

# PRESS BASHING AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

*How free have the media become in South Africa with the changing political landscape? TONY HEARD surveys some of the editors*

**S**OUTH African editors are unanimous that restrictions have eased considerably for the press. But they point to major problems and concerns. However, Ken Owen editor of the *Sunday Times* adds the rider: "The space for journalists has widened faster than their capacity to use it. We still report in the dogged, defensive style of the past; reporters lack aggression; we all lack the flair.

"The virtual destruction of South African journalism — the terrible loss of skills — is now exacting its toll. The present generation lacks a sense of what is possible, and lacks role models."

## *Intimidation a problem*

The worst problem is intimidation, specially of black journalists, by what is laughingly known as 'the community'... Richard Steyn, editor-in-chief of the Johannesburg *Star* warns that, although the press is certainly freer than before, the provision whereby the authorities can demand sources continues to be invoked.

"Areas of difficulty include the reporting of politics in right-wing white and most black communities. Journalists and photographers perceived to be from unfriendly newspapers continue to be harassed, threatened and sometimes attacked. While the ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party pay lip service, at top level, to press freedom, their supporters show little sympathy for dissenting views."

Koos Viviers of the *Cape Times* of Cape Town (who was deputy editor of the now-defunct *Sunday Express* in Johannesburg when it was first to open up the Information Scandal and as an editor in the Eastern Cape fell foul of PW Botha's security laws) gives two explanations why the independent newspapers tend to set the pace in exposés: First, they have the sources, who trust them; and second, they are known to "run with the story" — as did the *Sunday Express* and *Rand Daily Mail* in the Information Scandal days. (Bizarre, but both were closed by their mining-industry owners not long after.)

Viviers says newspapers are acting as if there are no restrictions, except the ordinary laws of defamation, etc. This openness he welcomes, but warns that all norms cannot simply be thrown overboard.

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**Richard Steyn  
The Star**

He feels that in the repressive period the country lost too much journalistic talent and now, as it were, has to "re-invent the wheel" in strengthening investigative reporting. Because of community pressures, black journalists, he feels, are learning fast to fight for their independence and their profession. John Patten of the *Natal Mercury* (Durban) recalls a recent remark by an ambassador that he regarded the South African press as freer now than it had been for more than half a century, and probably freer than it would be for another half century. This suggests, says Patten, that the press is living through an Indian summer — a brief respite — before the onset of more restrictions under a new dispensation.

He says public service resistance to press proings was bad five years ago, and remains bad today.

"Although the style of the administration has become more open, civil servants perceive the new South Africa as threatening to their livelihood and careers, and do little to assist in revealing information relating to sins of the past or areas where changes in public service practices are needed," says Patten.

He sees difficulties in the way of the press in getting to the bottom of serious allegations against government, and also in relations with the unbanned parties.

"The ANC has generally shown a willingness to co-operate, but it does wish to control the press." The ANC also suffers from a "certain lack of organisation" — understandable in the circumstances.

## *A greater openness*

Jim Jones of *Business Day*, Johannesburg, concedes that there is greater openness on the part of the police when it comes to legitimate police activity (as opposed to covert operations). "In other government departments the lack of speedy (and honest) responses to inquiries is still as prevalent as it was, but this is a syndrome common to bureaucracies throughout the world."

Unfortunately, Jones says, similar symptoms have been displayed by the ANC. In many respects "the ANC and other left-wing parties" are so disorganised as to make it impossible for a reporter to reflect their viewpoints with complete certainty. He says the ANC has also taken to suggesting newspapers remain quiet

PLEASE TURN OVER

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**John Patten — Natal Mercury**

on certain issues in the interests of the country, or the safety of individuals.

“Another alarming phenomenon has been news people being directly threatened by political activists on the ground. This has become a serious problem for some black reporters who are asked to declare their political affiliations after being placed in compromising situations.”

***A strong culture of secrecy***

Anton Harber co-editor of the *Weekly Mail* says: “The only law we take account of is libel law. Of course all the other laws are still in the books and it may not be very healthy for the rule of law for everyone just to be ignoring them — but this is what’s happening.”

Harber feels that the high level of intolerance of criticism from individuals within the resistance movements has receded.

His major concerns?... first, a “strong culture of secrecy and lack of accountability” on the part of government ministers (when it comes to matters such as political killings); and second, that “something has to be done about control and ownership of the media”. If the media does not address the problem “we will be tempting a future government to intervene.” (Harber was referring to the suggestion that too many newspapers are owned by too few interests).

Ebbe Dommissie editor of *Die Burger*, Cape Town, comments that, with the De Klerk reforms, the full spectrum of political activity is reported in South African newspapers. He says the government is opening up a whole range of subject matters that were previously kept away from the public eye — and he instances easier access to prisons, the changes to the Police Act, and movement “regarding the protection of a journalist’s sources”. Corruption and maladministration could be “freely reported”, and there is a more liberal approach to movies and TV material, he says.

But he warns, interestingly: “The law of unintended consequences is also taking its toll. So much is happening over a broad spectrum of politics and social activities, including the on-going violence, that all editors have their work cut out to find enough space for all the relevant stories. And this in a time of severe recession, where the newsholes of all papers are much smaller.”

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**Guy Berger  
South**

Andrew Drysdale of *The Argus*, Cape Town, says the official “heavy breathing” — intimidatory tactics, threats of prosecution and the closure of newspapers, etc — has all but disappeared.

“Press bashing ain’t what it used to be.”

In the new situation, “a great many people are anxious to share experiences, exchange views and even agree to differ”. This helps the media.

“The danger, when things get bumpy — especially when politicians start elbowing for influence and power — is that a new tyranny could be directed against the press under the pretext of its being unsympathetic, inadequate, biased, monopolistic, or whatever. As it is, some political players are already arrogantly demanding priority attention, or else...”

Drysdale says the harassment and threats to black journalists in particular is “hugely worrying” and needs to be taken up time and time again with political organizations.

“Indeed, the international press needs to be kept alert to the possibility of further violations,” he says.

“I suspect that the difficulty, certainly in some instances, is that there are political activist factions among some black journalists which has called into question their impartiality and commitment to the fundamental values of objective journalism.”

***More subtle pressures remain***

Dr Guy Berger, editor of *South* (Cape Town) says: “Although much restrictive press legislation is still on the statute book, these new times mean that one can ignore much of this with impunity. More subtle pressures remain, however, in the form of threats of legal or other action coming from government departments, in particular prisons and defence, as *South* has experienced in recent times.”

Berger speaks of a prevailing culture of bureaucratic secrecy and of “politicians being above scrutiny”. He says there are also strong pressures from opposition and other groups (eg. warring taxi associations) involved in conflict situations and with vested interests in types of coverage.

“Inhibiting free expression in an indirect way are the skewed market forces caused by apartheid policies. Newspapers target the huge audience of poorer and black readers only at the risk of commercial failure, because advertisers remain focused on those markets

with substantial buying power, and which still remain largely white," says Berger.

The views of the editors are, I believe, useful in assessing the current mood and future prospects in South Africa.

But the fundamental problem remains: Will the media be able to use the new freedoms, once gained? Will it be a mere Prague Spring of 1967, or a more durable Lisbon Spring of 1974?

Moreover, habits of freedom, once lost, are difficult to re-establish. And, when a new government takes over it will be under pressure from its followers — if only because of the enormous problems of reconstruction after the ravages of apartheid — to curb the scribes, to hang the messenger. For example, earlier this year a panel of South African editors and reporters at an occasion sponsored by the American University in the USA seemed pretty pessimistic about a free press in the future.

What can be done to underpin free expression in this important part of Africa?

For one thing, the country needs an independent foundation or institute dedicated solely to the free flow of the news. But it needs far more. It needs a constitutional entrenchment which guarantees, absolutely, freedom of expression and of the media. It needs a workable freedom of information act, which will curb

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**Jim Jones  
Business  
Day**

bureaucratic excess. It needs to nurture a culture of openness in a formerly closed society.

And it needs the international community's interest and involvement.

The words of two South African editors are apt, and with them I close.

Jim Jones: "I don't believe constitutional guarantees alone will be adequate... Perhaps we in the press will need the support of free newspapers abroad. We will have to strengthen our personal relationships with foreign newspapers so that any attempt to limit freedom of expression will be published abroad and thereby be deterred."

Richard Steyn: "The international community, and bodies like the International Press Institute (IPI) and FIEJ should continue to keep South Africa under close scrutiny, as in the past. Politicians of all parties, not only the white government, should be called to account. All the major political associations are sensitive to international opinion, so the IPI and FIEJ have important roles to play in ensuring that the various parties live up to the high ideals espoused from public platforms. They should also support the movement towards a new South Africa by coming here and giving us their expertise." ●

*TONY HEARD is a former editor of the Cape Times.*

**The soul truth, daily.**

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