



**THE 1993
FREEDOM
OF THE PRESS
LECTURE**

Jane Raphaely



THE burning question at the moment for most journalists, editors and publishers here is whether we will have more or less freedom in the press in our new South Africa. There is a distinction between freedom in the press and freedom of the press. Though journalists do get bitter and sometimes twisted when any one has the temerity to tell them what they can and cannot do, we do realise that as a profession we have more responsibilities than rights. Wherever journalists gather to discuss press freedom we start and end with the 'people's right to know' rather than our own right to tell or tattle. 🍷

But, as Stan Winder writes in the April issue of *The Journalist*, “the press in this country has a lot to account for”. Our record is not uniformly good — particularly in black eyes — because, as he says, “for decades, the South African media provided a willing complicity in covert operations by publishing only the official and hence accepted version of events”.

In some cases the press concocted their own dangerous and damning inventions. Arthur Goldstuck’s second collection of South African myths, were taken mostly from newspapers where they were originally printed as fact.

Just as it is incumbent on the press to report the truth and nothing but, it is also incumbent on us not to become an active part of the political process or to become partisans ourselves.

We should accept that it is our responsibility to disseminate as much information as possible inside the constraints of time and space, but after that it is the readers’ role and right to act upon the information.

However much we may sympathise with any particular cause, journalists cannot be activists, because this would damage the unblinking impartiality that is the prerequisite of a good reporter and destroy the credibility that is a journalist’s most precious credential. The same applies to the publications for which we work, but in practice a publication may be forgiven for an occasional lapse into partiality or even quite gross errors. Individual journalists can be haunted for years and sometimes ruined by a single instance of what their colleagues and readers see as bias or ignorance of the true facts.

In repressive societies journalists often become partisans in the press involuntarily, but this is almost always to their own detriment. This is one of many factors that has led to the present decline in the standards of journalism in South Africa and, by the same token, to the diminishing of press freedom. The people have the right to know everything there is to know, not just what anyone of us might decide, on the basis of our own convictions, is right or best for them to know.

Paradoxically, in this brief interval between acts in the history of this country, the silence on subjects that desperately need attention is almost deafening. It is true that we still labour under some of the most restrictive legislation ever devised to shut journalists up. Even though the outgoing government has rushed through several bills, including those long-overdue ones aimed at removing discrimination against women, there has not been a murmur, either in government or in any of the political groups, about the removal of: the entire Internal Security Act; relevant sections in the Defence Act and the Police Act; a whole range of sections from the Prisons Act; Section 205 from the Criminal Procedure Act; and the entire Protection of Information Act.



WORSE still, is the most brazen attempt to patch over the past. The equally brazen hatch and despatch of the Amnesty Bill through a thoroughly discredited President’s Council ensured that any disclosures made either to presiding committees or judges will never be revealed to the public, or anyone else.

We might have expected a government that is looking at a future in opposition, after what seemed set to be a century of dominance, to remove these Acts before doing anything else. Who should know better what horrors can be hidden behind restrictions such as these. Even if the government does not have the sense to protect itself from future mauling when it’s in opposition, why haven’t editors and publishers seized the moment either to cry for their removal or, better still, to behave as if they did not exist. What muzzles the Media Council now, apart from the Newspaper Press Union’s decision to cut it down to the size of one committee?

Because of the Acts mentioned above, the whole question of a conspiracy to kill Chris Hani hung in the air while the police detained and interrogated a series of suspects at their leisure. As a result, the country was in the kind of turmoil for which the murderers of Chris Hani must have aimed, and inevitably the violence escalated.

We were reduced yet again to receiving a dribble of information about the case from police sources and, because of the tameness and the timidity that have become endemic to the South African press, no-one seemed prepared to do the investigative reporting that the story would justify in any other equally developed country. We were still basically reprinting what official sources told us, long after those sources had been absolutely discredited. Even during the most repressive period of apartheid, Kit Katzen managed to produce a ‘Muldergate’. Just what on earth is stopping us now?

Many journalists tell me that the problem lies more in repressive management than in repressive government. All other aims are said to be subordinated to profitability, and though I am the first to admit that a healthy bottom-line is the best protection of editorial independence, this must not be achieved at the cost of the quality and integrity of the product.

For instance, disbanding cadet schools would be a tragic mistake and would be to the detriment of future generations who will expect and need more training and more help in advancement, not less.

This is possibly why the dirtiest words in a journalist’s lexicon at the moment are ‘market-related’ and ‘market-driven’, and why journalists, who see the space devoted to news shrinking in order to accommodate competitions and other circulation-builders, accuse their employers of selling newspapers rather than news.

What puzzles me is why our newspapers cannot do both. The extraordinary success story of the *Sowetan* and the steady growth of the *Weekly Mail* show that, in our market, papers with punch that reflect the reality of the readers’ lives can do extremely well.

In our own comparatively tame field of women’s magazines, our titles

scored remarkable circulation gains last year with content that was tough, realistic and, in the case of anything to do with abortion reform, extremely unpopular with a very large section of the reading... and ranting... population.

Femina has had a running battle over this period with the Hillbrow police who took exception, and were within their legal rights to do so, to our printing photographs of street children who were being held on an indefinite basis in their cells.

It is perhaps because they realise that *Femina* would be extremely happy to see them in court over this matter that they have not pursued it.

It may be also that there is something inherently ridiculous in pursuing a publication which is essentially concerned with far tamer issues over an infringement of a law that may be obsolete in the very near future.

Meanwhile, some of the best writing on the South African situation by South Africans tends to appear overseas. The best example of this is Rian Malan, whose brilliant dissection of the impenetrable murkiness of the Boipatong massacre first appeared in British *Esquire*.

We bought second rights to this for *Cosmopolitan* in February and were subsequently contacted by a Sergeant van der Merwe who wished to obtain third rights or the police magazine, *Servamus*.

Whatever you may think of Malan's personal politics, it is about as far from advocacy journalism as you can get. In fact, no-one escapes his withering criticism as he lists every known fact which emerged after this event and refuses to be drawn into a conclusion himself.

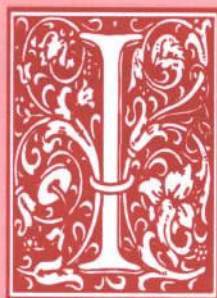
We have also purchased Malan's most recent piece on the tribal warfare in Northern Ireland, which has great relevance to our situation here. This picking up of other editors' original inspirations does not reflect much glory on *Cosmopolitan*. I am the first to regret that we did not think of commissioning him first, but it does surprise me that we were able to obtain first South African rights to these pieces so easily. It may be that in South Africa today an independent, icono-

clastic, hyper-critical voice is not what is most wanted.

One voice does continue to speak the unspeakable and dare to yell about the unthinkable, and it is perhaps worth noting that Ken Owen is not only the most hated journalist in this country but also the one who couldn't care less. His *Sunday Times* pieces continue to infuriate almost everyone who appears in them, but week after week he puts his finger on the pulse of the nation and reports with deadly accuracy on his findings. These may be morbid but they are undeniably and horribly true.

There has never been a time when the truth, in all its forms, was needed more in our country. As Rian Malan said in *The Farce Continues*: "This is South Africa where nothing can be taken for granted, even if you see it with your own eyes."

We have gone through such a long period of lies, have lived with such systematic lying on every side of our political spectrum, that perhaps the only two places where people might hope to get a glimmer of the truth are the press and the courts.



HAVE deliberately excluded the SABC from most of these remarks because it continues to be government-owned and run. Though its creative and production staff have recently made great leaps in applying a more professional and objective approach to news reporting, and it is obvious that the SABC and the government are trying to become more independent of one another, it will never achieve real independence until it is totally privatised and run like a business.

The complete proof of this was shown in the television coverage given to Mr Mandela prior to the day of protest against Hani's assassina-

tion. The editing of his message that night on TV1 provoked instant political interference from the ANC, and TV1 re-broadcast the full unedited version of the address that night at 11pm.

Old habits die hard and the SABC had simply switched its slavish obedience to previous masters to the incoming new ones.

I do not blame the ANC in any way for pushing their new advantage and nor do I debate the calming effect of Mr Mandela's words. What I am criticising is the SABC's failure to use its own initiative on that fateful eve. Their grounds for cutting the original broadcast during the news programme were valid. Their best defence would have been a new, fresh wrap-up at 11pm including the full spectrum of all political groups calling for peace and calm on the following day. That would have been in the best interests of the people, not one political party. And that should have been the first duty of a broadcasting service.

The role of television and radio in a time of crisis is so vital that privatisation or independence are not likely under an interim or an ANC government.

It is also obvious from the ANC's media charter that the ANC regards its own government control of television and radio as essential. This is unvaryingly described in terms of democratisation of 'the people's media'. And in this they are no better or worse than any other political player in our present situation. But this is also why it will be the party that gets the most votes that will change the composition of any future SABC Board to its own satisfaction and, through this, the policy of any future SABC.

I have slightly more hope for the deregulation of the air-waves, which might yet turn out to be a Pandora's Box of dissenting voices if communities realise that regional radio is not only accessible to them but affordable.

It was announced recently that the government has drafted proposals to free South African television and radio from the SABC's monopoly control. It is far more likely that this freedom will be applied to radio, though one does wonder why the

authorities confiscated the Bush Radio transmitter.

Who is calling the shots here? It's estimated that more than 100 local community radio services could be started.

I have a great respect for radio because I know it can reach that 50 percent of the population which cannot now, nor will be able in the foreseeable future, to read a word that any of us might print. Also there is a spontaneity, an immediacy, and a one-on-one opportunity in radio broadcasting that does not apply to the printed word which has to go through several hands and stages before it reaches the public.

Nevertheless, in the end, it will probably come back to newspapers and journals to do their best to keep the people of this country informed as to what is actually going on here.



ARTISAN or not, journalists will find themselves actively involved in the new struggle to keep those little points of light, which represent accurate, unbi-

ased information, burning in the darkness that threatens to engulf us now.

It will be journalists who become the heroes of this struggle and already our profession has begun to count its fallen. In 1991, 84 journalists died worldwide while working (two in South Africa); last year at least 61 were killed; and according to Reporters Sans Frontières (a French anti-censorship group) "scores" of journalists have been killed this year — at least one in South Africa, where many more have been assaulted, some seriously.

In early April the South African Union of Journalists held a seminar to discuss safety on the job. Journalists reported that there was no respect for the media from either the authorities or members of political organisations.

Perhaps it's a hopeful sign that it was local leaders of the ANC in the PWV region who made a citizen's arrest of the attackers who killed the SABC television reporter Calvin Thusago in late April.

The media show a curious shyness about publicising their own losses. It's a 'cowboys don't cry' syndrome, but if you accept that the public has a right to know and the press has a responsibility to supply that knowledge, surely the public also has a right to know the conditions and circumstances under which information is sometimes obtained and printed... or not printed.

One of my greatest fears for future freedom in the press in South Africa is that those journalists who are closest to their subject material because they are part of the communities that they are writing about will be those who are most at risk of intimidation and terror tactics. If we cannot defend them when they perform the vital task of telling those who live in much more sheltered circumstances just what is going on out there, the very least we could do is to carve their names with pride.

If, in the light of what is patently some pretty heroic activity in our profession, some of my comments might seem too harsh or critical, please blame this on the strength of my concern, both for the future of a country that I love and for a profession of which I am proud to be a part.

It will also be apparent that I am expecting that the main, if not the only, defenders of freedom in the press in our new South African will be journalists themselves.

On the whole I think that is a good thing. We have expected and allowed external authorities to control and dominate individual behaviour in this country for too long. Who better than journalists to embody and express that which is novel in this country — the right of an individual against the state.

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THE ANNUAL
**FREEDOM OF
THE PRESS
LECTURE**

THE annual Freedom of the Press Lecture at Rhodes University was initiated in 1990 on the 21st anniversary of the founding the Department of Journalism and Media Studies.

Originally sponsored by the Ackerman Family in memory of Sam Mabe, a *Sowetan* journalist who was murdered under mysterious circumstances, the Freedom of the Press Lecture has become a highlight in the calendar at Rhodes University.

Speakers have included:

- Max du Preez, award-winning editor of the independent Afrikaans weekly newspaper, *Vrye Weekblad*.

- Trevor Ncube, editor of the *Financial Gazette*, the crusading weekly in Harare, Zimbabwe.

- Jane Raphaely, editor and publisher of *Cosmopolitan* and *Femina* magazines.