

30. Role and impact of the media in politics

Sibusiso Ngalwa

Addressing the International Press Institute (IPI) Congress in Cape Town on 14 February 1994, Nelson Mandela said, “A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy. The press must be free from state interference. It must have the economic strength to stand up to the blandishments of government officials. It must have sufficient independence from vested interests to be bold and inquiring without fear or favour. It must enjoy the protection of the constitution, so that it can protect our rights as citizens.”

Political reporting has been the cornerstone of newspapers in South Africa. Some of the most riveting revelations have been in print media with newspapers like the Sowetan, Mail & Guardian, Sunday Times and City Press being at the forefront of such reporting. This context is particularly important especially as critical media is under threat due to financial pressure. The freedom and independence of the press that Mandela spoke about in 1994 is being threatened by such pressure. It is a foregone conclusion that print media already faced an existential crisis brought about by the increase in audiences consuming their news through digital platforms.

Writing in his important research *Paying the piper* - looking at digital transformation and its impact on the sustainability of the media and journalism in South Africa - Professor Harry Dugmore wrote:

“The print media is in one sense a manufacturing operation, with a high cost of sales as well as high operational costs, as opposed to broadcasting, where apart from broadcasting equipment and the cost of transmitters, operational costs, such as salaries, are paramount. For broadcasting, every new listener is free, and for online operations, every new reader is almost free. For print, every new copy sold costs money to print and distribute. Ratios of copies printed to copies sold need to be carefully monitored. Too few printed copies affect the potential for sale: too many copies sold mean high returns of newspapers or magazines that cost money to print but have to be pulped. In that sense print publications are a 19th or 20th century technology, facing obsolescence along with records, CDs, DVDs, videotape and cassette recording.”

The print media may have been a 20th century technology, but it has played a crucial role in shaping our democracy and exposing the ills of the apartheid state as well as post-democratic malfeasance. The South African democratic project may have been hailed as a “miracle”, but the reality is that it was hard won. Without the critical media, which exposed some of the worst atrocities of the early 90s, the excesses of the corrupt authorities towards the end of apartheid may have remained unknown.

Times have changed and so has the face of political reporting. The

political violence of the 90s, particularly in the former Transvaal and modern-day KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), dominated the news pages. The random shootings and the killings were too many. The massacres were countless. Yet brave journalists went into the lion’s den to bring us those stories. The names of Cyril Madlala, Paddy Harper, Fred Kockott and Siphso Khumalo stand out as some journalists who documented the political violence in KZN.

“Political reporting has been the cornerstone of newspapers in South Africa”

Mandela’s speech at the IPI Congress was an important one. He went on to say, “I have often said that the media are a mirror through which we can see ourselves as others perceive us, warts, blemishes and all. 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.”

When Mandela uttered those words, he had no idea that in May 2012 the very same ANC - through its spokesman Jackson Mthembu - would lead a campaign for the boycott of the City Press. “Don’t buy City Press, don’t buy”, Mthembu chanted at an ANC march to protest the controversial *The Spear* artwork, which depicted former President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed. The ANC’s secretary-general at the time, Gwede Mantashe called for the boycott of the paper by “all peace-loving South Africans”. This was all because the newspaper had refused to take down an image of the controversial painting by Brett Murray from its website. The City Press finally buckled under the pressure, and removed the image, with editor Ferial Haffajee telling a radio station that she had had a rethink of her original position on the posting of the image on the newspaper’s site. Many have argued that Haffajee capitulated due to pressure from the ANC. That may have been true. However, other editors have taken a different view on *The Spear* matter. Writing in the now defunct *The Times* newspaper, current Sunday Times editor Sthembiso Msomi eloquently explained why the *The Spear* was

offensive to black people. Msomi wrote about black men of all ranks - from the doctors and clerks, to cleaners and gardeners – being forced to strip naked and be examined by a doctor for diseases upon arrival in Johannesburg during apartheid South Africa. *Ukuthawuza*, as the Drum-era writers had dubbed the practice, was a humiliating equaliser for all black people. Therefore, while black South Africans may be proponents of freedom of expression, the idea of a white man (Murray) painting Zuma with his genitals exposed was a difficult one to swallow - regardless of how one felt about Zuma. This was yet another example of the robustness of our media space where thinkers from different backgrounds opined on the matter. There may have been some political intolerants, but the South African media space allows for all voices to be heard.



Intolerance towards critical reporting is not only the preserve of the ANC. Helen Zille, during her time as the Western Cape premier, showed similar intolerance when she issued a directive to provincial heads of departments to cancel their subscription to the Cape Times in 2015. Zille was still the DA leader at the time. The Sunday Times, South Africa's largest weekly newspaper, had faced similar pressure from the government of Thabo Mbeki. In 2007, at the height of the debate about the government's attitude towards HIV/Aids, the newspaper published the exposé *Manto: a drunk and a thief*. The article exposed how the unpopular former health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang had allegedly jumped a queue to receive a liver transplant. The article went further and alleged that Tshabalala-Msimang had damaged her liver through years of excessive drinking and had a previous conviction for theft. Mbeki was far from impressed - with former minister in the presidency Essop Pahad calling for an immediate boycott on the Sunday Times.

South Africa's post-democratic history would not be complete without an account of Mandy Rossouw's role in exposing the "monument of corruption" that is Jacob Zuma's Nkandla compound. With her reporting in the Mail & Guardian, she was the first to shine the light on the exorbitant amount spent to renovate former President Jacob Zuma's private residence in Nkandla. This was under the guise of a security upgrade. In 2009, Rossouw wrote in the Mail & Guardian that Zuma

was renovating his Nkandla homestead for a "whopping price of R65 million, and the taxpayer is footing the largest chunk of the bill". But it later turned out that the figure was grossly understated, and we learnt the entirety of the project would set the taxpayer back a "whopping" R246 million - through cost escalation and blatant corruption. Despite the obfuscation, lies and a coverup by a bevy of government ministers, the true extent of the Nkandla project was laid bare. What started as a newspaper report by the intrepid Rossouw in 2009, ultimately led to former Public Protector Advocate Thuli Madonsela's aptly naming of the final report on Nkandla, *Secure in Comfort*. What was initially said to be basic security upgrades, ended up with a swimming pool, an amphitheatre, underground bunkers, a clinic and helipad.

I would argue that the reporting on Nkandla and the wastage in the face of grinding poverty and unemployment in South Africa played a role in turning the public's, and, more importantly, the ANC membership's, attitude towards Zuma. For a man who rose to power on the back of a pro-poor ticket, Zuma was the ultimate "man of the people". But it soon emerged that no sooner was he in power, did he begin to be drowned in the trappings of comfort and fall into the clutches of the insidious Gupta family. Zuma turned a blind eye to the Guptas' looting of the state. Having finished a 10-year, two-term presidency, Zuma was determined to continue exerting influence as he actively campaigned for his ex-wife, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma to succeed. But ANC members had other ideas as they elected Cyril Ramaphosa as president. For the country to heal and recover from the gouging by the Guptas, Zuma and their lot, they opted for the relatively safer pair of hands of Ramaphosa. Without that initial article, which appeared in the Mail & Guardian's edition of 1 December 2009, the history of this country would have been a different one. The seed of the tree that ultimately toppled Zuma was planted then.

Despite the political intolerance and hyper-sensitivity to critical journalism, political reporting in a democratic South Africa cannot be compared to the state under apartheid. By the time the ANC won the 1994 election - triumphing over decades of oppressive white minority rule and apartheid - there were about 100 laws, enacted by the apartheid state, that censored the media. Press freedom was a faraway dream. We come from an era where newspapers could not report on banned organisations like the ANC, the South African Communist Party. It was only from 1990, following the unbanning of the liberation movements by head of state FW de Klerk and the release of Mandela, that the South African media could report on such activities.

Reflecting on this period, the South African National Editors' Forum founding member Raymond Louw wrote: "The removal of the banning orders meant that the media could report on the statements and activities of ANC members and those of other parties which had been strictly prohibited during most of the 42 years apartheid was in force. The police and other authorities had backed off from applying the restrictive laws still on the statute books."

More importantly, the change meant an end to the harassment,

beatings, torture and jailing of journalists who stood up to apartheid and who tried to tell the public what was really going on.

The media may be free to report in South Africa, but the tough economic climate and the over-reliance on the tradition of advertising has allowed the government to use its sizable advertising budget in a carrot and stick manner. Anecdotal evidence points to the fact that media houses that are considered to be hostile are not given any advertising. But the picture is a

lot more rosy for the digital media platforms which continue to grow.

Political journalism has mostly permeated print products, and, as recent history has shown, the threat of closure of the Mail & Guardian would rob this country, and the journalism industry, of an important player. But, at the same time, the emergence of platforms like the Daily Maverick is small comfort. News24's growth also bodes well for the consumption of journalism.

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Sibusiso Ngalwa has 17 years of experience, and held a number of senior positions at various publications. He was politics editor at the Sunday Times and editor-in-chief of the Daily Dispatch and DispatchLive. Sibusiso has worked as a parliamentary correspondent for Independent Media. He is the politics editor at Newzroom Afrika. Sibusiso is a journalism alumnus of the Durban University of Technology, and is chairperson of the South African National Editors' Forum.