

13. Looking in from afar

Joe Ritchie

My experience paying attention to the press in South Africa predates the end of the apartheid era, back to when, as an assistant foreign editor at The Washington Post, I was given much of the responsibility of handling copy from our correspondents based in Africa. I was on the foreign desk between 1977 and 1986, with a brief leave of absence in the early 1980s. In 1986, I left The Post to join the Detroit Free Press, where I eventually ran its foreign news operation, including directing a Southern African correspondent.

While on The Post's foreign desk, I became familiar through our correspondents with the Rand Daily Mail and its strong anti-apartheid stance until its ownership decided, under financial pressure, to tone down its coverage, and ultimately it folded. But that led to good fortune for our coverage, because the ousted editor of the Rand Daily Mail happened to be one of the best journalists South Africa ever produced, Allister Sparks, who became a special correspondent to The Washington Post, which enhanced the paper's report immensely. It also gave me an opportunity to meet Allister on one of his visits to our newsroom in Washington. I made my first visit to South Africa in 1996. By then, he was focused on developing the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, a professional development training ground for journalists that he modelled after the highly respected Poynter Institute for Media Studies in Florida, United States, and which he affiliated with the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

“South Africa has some of the clearest constitutional guarantees of press freedom on the planet”

After leaving The Free Press in 1992 to take up the Knight Chair in Journalism at Florida A&M University (FAMU), I had less pressing need to follow developments in South Africa's media from the standpoint of an editor. But as a journalism educator, South Africa still was close to my heart, and I had several personal interactions that kept me connected. The first was an opportunity suggested by my friend Joe Davidson, who had been a correspondent in Johannesburg for The Wall Street Journal. He connected me in about 1993 with Rich

Mkhondo, who was then still a reporter with Reuters, the first black South African reporter the international news agency had hired to report on his country. Rich had recently finished his first book, *Reporting South Africa*, a clear-eyed look at the early stages of South Africa's transition to democracy, and the challenges faced by journalists trying to cover it. We were able to host Rich as a visiting journalist in residence for two weeks, which gave many students first-hand contact with an accomplished international reporting professional. (It also gave Rich a good first taste of the America he would later report on from Washington for the Independent Media group.) Rich would also be a key figure years later in a reporting project I led for six FAMU students and six Chinese students from Shantou University for more than six weeks in 2010 during the FIFA World Cup in South Africa.



Nicolas Maingot, Head of FIFA Communications and Rich Mkhondo

Personal connections like that would colour my observations of the South African mass media, especially the press. In 1994, with the help of Adam Clayton Powell III, a media expert with a long-time interest in South Africa, we brought five black South African journalists to FAMU for about a week during a longer tour of the United States. They were mostly up-and-coming journalists from different media. Philani Mgwaba, at the time a young reporter with The Mercury in Durban, Ike Motsapi who was covering business and horse racing at the Sowetan, Eddie Mbalo, then a videographer and television engineer, Shado Twala who was already on track to become the well-known radio icon she is today, and Suzette Mafuna, who was a correspondent and feature writer for the New Nation.

Philani's history perhaps is the best lens through which I have followed — albeit not perfectly — some of what's been going on in the South African press in the past quarter-century. Two years after his US visit, I sought him out during my first South African visit and met him in Durban. Philani

was already moving up the ranks at The Mercury, taking on some editing responsibilities. I do recall the enthusiasm with which he related his role in 2002 in launching the isiZulu daily Isolezwe, which I saw as an important milestone. He then held top positions at the Pretoria News, Sunday Tribune, and became editor of The Mercury before leaving Independent Media. It's no surprise to me that Philani would return to community-based journalism in isiZulu, becoming editorial director at Ilanga.

This idea of independent journalism, I believe from afar that my old acquaintance remains so committed to, is the cornerstone of the craft, and one of the reasons I am cautiously optimistic that the South African press may thrive despite difficult financial challenges and attempts by government and other political figures to stifle or intimidate journalists.

South Africa has some of the clearest constitutional guarantees of press freedom on the planet embodied in Section 16 of the Constitution. It has teeth, better perhaps, than the vaguer protections offered by the First Amendment of the American Constitution. Better yet, South Africa has put in place what I believe is an effective, independent Press Council operated by respected journalism professionals who rule on disputes between parties covered in the print and online media. While not a

cure-all, I've occasionally read through cases adjudicated by the Press Council, and have been impressed with its thoroughness and fairness. The ombud system, favoured by Scandinavians, is not universally acceptable to journalists, but I think it works well when run by such competent people.

This may help explain why, even as America's ranking slips to historic lows, South Africa has maintained a respectable "mostly free" ranking in the Worldwide Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders. However, the commentary to the index does have cautionary language about South Africa under the heading "Press freedom guaranteed, but fragile." It notes that state security does spy on some journalists, and others are harassed or intimidated if they cover "certain subjects involving the ruling ANC, government finances, the redistribution of land to the black population or corruption."

Of course, what government welcomes aggressive reporting on topics it deems sensitive? I just hope that the strong tradition of media freedom and journalism excellence that I know some of these independent-minded friends in the profession have tried to follow will prevail over the things that render the press fragile.



Joe Ritchie's experience includes over a quarter-century as a working journalist and nearly as long in journalism education. Most of his career has been as an editor in international affairs. He has spent the past seven years in Hong Kong, most of it as an editor with the international edition of the New York Times, or that edition's predecessor, The International Herald Tribune. When Joe was a journalism professor at Florida A&M University, he spent many summers returning to newsrooms: three summers at the Paris newsroom of the International Herald Tribune, two at the main office of the New York Times (a summer on the foreign desk and one on the sports desk), three at The Washington Post, and four plus on an extended sabbatical year in Hong Kong before deciding to settle there permanently. A graduate of Calvin College (now Calvin University) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with an undergraduate degree in German, and of The Ohio State University, with two separate master's degrees in Germanic languages and literatures and journalism, Joe has covered or edited coverage of five FIFA World Cups. During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, he directed a multimedia reporting project with students. Joe has travelled widely, having visited all 50 US states and about 50 countries. He speaks and writes German with near-native fluency, and is also fluent in Dutch (which helps him read a bit of Afrikaans). He has been a visitor to DUT Journalism.