

28. Madiba and the media

Sello *Hatang*

Jonathan Shapiro (aka Zapiro) tells a story about Nelson Mandela (Shapiro, 2009: 123) which provides a powerful insight into Madiba's view of the media's role in a democracy. It is 1998, and Shapiro is sitting in his studio in Cape Town when the phone rings. It is Madiba, calling to talk about the work of Zapiro. At first, Shapiro thinks it's a friend pranking him, but quickly realises that it is indeed Madiba. In the course of the conversation, he apologises for some of his recent cartoons which have been critical of both Madiba and the African National Congress (ANC)-led government. "Oh, but that is your job," Madiba responds. In 2009, when the book in which this anecdote appeared was first published, I had just joined the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) as head of communications and spokesperson. I soon got to know Shapiro. and heard a slightly expanded version of the anecdote in casual conversation with him. But the substance of it is clear and, for me, very powerful.

“Madiba seduced the world's media with his relaxed demeanour, sparkling sense of humour and understanding of complex issues”

Madiba believed passionately in media freedom. For him, it was one of the fundamental building blocks for democracy. It is no accident that when he began drafting what he intended to be a sequel to *Long Walk to Freedom* in 1998, he dedicated a full section of the text to a reflection on the media. But, for me, perhaps his most compelling enunciation of the principle occurred in 1994, when he spoke at the congress of the International Press Institute. And I want to quote him at length here: “It is only such a free press that can temper the appetite of any government to amass power at the expense of the citizen. It is only such a free press that can be the vigilant watchdog of the public interest against the temptation on the part of those who wield it to abuse that power. It is only such a free press that can have the capacity to relentlessly expose excesses and corruption on the part of government, state officials and other institutions that hold power in society. The African National Congress has

nothing to fear from criticism. I can promise you, we will not wilt under close scrutiny. It is our considered view that such criticism can only help us to grow, by calling attention to those of our actions and omissions which do not measure up to our people's expectations and the democratic values to which we subscribe.” (Langa, 2017: 261)

It was this combination of passion, principle and sensibility which ensured that South Africa's Constitution would have one of the world's most robust protections of this freedom.

But to return to the Zapiro anecdote. It also speaks to how Madiba related to journalists and other media practitioners. Even as a younger leader within the ANC, he cultivated working relationships with journalists. He learnt their names, their writing styles, their areas of speciality. This had to do with respect, but also with a certain pragmatism. As a politician's politician, he knew that working relationships were mutually beneficial and of fundamental importance in the hurly-burly of public deliberation. In later years, young journalists would be astonished when in press conferences Madiba would point them out during question time and invite them by name to participate. For him, it was standard practice that when he had an issue with a particular journalist, when he felt that he was being subjected to undue criticism, he would reach out to the journalist concerned. Thami Mazwai, for instance, has spoken about those breakfasts with Madiba at which difficult matters would be resolved. (Langa, 2017: 262) And, like Lady Diana Spencer, he knew how to play the media. He was a consummate artist at this immemorial game. In the 1950s, he drew them into terms of engagement determined by himself as the debonair 'man about town' human rights lawyer. While underground, he fed individual journalists pieces of information which fuelled the image of him as the heroic Black Pimpernel. From prison, he ensured that crucial nuggets of information about himself and the other political prisoners would reach the media. So, for instance, a hunger strike by them for better conditions would have little leverage with the authorities unless journalists outside were ensuring that the matter was being debated publicly.

Madiba started reading newspapers as a daily discipline during his political and professional apprenticeship in the 1940s. During the long early years in prison when he and his comrades were denied access to them, securing contraband papers, even clippings of individual articles, or transcripts written by a prisoner who had had sight of a paper, became a top priority. After his release from prison, even in the most cluttered days of the negotiation period, every day would begin with a reading of the morning papers. This discipline was maintained through his presidency and until he was a very old man. Getting newspapers from the NMF, I recall, to Madiba became almost an organisational function of its own. When he was in town, it was a simple,

routine task. But when he was travelling, it was another story. When I was overseeing the process, we made arrangements with South African Airways to ensure that if Madiba was in Qunu, Cape Town or Maputo, he would always receive his papers before lunchtime. When he was overseas, our task was to comb papers of his choice first thing every morning, copy all the articles which met an agreed-on set of criteria, and then fax them through to his personal assistant, in time for him to read them over breakfast.

Madiba was an obsessive reader, generally. And he always read with a pen in hand, taking notes, making conceptual connections, recording reminders to himself, and so on. For him, it was about staying on top of the news, certainly, but at a deeper level, it was about developing his knowledge, and learning about the world around him. More specifically, reading media products was about securing insight into how he and his organisation were being perceived. Looking back at the 1950s, he reflected:

“Although ... newspapers are only a poor shadow of reality, their information is important to a freedom fighter not because it reveals the truth, but because it discloses the biases and perceptions of both those who produce the paper and those who read it.” (Langa, 2017: 259) As in every area of his life, the elegant blend of principle and pragmatism once again shone through.



To that blend, he could also bring charm, steel and, what I would call, poetry when doing interviews or speaking at press conferences. So many leaders resent difficult questions, and either become defensive or dismissive. Madiba was old-school,

tough, but respectful, always insistent on protecting everyone's dignity. There are many emblematic moments one could choose from to demonstrate these attributes. Let me choose five:

- His 1961 interview with Brian Widlake, while he was underground, captured perfectly the drama and the ambience required to communicate his role as the Black Pimpernel;
- The press conference at Archbishop Desmond Tutu's house the day after his release from prison was a display of remarkable mastery. Journalists who were present tell me that they didn't expect a great performance by Madiba. He had been out of the public domain for nearly three decades. It was, effectively, his first ever large-scale media event as a leader, and the previous day at Cape Town City Hall he hadn't exactly ignited the world with his oratory. But on this day, he seduced the world's media with his relaxed demeanour, sparkling sense of humour and understanding of complex issues;
- Who can forget the live interview he gave to Ted Koppel soon after his release from prison? Seasoned professional that he was, and on his home turf, as it were, Koppel sought to put Madiba in his place over issues like the ANC's relationships with Cuba, Libya and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Madiba responded like someone who had been in the media spotlight for the last three decades rather than in apartheid prisons. With the greatest delicacy and precision, focusing always on the issues at hand, he destroyed Koppel while affording him a modicum of dignity;
- The press conference at which he informed the world that he and Mama Winnie would be separating. There was the formal, very wooden reading of a statement. And then, when it seemed to be over, the return to the microphone, and the pained, heartfelt expression of this moment being the most difficult of his life. Moving beyond words, but still masterful;
- The moment in 2004 when he invited the world's media to the NMF and told them that he now intended to step away from public life and wanted to be left alone. It was time to "retire from retirement". The long, dramatic, pause before the "don't call me, I'll call you" punchline. Madiba knew how to perform. And his awareness of what the media expected from a performance was unerring.

Things were not always rosy though. Madiba's analysis of South Africa's media was sometimes less than complimentary. While president of the country, he began to push harder on the question of transformation. He critiqued the extent to which media ownership remained in white hands, and indicated disquiet with a growing monopolisation of control in the sector. He also pressed for greater representivity in newsrooms, editorial forums and boards of directors. At the same time, it wasn't long into his presidency when journalists began to complain about the ANC's tardiness in driving state and economic transformation. There was discussion about too many unnecessary compromises being made by Madiba. And in certain quarters, there was outrage at the 1996 replacement of the Reconstruction and Development Programme by the Growth, Economic and Redistribution strategy. For some, this was a selling out of the great majority of poor black South Africans.



Madiba bristled at the criticism, especially from black journalists, from whom he expected more understanding and generosity. He lashed out. He questioned their motives and their independence. He suggested that they were being the lackeys of white owners and editors. So harsh was he that, in 1996, the just-established South African National Editors' Forum passed a resolution defending black journalists against Madiba's critique. It wasn't long before Madiba reached out to the black journalists in his normal vein. He met with them behind closed doors, and thrashed things out.

As Madiba was quick to point out during the years I worked for him, he was no "saint". And he made mistakes. The critical thing for anyone, especially a leader, was to take responsibility for a

mistake, and then rectify it. Unlike so many leaders in the world today, Madiba had learnt to perfect the art. (In a new book with my colleague Verne Harris, we have a section devoted to this aspect of Madiba's leadership, Hatang and Harris, 2020: 39-43.) As a young man, by his own admission, he had "relied on arrogance in order to hide my weaknesses." (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2010: 409) He had found it difficult to deal with criticism, including by the media. But by the 1990s, he had learnt to engage with criticism and to acknowledge weakness. Another example from that period is when he, out of the blue during the 1994 election campaign, called for the voting age to be reduced to 14. The media came down hard on him. The foundation has in its custody one of his 1994 notebooks in which he records the critique, notes the disapproval within the rest of the ANC leadership, and acknowledges a grave error of judgment. It didn't take him long to correct things publicly.

In the last years of Madiba's life, the daily discipline of reading newspapers brought him a lot of pain. It was not easy to watch him with his morning papers, his brow furrowed as he absorbed accounts of the latest round of infighting within his organisation or another revelation of state capture. In 2011, it was hard for him to read about the brutal end to the life of President Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, the longstanding ally of the ANC and who Madiba had got to know well. He wouldn't ever say much. But the hurt was evident. Even Zapiro's cartoons would seldom draw a smile from him.

References

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