

THE NEED FOR NUANCE

BY HERMAN WASSERMAN

"I think that sometimes the media also positions itself as an opposition to the state. Especially in a situation where you have quite a strong ruling party and a weak and splintered opposition, the media assumes an advocacy role which in some cases is healthy but in some cases that can actually distort progress."

The above comment, made by a journalist interviewed a few years ago as part of a large comparative study on political communication in 'new democracies', reflects an attitude that is not only prevalent in political reporting in South Africa, but also informs broader debates about media-state relations. It goes something like this: South Africa is governed by a big, powerful ruling party. This party is opposed by an array of smaller parties, the biggest of which – the Democratic Alliance (DA) – is seen as the home of white liberals and therefore easily dismissed by the ruling ANC. It is therefore up to the media to act as a *de facto* opposition and keep the government accountable. The media, for all its claims to be a neutral and 'objective' observer, has in other words become a political player in its own right.

This comment, and others like it that emerged in those interviews, are not surprising when one considers that the post-apartheid media has largely fashioned its role as that of a 'watchdog'. (Remember the outcry when SABC Board member Thami Mazwai in 2006 suggested the SABC plays the role of a 'guide dog' rather than a 'lap dog' or 'watchdog'?). That the adversarial – and at times antagonistic – role that the South African media have been playing in the democratic era has already borne fruit is undeniable. From big scandals like the Arms Deal to the weekly reports of corruption, mismanagement and conflicts of interest from municipal to national level, the South African media continues to display a vigilance that should inspire pride and gratitude. It goes without saying that the media plays a vital role in holding government accountable – although whether the government responds adequately to these exposés is another question altogether.

Where an over-eagerness on the part of the media to play the role of an unofficial opposition does become problematic, is when it lapses into a binary discourse that prevents us from having nuanced debates about the media's role in post-apartheid democracy. The ongoing arguments about media freedom that have been raging around the proposed Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT) and the Protection of State Information Bill (PSIB), have unfortunately too often been examples of the latter type of discourse. In the heated, emotionally-charged exchanges, rhetorical points were scored that were not always helpful in developing an understanding of the shifting relationships between media, state, civil society and markets in the current juncture.

Take for instance the comparisons made between the current government's

attempts to regulate media and stifle freedom of expression with the repression of the apartheid state. Nic Dawes, the editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, made an attempt at nuance by tweeting that "the point is not a crude analogy with the criminal apartheid state, it is the recent memory of unfreedom. A resonance, not a comparison". But when the National Press Club called on supporters to wear black clothing on the day that Parliament was to vote on the PSIB, the comparison with apartheid was made explicit. The day of the parliamentary vote was dubbed 'Black Tuesday' in reminiscence of 'Black Wednesday' in 1977 when the apartheid government banned two newspapers and 19 black consciousness movements. The original 'Black Tuesday' was also characterised by mass arrests, detentions and was preceded by the murder of political leader Steve Biko. Critics were quick to point out that the conditions were very different then, to put it mildly.

An optimistic reading of these often highly rhetorical responses could see the public participation in campaigns opposing the PSIB as a hopeful sign that the post-apartheid public can lay claim to the rights as citizens and exercise agency. Protesters against the PSIB were allowed to voice their criticisms vocally and publically, without being harassed or imprisoned. Some observers have noted that the same courtesy has not been extended to public protests around rights to housing, eviction or land, for example. Examples include the overzealous response of Cape Town's city police when mostly working class black residents attempted to meet and protest in a public field in a white suburb in Cape Town. Even worse was the lethal force used by police in social delivery protests like the one in which school teacher Andries Tatane was killed in 2011 in the Free State province.

The already adversarial relationship between the press and the ruling party – which had never been favourable – now degenerated into insult and hyperbole with little room for nuance, partly because of the stakes. During these various debates, the competing normative frameworks for the media became evident. Most common on the one end of the spectrum were political economy critiques (e.g. the trade union Cosatu's submission to the Press Freedom Commission) which saw the media as a vehicle for capitalist elites and therefore in need of outside regulation, while on the other end of the spectrum (the position mostly taken by media institutions themselves) there was an insistence on self-regulation underpinned by liberal pluralism, sometimes

with an attempt at paradigm repair by suggesting ways of improving the complaints mechanism or imposing stricter sanctions.

Journalists clearly felt beleaguered, but because the media constantly repeated the mantra of being under attack, it enforced a stark either/or choice that tended to obscure the nuances in the various positions put forward in response to the proposed MAT and the PSIB. The very fact that these different issues were often conflated in public debates illustrated the highly polarised nature of the arguments. It all started to boil down to a simple dichotomy: you were either for press freedom or against it.

Subsequent incidents consequently became over-determined as always-already being about freedom of expression. When the SABC decided not to screen a mediocre and ideologically dodgy Nando's ad (and commercial channels followed suit), it was quick to be seen as censorship. When the ANC, predictably in an election year (for party leadership), reacted against the depiction of president Jacob Zuma's genitals in Brett Murray's now infamous *Spear of the Nation* artwork, the outcry against the "attack on artistic freedom" tended to drown out the more considered voices of commentators remarking on the recurring postcolonial tropes of the black body as exotic and sexualised or the role of the artist as court jester.

Steven Friedman has argued that the mainstream press's response to real and perceived threats to freedom of expression has revealed a middle-class bias. In analysing the journalistic preoccupations that these responses seek to defend and the phrasing of the press's attempts to oppose state control, Friedman argues that the mainstream media's understanding of freedom is restricted to the liberties of the suburban middle classes. This positioning of the press, in his view, makes it increasingly unlikely that free expression can be effectively defended.

In his reflection on recent South African debates about media freedom, Peter McDonald has argued that the press invoked the spectre of apartheid censorship as a polemical move to resist threats to their freedom. When these historical parallels are analysed critically, the backward look to the apartheid era "fuels cynicism, Afropessimism and a host of other dubious feelings". McDonald expressed doubts that the most recent threats to the freedom of expression constitute a return to apartheid censorship, and argues that there is no moral equivalence between what happened then, and what is happening now.

This is not to say that there is nothing to be concerned about in the current climate regarding freedom of expression. The point is, that we need to debate these issues in a more nuanced way that does not cast suspicion or doubt on those that dare criticise the media, or that are trying to imagine

different configurations for the relationship between media and state.

Debates around press freedom are of course hardly limited to South Africa, and in assessing recent developments in this country it would be instructive to also look further afield to other countries in Africa, but also other new democracies around the world. Such comparisons have been made by, amongst others, Colin Sparks. He questions the paradigm of "transition" for studying the media's relation to political and social change, especially when countries such as contemporary China and Russia are brought into the comparison. Instead, Sparks suggests a model centred on the process of "elite continuity and renewal". Critics like Francis Nyamnjoh, Steven Friedman and Peter McDonald have also pointed out that the debates around press freedom in this context have often been marked by a simplistic binary between media and state, in which commercial media are often seen as inherently independent rather than political and economic role-players that themselves are positioned within an array of power relations. In a debate that has become characterised by rhetorical throwbacks to the struggle against apartheid, making use of simplistic dualities such as "freedom" versus "control", "self-regulation" versus "statutory intervention" actually narrows the space for reflection and debate instead of defending it.

The heated debates surrounding media freedom also emphasise the importance of research-based, scholarly interventions into the often emotional and rhetorical debates about the role of the media in South Africa. These debates provide us with the opportunity to reflect on meta-debates in journalism: how journalists talk about journalism, how they position themselves in relation to other participants in public debates, and how discourses reveal power relations between different political stakeholders. For one, it prompts us to interrogate the media's claims to being a disinterested spectator, the mere 'messenger' who continually pleads not be shot at. The debate about media freedom is a political one, and journalists have shown themselves to be anything but apolitical bystanders.

The above article draws on the introduction to Wasserman's new edited book *Press Freedom in Africa: Comparative Perspectives*, published in June by Routledge, as well as a chapter co-written with Sean Jacobs for the *State of the Nation 2012*, forthcoming at HSRC Press. Results of the comparative study on political communication were published as: "Freedom's just another word? Perspectives on the media freedom and responsibility in South Africa and Namibia". *International Communication Gazette* 72(7): 567-588. For views on the Nando's ad, see <http://africasacountry.com/2012/06/08/fried-chicken-nationalism/#more-51888>

