

# WHAT'S ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNALISM?

BY NATASHA JOSEPH

Earlier this year, I was invited to talk about the right to freedom of expression as part of Rhodes University's annual Human Rights Week, which coincides with South Africa's Human Rights Day. It was suggested that I might want to discuss the Protection of State Information Bill, the ominous Media Appeals Tribunal, or both. Perhaps I could have done those things – the bill and the tribunal are harrowing threats to our work as journalists, and to South Africans' freedom of access to information.

Around the same time, though, the man who had suddenly become South Africa's most famous spin doctor and the arch nemesis of indignant journalists, Chris Vick, used column inches everywhere to suggest that we needed to turn the mirror around and look directly at ourselves if we were to properly engage with the bill and tribunal. Although I found Vick's tone galling and wondered about his motives, it was also clear that he was asking important questions and, critically, had hit a massive nerve among South African journalists. Why were we so enraged by his suggestions, insinuations and his systematic pulling back of the veil to reveal some of the practices we know must be scrapped from our industry? Perhaps, I thought, because we knew that in many ways he was right.

Self-reflection is hard, and maybe particularly so for people who spend their professional lives demanding reflection from others. But it felt right, in my head and heart, to use the opportunity at Rhodes to talk more deeply about what we could have done, or what we were still doing, to invite derision and attack – from the ruling party, for starters, but most importantly, from our readers, listeners and viewers

– the people for whom we assess and analyse news.

There are a number of recent examples of South African journalists behaving badly. My professional alma mater, the *Cape Argus*, broke the story that had lurked beneath its own surface for some years – allegations that a former political editor and a senior journalist had been paid to produce stories which painted then-Western Cape Premier Ebrahim Rasool's enemies in a bad light. The journalists in question no longer work for the *Argus* – Joseph Aranes resigned when the story broke, and Ashley Smith had left some years previously, resigning while disciplinary proceedings related to the allegations were underway. Aranes has repeatedly denied the allegations. Smith produced an affidavit in which he described what had happened and named both Aranes and several highly-placed politicians, including Rasool (who is now South Africa's ambassador to the United States). Nobody has been criminally charged, and it has taken a lengthy court battle for the *Argus* to access the findings of an internal ANC report into the "brown envelope saga".

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This seemed in some ways to be the catalyst for a spate of attacks on the industry – as though the claims against Smith and Aranes meant we were all on the take. Politicians, and Vick, frequently refer to brown envelopes when taking aim at journalists or threatening us with tribunals. In Mpumalanga, a reporter at a community newspaper admitted to accepting beer and being tempted with government tenders to write stories savaging Premier David Mabuza's political opponents. Again, nobody has been criminally charged, and Mabuza

and his allies have repeatedly denied the allegations. *City Press*' correspondent in Mpumalanga, Sizwe Sama Yende, took Mabuza's spin doctor to court after being offered money to drop a story. The case is ongoing. Another of our reporters has been approached by people offering money to write – or not write, in some cases – stories. The ease with which these offers are made suggests that people confidently expect reporters to take the money, which points the finger firmly back at our industry.

There are other examples. In preparing for my lecture, I asked colleagues in the media and those who work in PR to share some stories. I learned of one magazine publisher who kept products for herself: these had been earmarked as giveaways, but she dished them out to friends and family, and was genuinely affronted and shocked when tackled by the brand's PR company. Several people flagged the issue of "freebies" – lunches, outfits, weekends away – and wondered whether some journalists' willingness to accept these without question or disclosure meant they were corrupt or corruptible.

The uncomfortable truth is that we need to talk about our industry honestly, but instead we are largely defensive and try to turn the conversation away from ourselves. It is not good enough for South African journalists to say, "We're not so bad – a look at the politicians!" That said, there is no denying that corruption among politicians and officials is out of control – and in some cases, these same politicians and officials try to muddy the waters by pointing fingers at the media when they're in hot water. Our behaviour must be beyond reproach.

But how do we achieve this? I'd venture that an open, honest, difficult series of conversations is the starting point. We need to ask each other whether accepting freebies is muddling our motives. We need to talk honestly and openly about ethics; about how to train and equip newcomers to the industry so that they are ethically able to do the best job possible, and about how to ensure that those who have been in the industry for many years don't develop bad habits. This is no quick-fix situation. A single day's discussion won't cut it; nor would an entire week. We need to talk constantly, perhaps obsessively, to ensure that we are holding each other, and ourselves, to account. We owe our audiences that much as we tread ever closer to a South African information landscape ruled more than ever before by secrecy and silence.

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