



THE 1996
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FREEDOM of expression and freedom of information have come a long way in South Africa in just a few years. They are enshrined as fundamental human rights in sections 15 and 23 of the Constitution and although there are certain limitations and restrictions, they are the result of societal factors such as the administration of justice, privacy, national security and so forth, where basic protections have to be guaranteed even if they do conflict with full and unfettered freedom of expression.

In South Africa, these are mostly the kinds of exceptions and pressures any civilised country would impose upon itself. I detect no indication anywhere in government of an intention to retreat from the principles of freedom of speech so central to a democratic and open society. True, ministers from time to time complain of a hostile press and a media which they find disappointing in its ability or preparedness to disseminate information and government policy to the great mass of the South African public. The press stands accused of not treating serious issues seriously enough, of being too parochial and trivial, of failing to provide the quality of comment and analysis many had become used to in exile in Britain or the United States.

There are several myths or misunderstandings here which are important to correct. The most important one is that newspapers in South Africa are mass media. They are not—their penetration outside the main metropolitan areas is tiny, and even in the big cities, readership is essentially confined to the educated, learning classes, the so-called LSMs 6,7 and 8. Of the 25.2 million adults in South Africa, less than 10 per cent read newspapers in the Independent Group, daily or weekly, and 14 per cent if you include the *Sowetan*. These readers may include most of the opinion formers, but even so, newspapers are not, and never will be, the most effective method of communicating government information and policy to the South African citizenry. Television, which affects the lives of most South Africans, and radio, will always be more effective media in this regard.

The second myth is the belief that newspapers have a responsibility to disseminate everything that ministers say, and cover every debate in every committee in parliament. Newspapers in fact are commercial, profit-making concerns, just like any other businesses. They have their own constituencies and their responsibility is to them rather than to an abstract group of potential readers with whom the government needs to communicate. Independent titles are regionally based, and owe their first loyalties to those readers and

advertisers who are prepared to pay for their services. Ministers sometimes complain that, for instance, *The Star* in Johannesburg does not give proper coverage to the opening of a new dam in Mpumalanga, but the hard fact is the editor has to take a view on just how interested his readers are in that dam.

The streets of Johannesburg are paved with the bones of newspapers which have tried to report matters which are worthy but of little interest to the residents of that area. Complaints made by ministers are on the whole, in my experience at least, constructive and healthy. They have never touched on freedom of the press, or involved any threats, even veiled ones.



The debate that rages tends to centre on this subject of dissemination of information but goes on to include ownership, diversity, transformation and foreign involvement, all of which I shall come to later. It also often—too often—centres on the question of competence and quality, the ability of newspapers simply to report events and debates accurately, which I'm afraid is a failing on our part (although one that is receiving a great deal of attention in our part of the industry at least). But it always stops well short, at least in the political circles that matter, of any serious retreat from the freedom given to the press in these past few years.

That, of course, may alter as the honeymoon period ends, the miracle of Mandela recedes and particularly as serious electioneering begins in the run-up to the 1999 election. But I for one sincerely doubt it. I have never before come across a society which so appreciates and cherishes the benefits of its press freedom at all levels. It has been long in coming, it was hard won, and I don't for a second believe there is any threat to it.

But press freedom means different things to different people. A single newspaper free of government involvement would represent a significant step forward along the road to press freedom in a number of countries on this and other continents. In South Africa a new newspaper represents greater diversity and competition, which certainly help the cause of press freedom, but not much else. In Britain, where press freedom is believed by many to have gone too far and to be out of control, it means something else again.

I often feel humble in the company of seasoned South African journalists, particularly my black colleagues, who have learnt and practised their journalism in very different circum-

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stances to those in which I learned and practised mine. All were censored, most suppressed, and many of them arrested, beaten and jailed. All have extraordinary stories of the lengths they had to go to get even half the truth out, and the even greater lengths the authorities went to stop them.

Previous lecturers in this series, who have lived through it, have touched on this, and I only do so to highlight the sharp contrast between the inheritance of the press in South Africa and Britain where I worked until 18 months ago. Although South Africa now has, in theory and law at least, as much freedom as the press in any country in the world, the words "press freedom" evoke an immediate and emotive reaction in the breast of every right-thinking South African which is unknown to me and the depths of which I can only guess at.



In Britain for years we used to debate, probably equally heatedly although a good deal more comfortably, the subjects of press ethics and voluntary codes of conduct; we would discuss invasion of privacy and ombudsmen and rights of reply and reform of the libel laws and the laws of contempt; just as in South Africa journalists and editors endlessly debate the relationship between the Afrikaans press and the National Party and the media in general and the ANC, we endlessly talked about the press and the Tory party and the press and the Labour party; we became obsessed in recent years by the question of just how far the press could obtrude into the lives of the young royals before it became utterly intolerable, and whether it was possible for the Royal family to survive another generation living as it now did in the full exposure to a press which had taken the concept of press freedom to its logical extreme and which was now running into the threat of curbs simply to stop it ruining the lives of entire innocents whose only crime was to be the wife or child of someone in the news. We seldom if ever debated the basic principles of press freedom in the sense they are understood in South Africa, and which I believe were the principles on which this Press Freedom lecture was inaugurated to the memory of the *Sowetan* journalist Sam Mabe, murdered by unknown assassins.

In contrast to the elaborate framework of laws limiting press freedom which still existed in South Africa in 1991 when the first lecture was given here at Rhodes's Department of Journalism and Media Studies, the only laws that we worried about were the laws of libel and the laws governing contempt of court, and those, although many of us may have thought them unnecessarily restrictive, only rarely intruded seriously into our daily lives as editors and journalists.

The point is the British press, instead of regarding its freedom as something sacred and to be cherished as it is still in South Africa, takes its freedom for granted. Newspapers have existed and published for years in circumstances South Africans could until recently only dream of: a competitive and prosperous press, with a centuries-year old tradition of printing more or less what it wanted to print, a large, educated and affluent reading public with a long tradition of consuming printed matter at a very healthy rate, a wonderful diversity of newspapers—there are nine daily and as many Sunday papers selling nationally across the country, not to mention countless regional, metropolitan and local papers—and proprietors wealthy enough to support large staffs of journalists in the handsome style to which they have become accustomed.

These are the circumstances in which diversity and competition can reign. They are also the circumstances in which, alas, press freedom can also be abused and the excesses of the tabloid papers in pursuing their often meaningless stories into the very bedrooms of their targets have damaged the image of the newspapers in the eyes of the reading public in a way which may have long-term implications for the very freedom they pay so little attention to. Let us hope that situation never arises in South Africa.



There are lessons in plenty to be learned from the developed world, lessons of what not to do in order to make best use of your precious and hard-won press freedom, as well as lessons to be followed. That, however, is the subject of a different lecture. There is an entirely different and subtle series of factors at play in South Africa which directly touch on freedom of expression, not so much in the constitutional or

legal sense, but in the reality of how the newspapers, which are still very much more the opinion formers and moulders than any of the electronic media, report, comment and analyse South African affairs.

Forty years of apartheid did not leave behind it a press in South Africa well suited to taking advantage of its new-found freedom. For years, many of the more talented journalists had chosen to leave for Britain, Australia or Canada rather than continue to operate under the stultifying atmosphere which prevailed through the 1970s and 1980s. For years, there had been little or new investment, no innovation, very few new titles launched, and many which closed. Reading the first lecture in this series, given by Max du Preez of *Vrye Weekblad*, there are a number of stark ironies which jumped out at me.

Du Preez gave his lecture in 1991, a time of great hope and naive promise for all sorts of media in South Africa which is hard to imagine even today. He talks of the changes which had occurred in South Africa since February 2 1990 and their effect on press freedom: "We could afford to spend our energy and talents on those facets of journalism that are so terribly important: good writing, good culture, good sport, good fun and humour. We could start concentrating on good journalism rather than being just good watchdogs," he said. "It is significant that instead of withering away or being on their death-beds, every one of the member newspapers in the Confederation of Independent Newspaper Editors, that is *New Nation*, *Vrye Weekblad*, *South and New African*, have seen a substantial increase in circulation as well as advertising revenue since February 1990. One of those newspapers whose imminent death we hear so much about, *New Nation*, has just rocketed to 410 000 readers. That must say something."

Well, it must have said something indeed, although not quite what Du Preez might have had in mind. Good journalism clearly has not been enough even in this new era, nor was good sport, good fun or good humour. *South* has gone, a paper without a role in the new South Africa, with no backers willing to support it in its last trembling days. *Vrye Weekblad* itself, which had for years provided the Afrikaans educated elite with a broader political perspective than that of *Beeld*, a paper which I don't have to tell you had traditionally espoused the Botha position, also found itself without a role when De Klerk moved and *Beeld* moved with it. It too has folded. *New African* too is no more. As for *New Nation*, this is a paper which the *Sowetan*, in which we are partners with Dr Ntatho Motlana, rescued last year when its advertising had all but disappeared and its circulation had sunk to less than 20 000. It is now doing much better, but its role today is a very different one to that expounded by Du Preez, and it is still a long way from the dizzy heights of 1991.



It is an extraordinary and depressing fact that those publications which did most to sustain the flame of freedom in South Africa, and which came roaring into the new age full of hope, have, with the notable exception of *Sowetan*, either disappeared or are struggling. This is a factor which affects our newspapers too, although much less dramatically. Although advertising has never been more buoyant, circulations everywhere in South Africa have fallen sharply since the election, with the sole exception of the Afrikaans press which has held up remarkably well.

Why? We can provide some part answers including higher cover prices and more targeted titles which have deliberately shed circulation in costly outlying areas. But these are far from complete explanations. I cannot accept the view that the quality of our newspapers has declined so dramatically—in fact I am prepared to argue the opposite, particularly in the case of titles such as the *Cape Times* and the *Mercury* in Durban which are greatly improved titles, yet have suffered sharp circulation declines. *The Cape Times* that was delivered to my hotel room this morning is a paper which I believe is one which any reader, whether Capetonian or visitor, would be more than pleased to receive, and it is a paper I am very proud of, edited by a man, Moegsien Williams, one of the very best editors in South Africa and a man who is rapidly developing into a journalistic legend.

The answer may be more abstract and have to do with the fact that whereas once South Africa's newspapers were seen as the voices of opposition against apartheid, now in a country where every sensible person—and certainly Independent Newspapers—agrees with the broad thrust of government policy involving reconciliation, political stability, tolerance and economic prosperity, the newspapers have lost their old role

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and have not yet found a new one. That does not mean our papers, or indeed any papers, are slavish supporters of everything the government does—far from it—but there is no real disagreement, even with the effective end of the Government of National Unity, about the type of society we all want to see achieved.

The country, once so closed to the press, now almost overflows with transparency and freedom. Journalists are allowed into committee meetings in parliament which are too numerous for the number of political reporters available, and too wordy for the space available to report them as they deserve.

Only a fraction of the debates are reported, but even then the reader is drowning in the flow of words. A number of discussions which affect the lives of every South African are either going unreported or are unread. The challenge to us is to find ways of reporting political debates in ways that do interest the reader, and I think we can do that.



But the fact is that press freedom has not necessarily been good for the press. The debate in this past year has moved on to a different, not necessarily higher, plane altogether, one which we at Independent Newspapers find ourselves at the centre of and which to an extent features in the Task Group on Government Communications set up by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

The principal brief of that Task Group is to propose to the various levels of government the most effective methods of disseminating government and other information; as a side-issue, almost as a postscript, it has also been asked to assess the ownership and control of South African media and how this affects government communications. The background to that extra part of the brief came after various journalists had raised, at a conference at Arniston last year, the so-called dominance of the press by White-owned monopolies and the powerful position occupied by foreigners.

Because Independent Newspapers is not only the biggest newspaper group in South Africa but also the only group with a significant overseas shareholding, we find ourselves at the centre of that debate. I have to say we are willing participants in it on the grounds that we are prepared to argue, and prove by the actions we have already taken, that we are not only an effective and unbiased disseminator of government information but we have also added considerably to the diversity of ownership in this country. One man's foreigner is another's international investor, bringing not just capital but international skills, standards and a burst of innovation onto a staid old scene; he is also a scarce animal which needs to be cherished, as he is in all areas of investment other than the media.

Nor are we a malevolent white-owned monopoly. Independent Newspapers is a highly successful and fast growing international company which is one of the few media companies which has concentrated on what it knows best, which is newspapers, rather than the more glamorous electronic media. It is currently the biggest newspaper publisher in Ireland, New Zealand as well as South Africa, and is the joint biggest shareholder in the award-winning *Independent* of London, but it is not a white-owned monopoly anywhere. It is involved in media for the long-term, and jealous of its reputation for integrity, training, the independence of its editors and the contribution it makes to the societies in which it operates. It has no intention of jeopardising that reputation in any country in which it operates. We will argue to the Task Group that Independent has been a major beneficial force in the South African media, bringing a powerful element of competition—and press freedom is nothing without competition, as journalists in Zimbabwe or Kenya will tell you—which has encouraged the whole of the print media to raise its standards by raising its own, launched new and innovative titles such as the *Sunday Independent*, *Business Report* and *Sunday Life* magazine, invested in state-of-the-art electronic technology, promoted bright young editors, several of them from disadvantaged backgrounds—the first time that has ever happened—and is now busy training the next generation of editors.

It is true that we have also raised the profitability of our titles, but that too is very important for press freedom, as so many of the titles Max du Preez mentioned discovered too late, and we are not about to apologise for making ourselves more efficient. A poor man, even if he lives in the most democratic of societies, is not a free man, and a struggling newspaper is anything but free, open to the influence of anyone, including advertisers or vested interested, prepared to throw it a lifeline. We are big and healthy enough not to need

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anyone's lifeline, but even after two years of sharply increased profits, our returns are still well short of international standards, and still not up to the levels at which new entrants into the market are easily encouraged.

Inextricably linked with the debate over ownership and diversity is that of transformation. Mr Mbeki has said several times that South Africa's mainstream newspapers are dominated by white males and that this could not but influence the way developments were presented and interpreted.

That is true—up to a point. The fact is Independent Newspapers is a group in the process of what must be the most far-reaching transformation programmes of any private media company in South Africa. It is radically reshaping itself to respond to, and anticipate, the needs of the new South Africa at all levels including management and editorial, not just in token terms but in much more significant and meaningful ones. Every company and every government department has to make this shift, and make it urgently. Unless we all do, and this particularly applies to the media, South Africa will have a very different future to the one we all hope for. And I doubt there will be much room for press freedom in it.

It is not my intention to deliver a propaganda message for Independent Newspapers. But the issues we are facing up to and the problems we are tackling, notably transformation, have a great deal to do with the way in which freedom of the press develops in this country.



It is by no means enough to have the constitutional right to print fearlessly, and within the confines of the libel and civil laws, what editors want to. That is merely the beginning. You still have to have the skills, the resources, the imagination and the titles to exploit fully that freedom. You also need a press which, regardless of ownership—which is largely irrelevant—reflects the aspirations, hopes and interests of its readers. And that means the appointment of the right editors to take on the achievements of the old editors of *South*, *Vrye Weekblad* and the others.

More immediately it means the appointment of editors to papers such as the *Cape Times* and *The Argus* capable of taking those papers into the new South Africa, and reporting, commenting and analysing that new society in a very different way to that which had been the order of the day in the past. Senior editorial appointments in Independent are already reflecting the spir-

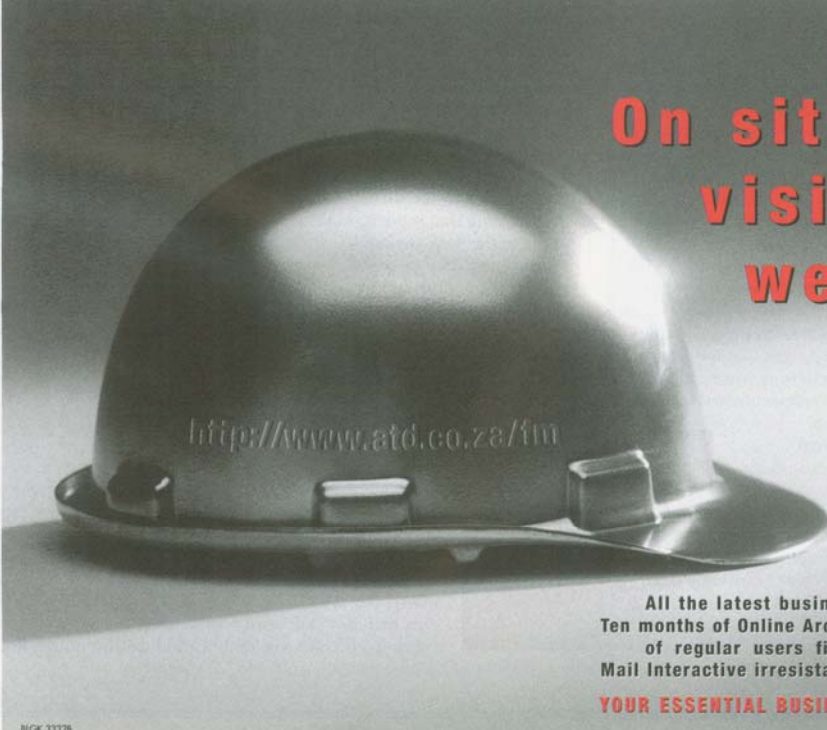
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it of a fast-changing country and a fast-changing company. In 1995 Moegsien Williams became the first black journalist to be appointed editor of a mainstream daily in the group, first at the *Pretoria News* and subsequently at the *Cape Times*. It was not a token appointment: Williams is in full charge of the future and destiny of the paper he edits, and to which he has already made a series of substantial improvements. Shaun Johnson, one of the brightest journalists of his generation, has been promoted dramatically and after launching the *Sunday Independent* has now been appointed as editor of one of the group's flagship papers, *The Argus*.

In Natal, Dennis Pather recently took charge of another flagship paper, the *Daily News*. Eighteen months ago only one of the group's eleven major titles was edited by a black person. Today four of the six are. Both the *Cape Times* and *Pretoria News* have black deputy editors. *The Star* has promoted black personnel to a number of senior positions just a rung below that of editor. All the papers have also promoted women into senior positions for the first time, and there are now more than a dozen women occupying senior editorial roles in the group's newspapers. We have selected 12 of our brightest journalists for special fast track training to equip them as the next generation of editors or senior journalists, including a course at the Nieman Foundation at Harvard.

What you may ask has this got to do with press freedom? It has a great deal to do with it. South Africa has an old tradition of editorial independence and that has not altered under Independent Newspapers which also has a long tradition of it, as evidenced by any of its editors in countries overseas. New editors are now being appointed who can better reflect the values and views of the new South Africa, and are being given the resources, the support and the ability to take newspapers in this country into the future in their own way. As Thami Mazwai, a black journalist for whom I personally have a lot of time, recently said: "Other media must underpin our democracy and play a crucial role in protecting, consolidating and entrenching freedoms we fought for and now enjoy." Only a professional, international class, properly equipped and well-trained press can do that effectively, and then only properly if it is truly transformed. That is the press the new South Africa deserves. And I believe it is the press South African is beginning to get.

Ivan Fallon is deputy CEO and chief editorial executive of Independent Newspapers.



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