The South African print media: from apartheid to transformation

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The South African print media:
From apartheid to transformation

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my friend Herman Arendse who gave me a start in journalism on The Cape Herald in Cape Town, 1975.

Consider what God has done. Ecclesiastes 7:13.
ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the role of the mainstream South African print media in perpetuating discrimination during the years of legalised racial discrimination – commonly known as apartheid – from when the Herenigde Nationale Party took power in May 1948 with an unprecedented 28-seat swing under the leadership of 74-year-old Dr Daniel F. Malan until it was replaced by the African National Congress, black-dominated unity government in April, 1994. Against an historical background, it focuses on the agenda and efforts of the mainstream metropolitan print media during the apartheid era, the build-up to the first non-racial elections, and the media’s role in the immediate post-apartheid era.

Race and class-based inequalities have always been a feature of South African life since settlement when the Dutch arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. The era of racial segregation can broadly be categorised as starting from 1910 to 1948, the Immigrant Regulation Act of 1913 that prevented the free movement of Indians across the provincial borders of Natal, which also placed restrictions on Indians owning land outside Natal province. Black land ownership was subjected to similar regulations with the Scheduled Areas of the Native Lands Act of 1913 and later the Native (Urban Areas) Act.

But it was from 1948 that the era of apartheid started under the National Party leader Dr Malan, known as the father of apartheid, a racially discriminatory and evil practice based entirely on racial superiority and aimed at keeping the minority white tribe of Africa in control over the indigenous people. This “separate development” policy was already entrenched in South African society by the time the National Party took control after the 1948 elections, but Malan legislated oppression by introducing various Acts of Parliament and in 1953 disenfranchised the “Coloured” people by removing them from the voters’ role.

Instead of opposing this blatant racism and discrimination that lasted nearly half a century, the South African mainstream print media – both the English and Afrikaans language press – embraced the new direction in the early years with an enthusiasm that reflected poorly on the role of the press. During the early reign of the National Party, from 1949 to the mid-50s, the English-language newspapers were weak and fearful, lacked integrity and honesty, and failed in their duty as public watchdog. While the Afrikaans-language newspapers were developing to support government policies, the English press shared similar views. Both the English and Afrikaans press failed in their duties as the Fourth Estate in keeping a watchful eye on government. They never opposed the status quo and offered little or no support for a system of equality for all the peoples of South Africa. Although, in many ways the press was severely restricted in performing its proper role, ultimately it was a white-controlled press which profited from apartheid.
This thesis argues that despite its efforts, fundamental political change was never the agenda of the press, nor was equality of the various races. Definitely not the Afrikaans press and certainly not the English press despite the role that it seeks to claim in the post-apartheid era as a de facto opposition and a constant nagging thorn in the side of government.

At times the English press wore the mantle of the opposition press and chided the government on various excesses but at the same time remained a conservative institution that practised much the same discriminatory policies of apartheid. Now, as South Africa continues along a new path of democracy, it is not a question of whether there is need for a reappraisal of the media in the post-apartheid era, but what shape or form it should take.

This thesis aims to redirect the functions and role of the national print media and suggests that while the owners and the gatekeepers remain the same, on their past record, there is a justifiable cause for concern in a country struggling to come to terms with democracy and concludes that fundamental change is needed.

By way of conclusion, I attempt to show that the South African print media, despite being hindered by a variety of laws to suppress criticism of the government, was at best hypocritical, at worst inherently racist and secular, tacitly supportive of the apartheid regime during the rule of the Nationalists and is now in need of reorganisation and fundamental structural change to meet the future challenges in a redeveloping nation.

It is not a case of whether that change is effected but how it will be done that is at issue. How that change will be effected depends both on a willingness for change on the part of the major publishers, full integration and a more balanced racially-representative staff, as well as a commitment to open government on the part of the ruling establishment.

With the demise of the National Party government and the introduction of the first non-racial parliament, it is my contention that it is now timely to forge a new media order, incorporating the best of what is good in the rest of the world and shedding that which is cumbersome while at the same time being sensitive to the development of an emerging democracy. This does not mean that the new media order should be of a restrictive nature, nor is it a call for the media to be less vigorous in its role of keeping Government honest.

The press must be free to criticise, investigate and chide the government. However, in the early years of nation building the role of the press should in some ways be more supportive rather than fiercely antagonistic, defiantly critical or adversarial. In short, the new media order should work towards reconciling the need for openness and the right to speak one’s mind with the necessity for healing the wounds created by racism. In the words of African National Congress stalwart Albie Sachs (1990):
We must remember that the objective is to open doors that are at present closed, not to create more blockages to the free circulation of ideas and information. We would have gained little if we were to replace the present media controls with new ones that simply switch the propaganda and biases around; if one realm of banality takes over from another. Truth has always favoured the democratic cause, and our people are tired of forever being protected in the name of what others think is good for them.1

The press in South Africa does not exist in a vacuum. Large sections of the South African print media grew fat on the machinery of apartheid. Racism was rife in many newsrooms and evidence given to both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Racism in the Media inquiry amply illustrates this. At the very least there is now a moral obligation on the part of the media to participate constructively in the transformation just as there is an obligation on all sectors of South African industries and trades to adopt Black Economic Empowerment objectives.

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PROLOGUE

Job reservation and discrimination in the workplace were features of the South African political landscape as far back as the 1920s. Many jobs were reserved for whites with no skills and only the very menial jobs were reserved for blacks. By blacks I mean the coloured, Indian and Bantu population. It was intended to provide unskilled and poorly educated whites with what was described as “European living standards”.

This colour-based job reservation was “legitimised” with amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act (job reservations) introduced in 1956 and 1959. Under the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956, categories of work were reserved for particular races. For example, trades such as electricians, plumbers, motor mechanics were reserved for whites while black people were restricted to manual labour, servants and mineworkers. The small white community was given the best and highest paying jobs to reinforce the beliefs of white superiority. Coloureds were given second best and black people were largely restricted to menial work.

The apartheid government’s Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956 can be regarded as another attempt to provide a measure of insurance for white labour against unemployment. The Act enforced job reservation and racial separation in trade unions and was designed to afford the white group another legal barrier against non-white encroachment.¹

The system of apartheid has left a legacy of inequality in the labour market and this inequality reveals itself in the distribution of jobs, occupations and incomes according to race, gender and disability.

However, job reservation did not apply to journalism. It was unnecessary because there were no training facilities for black journalists and universities that offered journalism/media studies as a career option were reserved exclusively for whites. In addition, publishers of the major newspapers steadfastly refused to employ black and coloured journalists.

There was no place for them. The focus of the news was directed towards whites, the content of the papers was geared towards whites, the advertisers were chasing the high spending power of the whites and black people did not fit into the equation. The first black journalists only started trickling into the profession in the early 1970s and then only on specific, racially targeted newspapers.

It is this history of oppression and exclusivity during the apartheid years that sowed the seeds of discontent between the ANC-led government and the national press. By the time the apartheid system collapsed in the early 1990s and the election of the Government of National Unity in April 1994, there was growing optimism for a new era of national transformation.
The national media were expected to be a part of this transformation. More than that, government expectations were that the media would be supportive in the early years of nation building. Instead, the government faced a critical media which it considered antagonistic and hostile. Instead of the developmental approach which the government desired, it faced the full scrutiny of a Western libertarian media which operates in much stronger and older democracies.

This was illustrated in a presidential address by Nelson Mandela at the 50th ANC conference held in Mafeking on December 16, 1997.

We have to confront the fact that during the last three years, the matter has become perfectly clear that the bulk of the mass media in our country has set itself up as force opposed to the ANC.

In a manner akin to what the National Party is doing in its sphere, this media exploits the dominant positions it achieved as a result of the apartheid system, to campaign against both real change and the real agents of change, as represented by our movement, led by the ANC.

In this context, it also takes advantage of the fact that, thanks to decades of repression and prohibition of a mass media genuinely representative of the voice of the majority of the people of South Africa, this majority has no choice but to rely for information and communication on a media representing the privileged minority.

To protect its own privileged positions, which are a continuation of the apartheid legacy, it does not hesitate to denounce all efforts to ensure its own transformation, consistent with the objectives of a non-racial democracy, as an attack on press freedom. When it speaks against us, this represents freedom of thought, speech and the press − which the world must applaud!

When we exercise our own right to freedom of thought and speech to criticise it for its failings, this represents an attempt to suppress the freedom of the press − for which the world must punish us!

Thus the media uses the democratic order, brought about by the enormous sacrifices of our own people, as an instrument to protect the legacy of racism, graphically described by its own patterns of ownership, editorial control, value system and advertiser influence. At the same time, and in
In many respects, it has shown a stubborn refusal to discharge its responsibility to inform the public.2

Accusations of bias and threats of prior restraint and censorship further muddied the waters. Black journalists were accused of being manipulated by their white masters; the media was accused of being slow to change in a way that reflects the new South Africa. And then there were complaints that the government was trying to nobble the press.

From my research, it is clear that there is no quick fix for this complex problem. Demands for racial transformation of the press, simply replacing white staff with black, is not the solution. Not every black journalist is an Uncle Tom and not every white journalist is a racist.

The problem of transforming the media now transcends racial inequalities and it includes factors such as improving journalistic standards, better pay to attract better journalists, improved training facilities, even reshuffling the decks so that the gatekeepers of information reflect more broadly the markets in which they operate.

Since the historic democratic elections in April, 1994, South Africa has undergone swift and varied changes. In the 10 years since the election of a Government of National Unity, the country has had two presidents. Nelson Mandela was president from 1994 until 1999 when he was succeeded by the ANC’s heir apparent and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

The bulk of my research was done while Mandela was president. However, the problems faced by the national press under Mandela continue under Mbeki.

During the period of Mandela’s government, many black journalists were promoted to the executive levels of the country’s major newspapers. In the fast changing world of South African journalism, there have also been many editorial changes. Newly promoted editors have changed newspapers, some were sacked and others switched camp to work for rival organizations.

Under Mbeki’s leadership, changes are evident in the way that the government and the national press are working towards settling their differences as each becomes more relaxed about its role in society. However, my PhD studies, which began in 1996, are based on research on the South African press conducted from 1990 to 1999 while I was working as a journalist with *The Canberra Times*. I have tried to indicate in this thesis where I know of people who have changed jobs or switched allegiances.
This thesis is written from the perspective of a black former South African journalist who worked on South African newspapers during the 1970s. It should be read within the context of someone who has seen and experienced the discriminatory effects of the apartheid system.

Notes for Prologue

1. Visser, Wessel, Shifting RDP into gear. The ANC government’s dilemma in providing equitable systems of social security for the “new” South Africa, Paper presented at the 40th ITH Linzer Konferenz, University of Stellenbosch, 17 September 2004

INTRODUCTION

As South Africa undergoes radical social and political transformation, the question is how should the media respond to the very difficult problems that the new government encounters as it struggles to cope with the AIDS crisis, extreme poverty, high illiteracy, poor housing and a lack of basic facilities such as running water and electricity.

In a climate of change, there is a need for the national media to change in a way to broadly reflect concerns in the wider community. The press has been accused of being “too white” and faces increasing demands for change from various quarters including veiled threats from President Thabo Mbeki for a more accountable media.

Against a background of statements made to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Human Rights Commission’s inquiry into racism in the media, there emerges a polarisation of ideas. Essentially, the national press remains a microcosm of the apartheid era with black journalists demanding a more prominent role as the gatekeepers of information. White editors are contending they were at the forefront in the fight against apartheid and have no axe to grind with the new government and the African National Congress. One view is put by ANC Women's League president Winnie Madikizela-Mandela when she addressed the Johannesburg Press Club in Braamfontein in 1998. Madikizela-Mandela accused the media of being wedded to the old order of Western racist supremacy, and out of kilter with the new social order.

They (the media) use the conventions and values of a small section of our society to define what constitutes a standard free press. They use their freedom to push an agenda that is totally out of touch with African society. The media would continue to be perceived to be loaded with the agenda of racism and white superiority as long as editors remain loyal to parties' political ideologies and are controlled by a business sector that is aligned to (those parties') paradigms.¹

Madikizela-Mandela accused the media of becoming an impediment to the idea of an African renaissance, that it lacked sensitivity and was out of step with the majority of South Africa’s people.

The media is in a dilemma, caught between two major cultures a dying, fossilized European, conservative liberalism, and an assertive emerging, African renaissance … If it is to play a meaningful role, it needs an urgent introspection followed by radical transformation.²
It is a view that is by no means unique and finds favour with a large section of the former oppressed as well as advocates within the white community.

In some ways it is a view shared by the former *Rand Daily Mail* editor Allister Sparks (1995) of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism:

After a political revolution that astonished the world, we are now entering an even more profound second phase of socio-economic change. The transformation of the media is part of it. Like all revolutions, the outcome is uncertain. All we know is that it will be important for the quality of our emerging democracy, for the media to provide the vocal system through which public debate takes place. If they are defective, the democracy will be defective. Hopefully, there will be change but that will require a change of attitude and commitment of resources by those who control the media.³

It is the way in which the media should change that poses a dilemma. The thesis asks the questions: Did the national press do enough in the fight against apartheid? Can the liberal English press rightfully claim the mantle of de facto opposition in the fight against apartheid or was it more often than not in collusion with the racist regime and little more than an irritation when it opposed National Party policy? And, what is the future of the national press, how will it meet new demands it faces in the democratic new South Africa?

Gordon Jackson [1993] also concedes there is necessity to rewrite the map but is unsure whether a developmental media system could prevail. Jackson finds that a developmental media system “is highly unlikely to become preeminent” in South Africa mainly because “the traditions of an already established mainstream press put these papers at odds with many elements of developmental media”. There are also fears the ANC-dominated government would promote developmental journalism “seeking to use the press with some level of compulsion to advance government policies”. And he arrives at the conclusion that:

As a whole the press is likely to cling to the social responsibility approach and First World standards for as long as possible, as indeed it should. Should the society as a whole move towards liberal democracy, it will be easier for the press to maintain its allegiance to and practice of First World standards. By contrast, should the country move further from liberal democracy, maintaining its present orientation would be difficult.⁴

Jackson concedes elements of developmental journalism will be incorporated into the evolving South African media and it should be welcomed but he suggests that despite the ample shortcomings of the press, “developmental journalism as a whole offers little to redress those weaknesses”.
Transformation of the media is already underway following the fall of apartheid in 1994 and the changing relationship between the press and the new Government of National Unity, South African media analyst and academic Eric Louw [1996] notes. Louw describes the new political order’s relationship with the press:

A new hegemonic order has been born and is forcing the press to radically change the ways which, to a large extent, mirror the wider reform process. Essentially, the Government of National Unity-times represents an altered political and socio-economic context to which all institutions in society (including the press) are having to adjust.5

One of the aspects focused in this thesis is the commitment to and the speed of transformation in the press.

Chapter One offers a broad historical overview of the development of the South African print media. It identifies four main strands of the South African print media during the period commonly known as the apartheid era. These are the Afrikaans press, the English language press, the “Black” press, and the so-called alternative press, each with its own agenda. They all operated under the same severely oppressive and restrictive laws but each reacted in a different way.

The chapter aims to show the complexities of the media in the political spectrum and the role of the mainstream English press as opponents of the government’s racist policy, the Afrikaans press evolving from a government propaganda machine at conception to grow into a disobedient and defiant appendage towards the end of the apartheid era.

Set against this background, there was the marginal role of the “black” press and the defiance of the alternative papers of the late 1970s and 1980s that caused much trouble for the government trying to crush rising civil unrest and anti-apartheid riots across the country. The alternative papers were often accused of fanning the flames of unrest in the townships.

The structure and foundations of the South African press is discussed in Chapter Two including the early days of the press, the struggles against authoritarian controls and the move towards greater accountability in the 1950s. Chapter Two also considers the role of the Afrikaans press in National Party politics, the effect of apartheid on the development of the national media leading eventually to the establishment of the alternative press in 1980 and its eventual decline and demise 10 years later.

Chapter Three continues with the legacy of government oppression and focuses on the early struggle for press freedoms against this background friction, the emergence of a pioneer press and later the impact of the “Magna Carta” in 1829 and briefly looks at the emergence of the “black” press.
Chapter Four considers post-apartheid paradoxes. The end of apartheid brought with it additional and new pressures on the press. Just as the English language press was accused of being unsupportive and biased against the National Party government, so too did the non-racial Government of National Unity stir up old conflicts by accusing the media of being fundamentally racist and unsupportive of change. The new masters ushered in old fears of repression and censorship while repeating the common appeal for greater support and consideration in the face of overwhelming social disunity. The Truth and Reconciliation hearings into the role of the media during the apartheid era are also considered in Chapter Four as well as considerations from former Argus company editors who defended their stewardship of the English press as antagonists of the government and proponents of change.

Chapter Five focuses on new directions and options for change. Among the new directions considered are options from the government-directed Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), as well as the ANC media policy before it came to power in 1994, options from a reformed National Party as well as warnings from then President Nelson Mandela urging the media to adapt and change in the spirit of the national and social transformation and similar threats from his successor Thabo Mbeki who put the national press on notice.

Chapter Six considers the effects of racism in the media and looks at efforts by the South African Human Rights Commission to facilitate a free and open press. It focuses mainly on two major submissions to the SAHRC, *Cultural Bloodstains* by Claudia Braude and a report by Media Monitoring Project that looked at racial stereotyping in the media, as well as individual submissions by interested parties including a loosely formed group of “black” editors, a response from a group of “white” journalists. It concludes with an assessment of the recommendations of the human rights commission.

Chapter Seven considers options for change in the South African press against a background of various theoretical academic studies.

Chapter Eight concludes that real changes within the South African press will only become a reality when there are corresponding meaningful changes in South African society. It also offers modest options for a new media order in the emerging democracy and promotes an expanded role for black journalists to better reflect the diversity and needs of all sections of society.
Research Framework

Issues considered in this thesis include a scope for a meaningful journalism Code of Conduct, aspects of a developmental media approach despite its shortcomings, a review of ownership and monopolies, levels of overseas ownership, improved prospects and training for black journalists at the highest levels to provide a more equitable balance of opinion, options for self-regulation, and the impact of constitutional guarantees of press freedom amid government calls for a more sympathetic and supportive national press.

The image of South Africa making a smooth and trouble-free transition from oppression looks rather tarnished, especially with rising crime, poor housing, rampant poverty and a host of other problems threatening the very fabric of democracy and offering soft and easy targets for a critical press. Here the national media must take much of the blame as it pursues an adversarial role against the government. That is a role demanded and expected of the press in a strong democracy. But in South Africa the bonds of democracy are strained and still fragile.

Mandela puts the government’s case:

I know that these comments will be received with a tirade of denunciation, with claims that what we are calling for is a media that acts as a lapdog rather than a watchdog. We must reiterate the positions of our movement that we ask for no favours from the media and we expect none. We make no apology for making the demand that the media has a responsibility to society to inform. Neither do we doubt the correctness of our assessment of the role the media has played in the last three years. All of us know too much about what happens in the newsrooms .... Conference will have to consider what measures we have to take .... At the same time as we consider these matters, we must also reaffirm our commitment to the freedom of the press and demonstrate this in all our practical activities.6

There are many arguments against the media adopting a developmental role in society as opposed to the more traditional Western model but it is clear that in developing countries, the arguments against the traditional Western model of the press has validity in that it has been less than successful.

This thesis does not propose some form of censorship for the South African press but rather that the gatekeepers of information need to seriously re-assess their role in society. Are newspapers going to remain inactive and passive yet critical bystanders in a changing landscape or are they going to be interactive players adopting some sort of role in the process
of nation building? This thesis suggests there is an urgent need for the national media to adopt a more positive and proactive role, yet it is one that they may be reluctant to embrace.

The thesis suggests that while the fundamental make-up, ownership and staffing, especially at senior management and editorial decision-making levels remain the same, the impetus for change will be slow and the political agenda tinged with the mistakes of the past. Staffing needs to reflect the diversity of a nation in transition and a definitive press policy needs to be spelt out – even if this is by way of legislation as in a Press Act within the boundaries of the constitutional guarantees on freedom of speech.

By and large the executive roles in South African mainstream print media are dominated by white people who remain stunted by a lack of basic knowledge of the lifestyle and affairs of the vast majority of South Africans. Proper journalism education for a new generation of South African journalists, especially black journalists, and participation at senior decision-making levels is an important and necessary start even before political or legislative considerations for the evolution of a dynamic press in South Africa are considered. This is not to say that with affirmative action, by employing more black journalists or promoting more black journalists to positions of influence on South African newspapers, changes will necessarily follow. Thabo Mbeki, the South African president, and his predecessor, Nelson Mandela, have already levelled serious allegations of bias against senior black journalists whom they accuse of unbalanced comment on policy matters of national importance and of carrying out the hidden agendas of their white masters.

This complaint is not peculiar to South African journalists where the government is often at odds with the press. However, the South African society is in the process of major transition socially and politically and the media has also to transform in a way that it will be meaningful to the broader community, not just the wealthier influential whites that have been served so well.

Mathatha Tsedu, deputy editor at The Star in 1997 and one of the few senior black journalists appointed to a management position, explains the dilemma in a report Journalism in transition in South Africa to the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University:

In actual fact, the threat to journalists, unlike in the heyday of apartheid repression is their [black journalists’] conscience. The challenge is to decide what is right and wrong and sometimes national priorities might interfere with what would ordinarily be good journalism … Exposing corruption is another area in which black journalists have excelled, debunking the myth that because they are black and the government is black, they would therefore spare them the rod”.

7
The thesis methodology is largely descriptive and based on empirical observations, drawing on historical analysis and earlier research by South African media academics including Keyan Tomaselli, Eric Louw, Guy Berger, Arrie de Beer, and Gordon Jackson and is assisted by the works of William Hachten, Anthony Giffard and John Phelan. South African newspaper editors, among them Raymond Louw, Harvey Tyson, Moegsien Williams, Ryland Fisher, and Thami Mazwai among many have contributed significantly to the ever evolving media debate and substantial use is made of their observations. It covers opinions from the extreme views offered by Mazwai, a former political prisoner and now programming chairman of the national broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, who dismisses objectivity in journalism as an illusion to Keyan Tomaselli who sees the need for improved research skills as essential for the improvement of journalism and Ryland Fisher who argues for the radical reform of South Africa’s predominantly white newsrooms in the hope that more racially balanced newsrooms will provide a broader scope of news coverage.

My own experience as a South African journalist during the turbulent 1970s on the “coloured newspaper” The Cape Herald and later The Cape Times in Cape Town also provided some useful observations and impetus. Submissions and interviews to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s inquiry into the role of the media during the apartheid era as well as submissions to the South African Human Rights Commission’s inquiry into Racism in the Media offered varied perspectives on the way the South African press operated. This research is limited somewhat by personal interpretation and subjective standards of what is being represented in the news.

There is no shortage of theories suggesting means and ways in which the press needs to change in what is described as “the new South Africa”. This thesis does not aim to add to the plethora of theories canvassed. However, it hopes to determine an urgent need for greater participation of “black” journalists at the executive and gatekeeper levels of the media to influence the national agenda, to facilitate a broader spectrum of opinion and media coverage and to ensure full participation to the widest levels of a segmented society. It also looks at ways in which this change can be achieved.

This thesis hopes to draw attention to the continuing difficulties faced by “black” journalists in the post-apartheid South African press. By highlighting a need to change the direction and focus of the national press, it also suggests an expanded role for the previously disadvantaged journalists and an opportunity to reshape the national agenda. This needs to be reflected at senior editorial or executive levels rather than at the lower and entry levels of journalism. This thesis then proposes some specific steps to implement such change for the gatekeepers of information.
Notes for Introduction


3. Sparks, Allister, Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) journal, volume 1, 1 July 1995, Johannesburg.


CHAPTER ONE

SOUTH AFRICAN PRESS FREEDOMS – AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Introduction

Chapter One offers a broad historical overview of the development of the South African print media. It identifies four main strands of the South African print media during the period commonly known as the apartheid era. These are the Afrikaans press, the English language press, the “Black” press, and the so-called alternative press, each with its own agenda. They all operated under the same severely oppressive and restrictive laws but each reacted in a different way. The chapter aims to show the complexities of the media in the political spectrum and the role of the mainstream English press as opponents of the government’s racist policy, the Afrikaans press evolving from a government propaganda machine at conception to grow into a disobedient and defiant appendage towards the end of the apartheid era.

Legacy of oppression

The fight for press freedom in South Africa has been a record of struggle, oppression, political interference and racial bias in a deeply divided country. Its roots lie in the complexities of a colonial dispensation extraordinary even in the eventful annals of European imperialism. From the mid-16th Century two great colonial powers, the British and the Dutch, vied for supremacy in South Africa. This ensured an inheritance that was bilingual and bi-cultural, akin in some ways to the later settlement of Canada. For more than 150 years, the Dutch were predominant in the Cape, until the early 19th Century when the British out-maneuvered them by an adroit combination of political strategy and militarism.

The Dutch trekked from the Cape inland and north from the 1830s, recreating their imperialism in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The inevitable result was a see-sawing military struggle, culminating in British sovereignty following the successful South African (Boer) War of 1899-1901 and the inauguration of the Union of South Africa in 1911.

Through much of the 20th Century, the Union simmered under an uneasy alliance between British institutions and the traditions and culture of the thrusting Afrikaners. Gradually, the Afrikaners asserted a political ascendancy which enabled them to fulfil by ostensibly democratic means their political, racial and cultural aspirations in South Africa. The fulcrum of this hegemony was a rigorously controlled separation of black and white South Africans, a policy known generically as apartheid. South Africans of British origin and culture lacked the numbers, the political will and the strategical dexterity to withstand the development and enforcement of institutional and cultural separation based on race. Apart
from the chasm between black and white, the British and Afrikaners were often uneasy bedfellows, the British inclined towards moderation but mostly compliant with the political majority.

The labyrinthine twists and turns of imperial history, and apartheid, ensured that two contending white cultures, the British and the Afrikaners, emerged in South Africa, each producing its own distinctive newspaper press. White supremacy flourished in the enduring presence of a vast, tribal-based black majority, ruthlessly controlled and oppressed but never subjugated or marginalised. Heterogeneous in composition, the black majority reflected traditions of protracted resistance, even spasmodic military glory in the combative Zulu nation.

The size and distribution of the overwhelming black population ensured that from the mid-19th Century it would also produce a diverse press. Thus, the colonial press traditions of the British and Afrikaners were augmented by a rich and politically potent press whose primal impulses were racial.

Stimulated by political forces, particularly apartheid, an alternative press tradition emerged in South Africa during the second half of the 20th Century. In short, the emergent framework of the South African press was anchored in three powerful traditions: colonial with enduring British and Afrikaner press systems; racial, with a black population and press much coerced but never subdued; and a lesser, though still influential, political press influenced by alternative attitudes and stances.

The following account does not analyse in any conceptual sense the origins and institutional development of South Africa. It aims, firstly, to account for the emergence of print news technology and print newspapers in the country since its foundations in the mid-17th century. On the basis of this analysis, it proceeds to define, describe and conceptualise the four quintessential press systems identified above: British, Afrikaner, Black and Alternative.

**Beginnings**

It took nearly 175 years after settlement for the first newspaper to appear in South Africa, and at that, a strictly-controlled government gazette. The Dutch, who first settled in 1652, discouraged the establishment of a free press. For most of the first 150 years after Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape Colony, there was no print technology there. Monetary policy dictated the procuring of crude print technology to provide currency. In 1782, the Dutch East India Company allowed Governor van Plettenberg some printing type to produce emergency currency when war with England disrupted normal consignments of specie from Holland. All requests for a printing press were denied.
The arrival of the first printing press in 1794 was the reluctant product of constant representation by burghers at the Cape to the colonial government which transmitted them to Holland, but Amsterdam rejected pleas for presses in 1783 and 1786. The colonial administration urgently needed a press for printing proclamations, government orders and other state documents.

It was a pattern not dissimilar to early settlement in the United States, and Australia where a printing press was dispatched in 1788 with the First Fleet. In many respects, the printing press legitimised first settlement. In Australia, government decrees were printed and distributed from the early 1790s, and the first newspaper, a government gazette, appeared in 1803. In the United States, where early settlement was broadly contemporaneous with South Africa, newspaper production began virtually from the early 18th Century.

In 1793, the Council of Policy at the Cape established a printing plant. It appointed Johan Christian Ritter as superintendent, but he lost the position in 1795 when the British took over the colony. Ritter and another master printer, Harry Harwood Smith, scrounged some basic printing equipment and lobbied the British Governor, Sir George Younge, for the government printing licence. Ignoring Ritter and Smith, on July 15, 1800, Younge issued a proclamation appointing Alexander Walker and John Robertson as government printers.

They were established Cape merchants who had imported a printing press, type, three printers and a Dutch translator. Walker and Robertson began printing on February 1, 1800 but the decision to grant them government sanction was challenged by Ritter and Smith. The Governor proclaimed a heavy fine and confiscation of plant if other printers entered the field, and sole right of printing was vested in the colonial government. The government offered to buy a press on order from Ritter, but Smith was ordered to hand over all his printing equipment.

Walker and Robertson were also given permission to start a weekly paper and so began publication of the *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, on August 16, 1800. Some historians regard this publication as South Africa’s first newspaper. But it was not a newspaper in the traditional sense as material was restricted to government proclamations and public notices. This initiated what Cutten described as the start of a romantic era in South African journalism, lasting until 1828. These were epic, landmark years for the South African press.¹

Essentially, the *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser* was a government gazette but it contained small news stories and a modicum of commercial advertising. Its staple fare, however, was the constitutional, legal and administrative documentation of colonial government. It was a bilingual paper known both as the *Cape Town Gazette and African
Advertiser and the Kaapsche Stads Courant en Afrikaanse Berigte [Cape City News and Afrikaans Reports]. With a return of Dutch hegemony, the newspaper was known only as the Kaapsche Courant from 1803 to 1806, but resumed its original name when the British occupied the Cape again in 1806.

This name it retained until July 7, 1826 when it appeared as The Cape of Good Hope Government Gazette. Changing nomenclature reflected alternating periods of Dutch and British rule. The first British occupation of the Cape lasted from 1795-1802. Constitutionally, the Cape colony reverted to the Dutch rule in 1803 when it was handed back to the Batavian Republic to comply with the Treaty of Amiens. This was signed by Britain, France, Spain, and the Batavian Republic (Holland) in March 1802, marking the end of the French Revolutionary Wars. The second British occupation of the Cape started in 1806, when Anglicisation of the Cape Colony began in earnest.

Towards a free press

The first commercial newspaper was published 170 years after the first Dutch settlement in the 1660s. Almost a quarter of a century after the first British settlers arrived, the fundamentals of a free press were initiated. Following a sequence of campaigns and petitions, the Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, reluctantly, in December 1822, permitted a non-government newspaper. Thomas Pringle, a poet and writer of some note, and a fiery Dutch clergyman, Dr Abraham Fourie, inaugurated the South African Journal and the Nederduitsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Tijdschrift [loosely translated as Netherlands South African Magazine].

These publications appeared in English and Dutch in alternate months from March 5, 1823, signalling the emergence of a privately-owned newspaper press in the colony. The South African Journal published only two issues after an article critical of Governor Somerset led to its closure. Pringle was bluntly warned to cease publication or face the consequences.

The Dutch edition, though, lasted for nearly 20 years, steering well away from official business, politics and social controversy to focus largely on ecclesiastical matters until its demise in 1843. From it stemmed the official mouthpiece of the Dutch Reformed Church, Die Kerkbode [Church News]. Thus, the foundation press of the Afrikaners owed its emergence and survival largely to a religious audience.

Meanwhile, the more venturesome Pringle also persuaded his close friend John Fairbairn, an experienced writer and journalist, to join him at the Cape and embark on a new venture, The South African Commercial Advertiser. A printer, George Greig was foundation proprietor of the Advertiser which first appeared on January 7, 1824. It is generally considered to have been the first independent South African newspaper. Greig edited the first two editions, then responsibility passed to Pringle and Fairbairn as joint editors.
The authoritarian Somerset opposed the publication with a vehemence that prompted its early closure. Pringle refused to continue publication unless the press was protected in accordance with well-established British traditions of press freedom. In a battle that lasted five years and closed the *Advertiser* on two occasions, Pringle asserted his right to “petition the King for the extension of freedom of the press in the Colony”. He pressed his case in London and in 1828 was allowed to publish again. On May 8, 1829, the press was freed from the control of the governor and his council with the proclamation of Ordinance 60 of 1829, (Ordinance for Preventing the Mischiefs arising from Printing and Publishing Newspapers Ordinance 60 of 1829) the “Magna Carta” of the South African Press.

It was introduced by General Bourke and it provided among others libel laws as remedies for abuses of the liberty of the press. De Kock describes it as the cornerstone for a free press and its proclamation "a time of vigour remarkable in any country's annals". Twenty-one of the 23 sections of the charter spelt out rules and regulations which newsmen had to abide by, but with a guarantee that only proven libellous and irresponsible statements could in future prompt government intervention. Governor Sir George Younge’s proclamation of 1800 restricting all public printing to his nominated appointees was also repealed.

**A pioneer press**

In another strand of rapid growth, other newspapers had followed in the tracks blazed by the pioneers. On August 18, 1824, *The South African Chronicle and Mercantile Advertiser* appeared and was published until 1826. It was perceived as a government mouthpiece that reflected the views of Governor Somerset and deflected any criticism of the colonial government at the Cape. Apart from the religiously-inclined *Nederduitsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Tijdschrift*, the father of Dutch journalism was a Portuguese-Dutch Jew, Joseph Suasso de Lima, a lawyer who started his newspaper, *De Veerzamelaar [The Gleaner]* in 1826. Meurant described De Lima’s newspaper as “a Dutch version of [London] Punch”, indulgent of society gossip.

*The New Organ*, edited and owned by Fairbairn and Greig, (see above) also emerged in 1826. As with *De Veerzamelaar*, it too was launched without the necessary licences and De Lima soon encountered financial difficulties from the contentious content of *De Veerzamelaar*. Neither lasted long, folding in the face of levies and stamp duties on published newspapers and periodicals. Under Ordinance 26 of 1826, Governor Somerset levied stamp duties on publications, not so much to raise revenue as to hinder their development. The newspapers at the Cape were too few; it was another attempt to stifle a struggling and
developing press by fiscal means. The small newspapers were mostly unable to pay but struggled through as a philanthropic press until the stamp duty impost was repealed in 1848.

De Lima followed the model of the press pioneers but steered wide of politics in his weekly publication. It was always going to be a struggle for his small newspaper to survive and after just two editions it became clear there was little demand for it. Other newspapers starting in mid-1828 included the Zuid-Afrikaan [South African] which arose out of the demise of De Veerzamelaar. It was edited by De Lima and C. E. Boniface, a Frenchman who later produced the first newspaper in Natal. The Colonist, a weekly English publication, lasted from November 22, 1828 until September the following year. The Zuid-Afrikaan was the first newspaper to embrace Afrikaner nationalism and was intended to counter the efforts of Fairbairn which were mainly aimed at the English settlers. Thus, the dichotomy between newspapers directed to English and Afrikaans emerged early in the press history of South Africa, although some semblance of a joint approach occurred with alternating bilingual issues.

In the wake of Magna Carta

Several newspapers appeared in the wake of the “Magna Carta”, Ordinance 60 of 1829. The most important included The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette (June, 1830), The Graham’s Town Journal (December, 1831), a religious four-page weekly De Kaapsche Cyclopedie (February, 1833), a missionary monthly The South African Christian Recorder (1835), a bilingual journal The Moderator and Mediator (1837), Leesvruutgen, a religious journal (1837), The Eastern Province Government Gazette (1838), The Price Current (1838), De Ware Afrikaan (1838), The Cape Times (1840, not the present Cape Times which was established in 1876), The Colonial Times (in Grahamstown 1840) and the Cape of Good Hope Shipping Lists, in Cape Town (1840).

This diversity of newspapers reflected a number of well-established press traditions, most emphatically the religious press. The introduction of a dedicated literary journal and a commercial shipping list were also typical of patterns followed in other colonies.

The practice of bilingual publication continued but does not appear to have insinuated itself into the common practice.

Contentious had been the spread of John Fairbairn’s South African Commercial Advertiser into the Eastern Province which angered Dutch trekkers in December 1830 as settlers prepared for war with the indigenous people. The Graham’s Town Journal was established under Louis Henry Meurant, as a voice for the trekkers occupying new lands in the north and east of South Africa. It sought to fend
off criticisms of the Afrikaners from Fairbairn’s more liberal newspaper in Cape Town. Fairbairn, a missionary’s son and a libertarian, was regarded as representing a clique of fanatics obsessed with outrages on defenceless natives. The Graham’s Town Journal was troubled by what it perceived as an attack by Fairbairn’s paper on the frontiersmen of the Eastern Province. In response, the Afrikaners launched De Zuid Afrikaan to “defend the good name of the Dutch residents against the libels of a hostile English party at the Cape and in England”. It opposed what the settlers viewed as the “radicalism of the negrophilist philanthropists”.6

By 1840, the South African press had grown to seven newspapers and nine printing houses from the origins of the four small newspapers publishing in Cape Town in 1826. By 1881 the Colonial Office in Cape Town had registered more than 125 assorted journals and newspapers. The rights of a free press had been established with control of the press shifting away from the Governor. Further church newspapers and magazines also appeared in the late 1840s, including The South African Christian Watchman printed by the Wesley Mission, launched in January, 1846 and the Natal Witness (1846). In January 1851, the South African Church Magazine and the Ecclesiastical Review were first published. The last newspaper published at the Cape before mid-Century was The Cape Monitor, October 15, 1850, at Cape Town.7

It would be futile listing new publication between 1850 and 1900 because many newspapers were started with the discovery of gold in the Transvaal and it would assume an intolerable magnitude.8

Some of the more notable publications of this period of development included The Friend (1850), Natal Mercury (1852), Cape Argus (1857), The Star (1871), De Volksstem (1873), The Cape Times (1876), Diamond Fields Advertiser (1878), and South African News (1899). As the nomenclature indicates, the trend was firmly in the direction of general newspapers, perhaps with a slight orientation towards an English-language press.

Appearing in the early 1900s, the dwindling days of colonial South Africa, were the influential Rand Daily Mail (1902), Sunday Times (1906), and Die Burger (1915). These landmark publications evolved into major metropolitan newspapers of South Africa, and several of them were still publishing in the late 1990s. The Cape Argus and the Cape Times remain the major English newspapers in the Western Cape and Die Burger is one of the most popular Afrikaans newspapers. The Rand Daily Mail went under in 1985, perhaps due to mismanagement and financial difficulties but it also might be argued that it finally succumbed to government pressures. Thus, there is a sustained and enduring tradition of significant press publication extending through almost the whole of the 20th Century.
The *South African Catholic Magazine*, a monthly review of ecclesiastical news and opinion, was launched in 1891 with a prominent intellectual and Catholic priest Dr Friedrich Carl Kolbe as founding editor. For more than a decade Kolbe wrote much of its copy and gained a reputation as a fierce anti-war campaigner and a feeble voice against British imperialism. His opposition to the second Anglo-Boer war was not well received in many quarters. The editor of the *Cape Mercury* castigated the cleric’s logic, chided him for meddling in secular affairs, and by 1899 Kolbe had to relinquish editorship of the magazine temporarily to spare the Catholic church embarrassment over this public feud.

However, he continued his anti-war stance and opposition to martial law in the editing of Albert Cartwright’s anti-war newspaper the *South African News*, first published in Cape Town in 1899. In it, Kolbe’s editorials and viewpoints clashed frequently with the editorials advanced in pro-war newspapers such as the *Cape Times* and the *Argus*.

He seriously underestimated the magnitude of the ecclesiastical opposition to his anti-war stance and by March 1900 it was clear that his continued role at the *South African Catholic Magazine* could not continue and he resigned as editor.9

**Founding fathers**

This overview of how the South African press evolved has emphasised the paramount role of the intertwining colonial struggles between English and Dutch that brought colonial settlement to South Africa. The role of the black press and, particularly, idiosyncratic publications outside mainstream journalism, do not blend readily into this account of press evolution. Before taking them up in detail, a brief summary of the British and Afrikaner press is necessary.

The English-language press as it had emerged by the end of the colonial period was showing clear signs of settling into two main publishing groups predominant in English-language press and, over time, a formidable presence in the national press structure. These were the Argus Printing and Publishing company and its smaller rival South African Associated Newspapers (SAAN). The traditions and heritage of the English-language press were steeped in the British experience and tradition, particularly adherence to conventional Western models of freedom of the press. They can be traced in large part to the arrival of the British settlers in the early 1820s. However, the influence of the early Dutch rulers cannot be ignored, even though they showed great reluctance to accept the conventions of a free press at the Cape for more than 150 years. The Dutch masters, despite their opposition in the Cape, also derived from a free-press tradition in Holland extending back to the spread of the printing press through Western Europe in the late 15th Century.
The Afrikaans-language press had its roots in the Afrikaner language, religion, politics and nationalism. The Afrikaners created it largely to further their national and cultural aspirations. Unlike the English-language press, the Afrikaans press strove through much of the 20th Century to get the dogmatic, racist National Party into power, and then to keep it there.

Remarkably, at the time of Union in 1910, there were no Afrikaans newspapers in South Africa. The structure of Afrikaans publication outlined above was extinguished in practical terms by the brief triumphs of English imperialism and patriotism in the late 19th Century.

Accordingly, newspapers in the Afrikaans language targeted at a national and cultural Afrikaner audience did not survive the Boer War (1899-1901). The traditions of an Afrikaans press were deeply imbued, however. A resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism led in 1912, shortly after the promulgation of the union, to the establishment of Die Week [The Week] founded by editor Harm Oost. This patriotic Afrikaner newspaper lasted two years before foundering financially.

It focused on Afrikaner politics, culture and economic efforts to assist and uplift the Afrikaner people. Hachten suggests that this resurgence in Afrikaner nationalism and the launch of Die Week spawned the Afrikaans press as it exists today.10

**Black and alternative**

According to Rosenthal, Bantu journalism in South Africa had its foundations in missionary journals about the mid-18th Century, and developed with the proselytising British and Foreign Bible Society which aimed at providing the Scriptures in every language.11 The scope of this evangelical journalism is unclear, although it must of necessity have been largely oral or hand-written in character.

The first printing equipment was brought by a group of American missionaries who came to Natal in the Voortrekker era of the late 1830s and used it to publish the first periodicals in the Natal region of eastern South Africa.

Thus, the first tentative steps of the black press lay in providing religious pamphlets and sermons, creating a system of writing and the spelling of African words never recorded before. It helped to prescribe basic rules of typography, led to the training of printers and compositors, and the consequent start of the first authentic Bantu presses in South Africa. The Bantu press made its first modest appearance at Esidumbeni Mission Station in Natal with the publishing in 1844 of the Xhosa language magazine Ikwezi [Morning Star]. This was
followed in 1862 by *Indaba* [*The News*] edited by the Rt Rev Bryce Ross. Circulation was around 600 copies with two-thirds of the content in Xhosa and the rest in English.12

*Indaba* had a rival when the Wesleyan Mission Press at Kingwilliamstown launched *Isitunywa Senyanga* [*The Monthly Messenger*] in the late 1860s. Both publications were devoted to spreading the Christian message. The religious affiliation of *Indaba* was transferred in 1870 to the head of the Presbyterian Mission College at Lovedale, in the Cape, and the paper was renamed *The Kaffir Express*. It was published in both English and Xhosa for six years then split into *The Christian Express*, all in English, and *Isigidimi Sama Xosa* [*The Xhosa Messenger*] all in the Xhosa language. In the Transvaal, one of the earliest Black publications was *The Native Eye*, started in Pietersburg in the decade between the Boer War and unification by Simon Majakatheta Phamotse. It enjoyed some prestige under Phamotse as editor because of his close association with the administrator of Basutoland, Sir Godfrey Lagden. *The Native Eye* folded when Phamotse returned to Basutoland and became secretary to Paramount Chief Jonathan. Among other publications, Daniel Simon Letanka started the *Motsoalle* [*Friend*] in 1910 but, not satisfied with the name, he changed it to *Moromioa* [*Messenger*].

The first real newspaper for Bantu people was the Sechuana publication *Molekudi ua Bechuana* which first appeared from 1856 to 1857, published at the Wesleyan Mission at Tha ‘Nchu, edited by Rev Mr Ludorf. This newspaper included religious matter, a section on current politics, illustrations and photographs of social occasions. A monthly publication, it was followed by the *Mahoko a Becwana* [*The Bechuana News*] printed in the town of Kuruman at the Moffat Institute under the auspices of the London Bible Society. Again, the focus of news was religious, social and political. Following the London Mission Society example, the Lutheran Mission later supported a newspaper in the Transvaal, *Moshupa-Tsela* [*The Guide*].

The turbulent development of a black press, largely independent of religious and other influences, began in 1884 with the establishment by Jo Tengu Jabavu of an African language newspaper in the Ciskei called *Imvo Zabantsundu* [*African Opinions*]. By the late 19th Century, several newspapers under Bantu control were publishing. Most lasted only briefly and are hard to trace. In 1901, Solomon Plaatjie published the *Koranta ea Becoana* [*The Bechuana Gazette*] in English and Tswana, and the Rev Walter Rebusana launched *Izwi la Bantu*. Rabusana later became the vice-president of the South African Native National Congress.

Other minor independent Black publications started around 1900, including *Ikwezi le Africalan d’Umlomo wa Bantu*, but these did not last long. In 1903-4, Dr John Dube produced
the *Ilangai and Lase Natal* [*The Natal Sun*] in the Zulu language. Dr Dube, a minister educated in the United States, is considered a pioneer of black journalism in South Africa along with Solomon Plaatjie, Tengo Jabavu, and Mark Radebe. Radebe aimed to start a national newspaper, *Ipepa lo Hlanga* [*The National Paper*] as a national platform for his people. Radebe’s enterprise was unrewarded. He lost money and was forced out of newspapers into the law and private enterprise.

Under the editorship of its founder, Alfred Mangena, *The Native Advocate* launched in 1912 was the first African newspaper published in the national capital, Pretoria. It foundered financially and closed after a year of publication.

**The Alternative press**

The Alternative press was a much later development. It emerged in the 1970s, and so was indisputably a post-colonial phenomenon. Perhaps more importantly, it was a post-apartheid phenomenon. The genesis of the Alternative press can be traced to the wave of national unrest that swept South Africa in 1976, starting with the Soweto riots of June 16, 1976 and the subsequent banning of four newspapers. Unrest spread to Natal, East London, Port Elizabeth and the Western Cape where the resistance movement gathered momentum.

 Appropriately, the first South African grassroots press was established in Cape Town, where the seeds of both English and Afrikaans press systems had also been sown. Coloured activists were largely responsible for mostly improvised, ad hoc journals initiating an alternative system. A fortnightly tabloid called *Grassroots* was launched in 1976 against a background of protest and resistance to apartheid. The community paper was a response to the privately-owned liberal press that was seen as being white-orientated and pro-establishment. It was against this background that *Grassroots* and the papers that followed were called collectively the Alternative press by their founders.13

Johnson [1991] links the importance of *Grassroots* to the growth of democratic organisation in the community, with the newspaper acting as the epicentre for that growth.

No longer was the newspaper a mere chronicler and herald of resistance. It became part of that very process, influencing the direction it took.14

Staffed largely by unpaid volunteers and anti-apartheid political activists, the Alternative press struggled against police harassment and limited resources. By 1983, the first wave of community-based Alternative press publications had begun to falter. It was given a renewed surge of life by several professional journalists who joined grassroots papers and gradually shaped them into professional weekly products. The *Weekly Mail*, in 1985, was the first, followed over the next four years by *New Nation, South, Vrye Weekblad*, and *New
African. Several smaller magazines such as *Work in Progress* and the *SA Labour Bulletin*, which dated from the 1970s, were given renewed vitality by the new press movement.15

The concept of “alternative” newspapers in South Africa found a niche market in the political upheavals of the late 1970s and early 1980s, but its foundations can be traced back much earlier. In 1952, Prime Minister Danie Malan moved to silence the voices of criticism and dissent by banning South Africa’s Communist Party-controlled newspaper, *The Guardian*.

From it developed the *Advance*, which was also banned two years later, and then reappeared in various forms as *New Age* which was outlawed in 1962. Other minor newspapers that could loosely be defined as the alternative press in the 1960s all met the same government resistance. Some were banned, and all of them were constantly harassed.

**The main players**

By 1994, more than 5000 newspapers and magazines were registered with the Department of Home Affairs. Another 66 new publications had been approved for publication. Registration of newspapers and other publications was no longer required after November 1994. (See Appendix A for a list of national newspapers and circulation figures.)

In the early 1990s, the Argus company produced more than 60 per cent of the 1.5 million newspapers sold daily in South Africa and, with Times Media Ltd (TML) commanded almost total national coverage. South African newspapers and magazines, however, were still dominated by four organised press groups. The major group was Argus Newspapers, owned by Tony O’Reilly’s Independent Newspapers PLC, based in Great Britain and Ireland. It published *The Star*, in Johannesburg, *Cape Times* and *Argus* as morning and evening dailies in Cape Town, *Natal Mercury* and *Daily News* as morning and evening dailies in Durban, *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, a morning daily in Kimberley, *Pretoria News*, a 24-hour daily in Pretoria, *Sunday Tribune* in Durban on Sundays, and several weekly newspapers. It was also a controlling shareholder in the Newspaper Printing Company, which printed Argus and TML newspapers throughout South Africa, and of Allied Publishing, which distributed Argus and TML newspapers nationally. TML had shares in both companies. Times Media Ltd was owned by Omnimedia Corporation, controlled by Anglo American. TML published *The Sunday Times*, in Johannesburg, *Business Day*, a morning daily newspaper, and the weekly *Financial Mail*, in Johannesburg, *The Eastern Province Herald*, a morning daily in Port Elizabeth, and the *Evening Post*, an evening daily in Port Elizabeth. TML also owned several weekly and monthly newspapers, newsletters and magazines and information services.

The Anglo American mining group enjoyed large cross-media ownership and moved swiftly after the fall of apartheid in 1994 to sell its controlling interest in Argus to the
Independent Newspaper group. This further reduced the players in the small newspaper market in South Africa. This media monopoly was a worry for the ANC which considered compulsory steps to dilute the effects of the concentrated media ownership and to give access to the media to those excluded. In its media charter, in 1992, the ANC stressed as one of the cornerstones of its policy that the media should be open and that it should be absolutely accessible to anybody, either in print or the broadcast media.

The Irish media group, Independent Newspapers, bought a 31 per cent controlling interest. It lifted its stake to 34.98 per cent shortly afterwards and in February 1995 announced it planned to raise its stake in Argus Newspapers by R150 million ($A58.11 million) to nearly 70 per cent of the group.

By the end of 2002, Independent Newspapers was the leading newspaper group in South Africa, publishing a total of 14 daily and weekly newspapers in three major metropolitan areas of South Africa. Independent Newspapers has aggregate weekly sales of 2.8 million copies in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. The group currently attracts 48 per cent of the total advertising revenue spent in the paid newspaper market and reaches 63 per cent of English newspaper readers in those three areas. Independent Newspapers also publishes 13 free weekly community newspapers in Cape Town and holds a number of profitable commercial printing and distribution centres in South Africa. In addition, the group also has interests in magazines, book publishing, radio and broadcasting and television.

Times Media Ltd was acquired by the black empowerment group, Johnnic Communications which has diverse media and telecommunications interests. It is chaired by Cyril Ramaphosa, a presidential contender and trade union leader. Johnnic shares 50 per cent ownership of Times Media Ltd with the Pearson Group of the UK, owners of the Financial Times. Johnnic Communications was incorporated on June 11, 1988 as The Argus Printing and Publishing Company Ltd. The name changed to Argus Holdings Ltd on August 17, 1988 and to Omnimedia Corporation on September 26, 1994. On May 10, 2000 shareholders approved a further name change to Johnnic Communications to reflect the restructuring of the company.16

Nasionale Pers was owned by its directors with a large percentage of shares held by Servgro, which in turn was owned by the Sanlam insurance group. Nasionale Pers published Beeld, the Afrikaans morning daily in Johannesburg, Die Burger, the Afrikaans morning daily in Cape Town, Die Volksblad, an Afrikaans evening daily in Bloemfontein, City Press, a Johannesburg-based Sunday newspaper, Finansies en Tegnies, a weekly business magazine in Johannesburg, plus several weekly and monthly Afrikaans magazines. Nasionale Pers was also the biggest distributor of school textbooks in South Africa. Perskor, the smallest
Afrikaner publisher, was owned by Dagbreek Trust, the Rembrandt tobacco and liquor giant, and Nasionale Pers. Perskor published the Johannesburg morning daily, The Citizen, Transvaler, the evening daily in Pretoria and numerous magazines, several small weekly and monthly newspapers and was also involved in book publishing. By 2003, Naspers rationalised its operations as Media24 to embrace all aspects of its publishing empire. Wholly-owned by Naspers, its operations include newspapers, magazines, internet ventures, distribution companies and printing works. The group owns four dailies, two weeklies and three Sunday newspapers as well as 37 community newspapers countrywide. The magazine division includes over 33 magazines in every sector of the market.

Other important publishing houses were Caxton, Thompson’s Publications, Republikeinse Pers, Publico and Penrose. Independent Newspapers took up 31 per cent of The Argus Newspapers in February 1994 (see above).

It also transferred control of the Sowetan newspaper to the black-owned New Africa Investments group in response to growing criticism of a concentration of media ownership of South Africa’s English-language press. Except for the two Sunday newspapers which were variously printed in regional centres, Rapport and the Sunday Times, there was no national daily newspaper in South Africa. This was caused by the large areas to be served, a changing market place and distances to be covered, as well as a perceived lack of support for a nationally-circulating daily newspaper.

There were 33 daily and weekly newspapers and more than 100 country or provincial newspapers operating in South Africa in 1994. Most were small bilingual publications avoiding politics. There were also hundreds of small community newspapers or “free sheets” that circulated in the suburbs and townships, reflecting mainly suburban issues and advertising or promotional material. Politics in the community newspapers was by and large ignored.17

By 2001, a number of publications with varying degrees of success have extended their coverage to the majority black community, away from the traditional white media audience. Conglomerates still own all the newspapers in South Africa. Independent Newspapers controls 75 per cent of the English language newspapers. Among the major conglomerates, New Africa Investments Limited is a black-owned consortium that controls the country’s major black-orientated newspaper, the Sowetan, along with Times Media Ltd. Despite post-apartheid improvements, the print media in South Africa remain dominated by the white minority, and reach only about 20 per cent of the population due to illiteracy, the lack of newspapers in rural areas, and the cost of the publications.
By the end of 2002, nearly 10 years after the end of apartheid in South Africa, race continues to affect the media in the country despite other improvements in freedom of speech and the press.\textsuperscript{18}

**A comparative model**

Although I have outlined four basic strands of the South African print media, others have suggested the group could be further stratified to reflect narrower interests. Although the four major divisions are considered adequate here, a further segmentation into nine categories by Tomaselli and Louw is useful for comparative purposes. These were:

(a.) the conservative pro-apartheid Afrikaans press linked to the National Party (since the 1930s);

(b.) the anti-apartheid conservative-liberal press linked to monopoly “English” capital since 1850);

(c.) the anti-apartheid press aimed at black readers owned by either monopoly “English” capital or paradoxically, by pro-apartheid “Afrikaner” capital (since the 1970s). This press functioned within the state’s strategy of creating a black bourgeoisie;

(d.) regional and/or free sheets, tied to the English liberal and conservative Afrikaans presses, offering “apolitical” local interest items. A rapidly-growing press in both black and white areas, government, and the economic pressures of advanced capitalism are increasingly steering print media into this uncontroversial direction;

(e.) the social-democratic independent press (since 1985);

(f.) the left alternative press (since 1980);

(g.) the neo-fascist pro-apartheid press serving factions which broke from the National Party in the 1980s;

(h.) newspapers linked to the Bantustan infrastructures, for example *Mafiking Mail* and *Illanga*, and;

(i.) government propaganda sheets produced by state news agencies, the largest of which was the Bureau of Information (since 1986).\textsuperscript{19}

Switzer [1997] further complicates the media landscape, claiming the alternative press in South Africa constituted a unique political, social and literary archive—the oldest, most extensive and varied collection of indigenous serial publications of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa and he notes four distinct phases in the history of the alternative press:
1. The African mission press (1830s-1880s) represented by the pioneering missionary societies and their converts. The earliest African protest literature can be traced to the last three decades or so of this era.

2. The independent protest press (1880s-1930s) represented primarily by the black petty bourgeoisie with African nationalist newspapers the dominant organs of news and opinion.

3. The early resistance press (1930s-1960s) which gradually embraced a popular, non-racial, non-sectarian and more militant alliance of left-wing working- and middle-class interests. During this period, traditional protest publications were brought out, closed down or depoliticized and merged with a new captive black commercial press controlled by white entrepreneurs.


Summary
This chapter has provided an overview of the historical development of the South African press and its struggle for legitimacy in the early days of settlement. It traces the struggle towards a free press against the background of an intertwining colonial struggle between the English and the Dutch.

It also identifies four basic strands during the apartheid years: the Afrikaner press, the English language press, the Black press, and the so-called alternative press, each with its own agenda.

The aim has been to show the complexities of the media as it operated within the political spectrum, particularly that the role of the mainstream English press as opponents of the government’s racist policy and apartheid cannot be down-played. Reviewed in the context of African politics and black liberation aspirations, the English language press was clearly deficient in content and insufficiently defiant. This was as much the result of legislative restrictions and police harassment as from a reluctance to confront the status quo. It also struggled under repressive legislation and faced constant government threats, banning orders and censorship. Chapter Two will look at authoritarian controls on the media during apartheid and the establishment of an alternative press that challenged government policies.
Notes for Chapter One


2. Ibid.


8. Ibid p. 7; also Cutten, op. cit, pp. 9-20.


CHAPTER TWO

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PRESS: STRUCTURE AND PRACTICE

Introduction

The structure and foundations of the South African press is discussed in Chapter Two including the early days of the press, the struggles against authoritarian controls and the move towards greater accountability in the 1950s. This chapter also considers the role of the Afrikaans press in National Party politics, the effect of apartheid on the development of the national media leading eventually to the establishment of the alternative press in 1980 and its eventual decline and demise 10 years later. This chapter details the complexities of the national press against the backdrop of apartheid and the way the political system of separate development shaped the development and focus of the press.

Foundations

A legacy of the Afrikaner press is that it dedicated itself to the preservation, interests and advancement of the Volk, the hereditary Afrikaners. It was a news media born in response to perceived ideological differences with the so-called “enlightened”, or verlig, English press and the transcending objective of promoting Afrikaner nationalism. The first newspaper to propagate the interests of Afrikaners and the Dutch, De Zuid-Afrikaan, was started in 1830 by Christoffel Joseph Brand, an advocate who was unpopular with the British colonial authorities. In its third year its subscription base rose to 3,000 when Afrikaners from the other British-annexed parts of South Africa embraced it. It folded in 1904.

In the early years of apartheid there was no argument that the Afrikaans press was dedicated to Afrikaner nationalism, especially in 1948 when the Nationalists took office. The battle for survival between conflicting interests which started out as a colonialist’s struggle against authoritarian controls continued through the history of South Africa, polarising the society. It created a rift not only between burgeoning black African nationalism and Afrikaner domination in the early 1900s, but also spawned a growing animosity between the white English settlers and the Afrikaner nationalists. This was especially so during the Boer War and 40 years later during World War II when the National Party and its leaders were sympathetic to Hitler and the Nazis. Consequently, the Afrikaans press was consumed with a strong nationalistic fervour having clear racist overtones.1

South African newspapers observing the British traditions of a free press while operating within a framework of racial oppression faced an extraordinary dilemma. They juggled between the case for apartheid and the role of the media as public watchdog. This ambivalence – not clearly supportive, yet selectively oppositionist – isolated the English press
from the Afrikaner print publishers, who regarded it as a virtual enemy. The English language press was perceived as supporting the Opposition parties, mainly English, and soft on supporting apartheid. The Afrikaans press was overwhelmingly staunch, loyal National Party stock, unstintingly committed to apartheid. In the eyes of the Afrikaans press, the English press fell short of maximising support for the national policy. Paradoxically, the English press was vexed by blacks who claimed that, fundamentally, it was a white press for white people.

A watershed in this deeply-ingrained antipathy as it affected South African news media history can be discerned in the period preceding the election of the Nationalist Government in 1948. After World War Two, and the reconstruction period, widespread international demands emerged for an extension of democratic institutions in South Africa.

A closer look at the mechanics of the press, its freedoms, role and influence, was an inevitable part of this phenomenon, following the processes of self-scrutiny of the press in leading Western countries. In the United States, a privately-financed Commission on the Freedom of the Press was established in 1942 and suggested “reforms from within” the industry. In 1946, the Labour Government in Great Britain established a Royal Commission to “inquire into the financial control, management, and ownership of the Press”. The precedents were there for the South African government to establish its own inquiry.2

**Parliamentary scrutiny**

The initiative was taken in the House of Assembly by United Party MP Dr Bernard Friedman. He moved on February 24, 1948 that a select committee be established with the following objectives:

. . . to ascertain whether the financial and technical control of the press in South Africa is such as to prevent a completely free expression of editorial opinion and expression of news; whether the conditions of employment are such as to ensure to the reading public an adequate supply of journalistic talent capable of free and competent reporting of the wide field of social and economic activities in South Africa; and whether there exists any restraints on honest news through censorship, loaded transmission rates, economic sanctions and other devices.3

The Argus company interpreted this as an attempt to curb its growth and perceived dominance in the South African print media industry. Parliament was dissolved in 1948 for general elections and the motion was still in committee. The United Party was defeated at the polls, General Jan Smuts resigned as leader, and it was assumed that the print inquiry would disappear from the agenda.
Instead, the incoming National Party quickly revived it. On January 31, 1950, Dr A. J. R. van Rhijn, a National Party parliamentarian, moved in the House of Assembly that the government consider the “advisability of a commission to inquire into the existence of monopolistic tendencies, press combines, and group interests in this country and their influence on the press, and the advisability or otherwise of controlling internal and external reporting”. On October 23, 1950 a Press Commission was announced with Justice J. W. van Zyl as chairman. The first sittings were held in January, 1951.

The English-language press saw the Commission as an attempt to muzzle the press in general and, in particular, to restrict the growth and financial success of the English language newspapers. It was an ironic consummation that a measure conceived as liberalising South Africa’s press should actually open the way for greater repression. It enabled the English press to be painted as the voice of opposition to the Nationalists, driven by financial and corporate interests rather than politics.4

During the apartheid era, the English-language press was perceived by the Nationalist government as the “hostile and foreign press”. Perhaps this had some justification because the mainstream English press was a constant thorn in the side of the Afrikaners. It took much credit for what was depicted as its persistent opposition to government policy. But over the years of apartheid rule and the constant overwhelming electoral successes of the National Party at elections, it was incongruous that this dominant “white” press was consistently out of step with the white voters who resolutely supported the National Party.

In its opposition to the Nationalists, the English press certainly were not promoting a radical change in the political status quo, the concept of equality or black majority rule. The two major black revolutionary groups, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) were still referred to as “terrorist groups” in the major “white” newspapers even in the lead-up to their final “unbanning”. For the black majority, it was difficult to determine the agenda of the “white” press.

Certainly they were not working in the interest of the blacks as their recruitment policies made clear. Staff ratios, both for the Argus group and South African Associated Newspapers, from 1949 to even the late 1990s, showed only small numbers of black or coloured staff journalists, and even lower percentages at managerial levels. These were the two dominant newspaper groups in South Africa.

**Apartheid and the Afrikaans press**

The greatest ambition of the Afrikaans press had been achieved in 1948 with its government in power. Towards the late 1950s, however, a subtle change was apparent. No longer satisfied
with merely being the vehicle for pro-apartheid government policy, the Afrikaans press took more positive steps to highlight factional differences within the Nationalists.

Any opposition to the National Party by an Afrikaans paper, however, revolved around how apartheid policy was applied rather than the principles involved.\(^5\)

As noted above, the ideological rift between the Afrikaner and English press was already clearly defined. Ultimately, it widened to a gulf linked only by the slender thread of “white man’s superiority”. The Afrikaner-dominated Nationalists were in power and its sharply-distinguished Afrikaans press stoked the fires of the Afrikaner nationalist movement.

The English language press was regarded as the “enemy” of the government and a supporter of its enemies, the black majority. The Afrikaans press, without any pretence, aligned itself over the apartheid years to government aims and aspirations.

Robert Sobukwe, the leader of the Pan-Africanist Congress, described the freedom of the press as a white freedom:

> Not only the vehicles of communication but also the laws that they [the newspapers] obey are white men’s law for white men’s purposes.\(^6\)

The former editor of Die Burger, Professor P. J. Cillie, succinctly stated the newspaper’s ethos and its dominance in the Cape Province:

> Die Burger, of course, is an example of a newspaper that was published not primarily as a commercial proposition, but quite frankly as the pioneering opinion-forming journal with a very definite political message, that of the then still small Nationalist Party. The first shareholders did not expect early dividends, and for very many years did not get them.\(^7\)

More subtly but with equal determination, the English press segregated its newspapers along racial lines and stifled the development of its black staff both in terms of hiring staff and providing separate newspapers staffed exclusively by “black”, “coloured” or Indian staff for black, coloured or Indian newspapers. Examples of these were the World aimed at blacks around Soweto and greater Johannesburg, The Cape Herald aimed at “coloured” markets around the townships of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, the Johannesburg edition of Post and the Durban edition of Post aimed at the Indian market in the two major cities.

By contrast, the Argus in Cape Town was almost entirely white staffed with token non-white appointments only made mid-1970 when Sharkey Isaacs was appointed and later Rashied Seria was transferred from the Cape Herald. At the Star, in Johannesburg, the pattern was similar. It was a pattern that was consistent and would continue for over a decade more.
Seria was later to quit the *Argus* in disgust and was a foundation member of the alternative newspaper *Grassroots*. While “coloureds” were an invisible minority on the reporting and editing staff of the white English press, not a single “black” journalist was employed on an English newspaper in the entire country.

Even so, the English press managed to cultivate and to preserve this image of a protagonist for change, antagonistic to the excesses of apartheid, a fearless and strident anti-apartheid campaigner in the face of adversity. In retrospect, this perception can be seen to have been invalid when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997 inquired into the workings of the press in South Africa during the apartheid years.

But it is only partly correct to conclude that the Afrikaans press was solely an instrument of oppression and a government propaganda machine. In the complexity of South African politics and changing loyalties, the thrust of the Afrikaans press was different both in tone and direction. For example, the progressive Dr Willem de Klerk was editor of *Die Transvaler* [1973-87] and editor of the mass circulating national Sunday newspaper *Rapport* [1987-92]. In both editorships, De Klerk did not share the extreme views of Nationalists such as Hendrik Verwoerd. During the 1980s, political change sparked nationwide political unrest and riots. The Afrikaners were split into two rival publishing groups loyal to different regional factions of the National Party. These were *Perskor*, the more conservative faction in the Transvaal, and *Nasionale Pers* in the Cape Province. The Cape’s citizens generally were perceived to be wealthier and more liberal in terms of Nationalist policy than the Transvalers. Political policy division even in National Party circles was not unusual.

**Die Burger and the Afrikaans press**

The role of *Die Burger* in National Party politics is well documented, especially its relationship with the government post-1948. It began in 1915 as the National Party’s official newspaper.

As the oldest and most successful of the Afrikaans newspapers, *Die Burger* was always closely linked with the party, and had a decisive role in charting policy and direction. Daniel Malan was appointed its first editor in September 1915 when he became leader of the National Party in the Cape. Malan was a Dutch Reformed minister from 1905 to 1915 but became a hardliner who abandoned the ministry to edit *Die Burger*. Malan led *Die Burger* until 1924. He became Prime Minister in 1948, having held senior party positions in Opposition from 1924. Malan resigned as Prime Minister in 1954, but never wavered from his uncompromising belief in white supremacy. He was not an editor in the traditional mould and left most of the news and reader services to others, concentrating on leader writing which was
mainly political. During his Prime Ministership, *Die Burger* maintained close relations with the power structure.

This close relationship with government had diminished by the time Dr Hendrik Verwoerd took over as Prime Minister in 1958. Verwoerd, a former Stellenbosch University sociology professor, edited the fiercely Afrikaner newspaper *Die Transvaler* from 1937 to 1948. He became vice-president of the National Party in the Transvaal in 1946 and, in 1958, party leader and South Africa’s sixth Prime Minister. But earlier he was embroiled in controversy for his anti-Semitic outbursts. In 1941 *The Star*, in Johannesburg, accused the ultra-conservative nationalist of promoting Nazi sentiments in the editorial comments of *Die Transvaler*.8

Verwoerd sued the newspaper, published by the English-language Argus Group but the court ruled against him, declaring his newspaper, *Die Transvaler*, a “very useful addition to the German propaganda service”. In finding for *The Star*, Justice Millin of the Transvaal Supreme Court ruled that Verwoerd’s “right to publish what he did was not in question”.

*The Star* defended on the grounds of justification, while Verwoerd pleaded his right to free speech. Justice Millin said that on the evidence, Verwoerd was not entitled to complain because "he supported Nazi propaganda, made his paper a tool of Nazis in South Africa and he knew it".9

Verwoerd’s political strictures were aimed not only at blacks but also on South Africa’s other minority groups, especially the Jews:

From the very first editorial in October 1937, in which Verwoerd lambasted Jewish meddling in Afrikaner financial affairs, and advocated deporting all the Jews, Verwoerd’s outspoken views antagonised not only [Jan] Hofmeyr [later deputy prime minister to Dr Malan] but also English [largely Jewish] financial and mining capital in the Transvaal.10

De Klerk described the Vorster era from 1966 to 1978 as a time of renewal and change of media policy direction:

During the Vorster era 1966-1978, in the face of considerable opposition from the government and its own readers, the Afrikaans newspapers initiated several enlightened schools of social thought. Against the inborn resistance of many readers, these newspapers persisted in their motivations for change and renewal. As a result of this, a process of change has begun in the National Party. This eventually led to the splitting off, rifts and new policy statements which characterise the present politics of reformation.
The Afrikaans newspapers were, and are in the vanguard of the Afrikaner (r)evolution which is breaking through.\textsuperscript{11}

De Klerk accused the English press of often stretching press freedom “to the extent that the patriotism of the press is questioned”. The Afrikaans press, on the other hand, had a commitment to Afrikanerdom, and thus was vulnerable to criticism for undermining the freedom to know, to inform, to differ, and to resist.

Harvey Tyson, editor of The Star, recalled a loose arrangement of editors, both English and Afrikaans, who met occasionally to discuss the role and direction of the media in South Africa. English-language editors “listened wide-eyed while Afrikaans editors lashed out, in secret, at their government or argued with each other”.\textsuperscript{12}

Out of these meetings a sense of professionalism was enhanced and many socio-political issues were scrutinised effectively by Afrikaans editors. As a consequence, some Afrikaner editors later consulted privately with trusted cabinet ministers to seek a broader understanding of the role expected of the print media. This had some similarity to the way in which the House of Commons would lobby correspondents in the UK who are given “off-the-record” briefings by senior party officials. The UK practice, however, was more regular and formalised.

**Press freedom and apartheid**

Despite the acknowledgment of standard professional values and standards, commitment to traditional journalistic practice was hardly the benchmark for Afrikaans newspaper editors. It was their commitment to apartheid that mattered most. Status in the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* [the Dutch Reformed Church] was another major factor, as might have been expected from the emphatic role of the church in the colonial development of Afrikaans journalism. (See above)

Political advancement through newspaper editorship and the church was a familiar path to party success for senior National Party members.

Andries Treurnicht, another Dutch Reformed minister and ultra-conservative National Party cabinet minister, edited the official Dutch Reformed Church newspaper *Die Kerkbode*, an influential conservative publication in Afrikaner circles, and later edited *Hoofstad* an equally conservative newspaper in Pretoria. His ultra-conservative views later led him to abandon the National Party in 1982 to start the ultra right-wing Conservative Party.

Prime Minister John Vorster had also been chairman of *Perskor*, the Transvaal publishing arm of the Nationalists. He was Prime Minister after the assassination of Verwoerd in 1966 but quit as Prime Minister in 1978 amid a growing rift between *Perskor* and the
Cape-based *Nationale Pers*. In 1978 irregularities surfaced in the Information Department which used government funds to launch a pro-government newspaper, *The Citizen*. Vorster was implicated in this embarrassing scandal that led ultimately to his resignation. He was succeeded as Prime Minister by P.W. Botha who insisted that Cabinet members should not hold newspaper directorships. Restrictions were placed on who held directorships of the major Afrikaner publishing houses, the source of major party funds through lucrative government printing contracts. The companies, however, remained in the hands of the party faithful, dominated by the senior members of the secretive and powerful *Broederbond* organisation, an exclusive, secretive Afrikaaner “brotherhood” that determined apartheid policies and direction.

It was a sinister organisation with secret membership contacts and influence that extended into every aspect of South African society.

Potter [1975] concludes that the Afrikaans press “saw itself and was seen by the Government as the communications arm of a political party which claimed to represent an entire people”.

The Government’s messages were directed primarily and often exclusively to the ‘Volk’. Ideologically, the Government did not recognise the rights of the independent press to information, for the English press did not represent the ‘Volk’ nor could it be trusted to communicate the political message.13

In summary, press freedom as espoused by Afrikaans newspapers differed from the robust English language papers which regarded press freedom as a basic human right. From the Afrikaans point of view, however, press freedom could not be elevated to where the stability of the state might be endangered.14

For Afrikaners eager to foster the unity concept of *volk en staat* (people and state), press freedom was linked to national development and perception of the common good.

**Apartheid and the black press**

In a context where power and control lay with the white press, particularly the politically-dominant Afrikaners, it was always a hard road for black journalists to carve any niche, whether as journalists or in newspaper management. Employment opportunities were few, black ownership was extremely limited, and the potential market largely poor and semi-literate.

The ingredients for development, and ultimate economic success of an independent, robust black press were lacking from the start.
The high illiteracy rate among the target audience was a formidable obstacle for any emerging black press. Except for a few small grassroots publications in the townships and other minor publications of various churches or community groups, a vibrant black press did not emerge in South Africa. Turning back to its professional evolution, the Bantu press was defined by Rosenthal in 1949 as falling into three categories — produced by Europeans for Africans, produced by Africans for Africans, and a joint effort of both Europeans and Africans.

Its evolution can best be described as extending through four distinct stages of development — the missionary era from 1837, the emerging independent period from the 1880s to the 1920s, the white-owned period of the early 1930s, and the multi-racial period post-1976. The colonial development of the Bantu newspapers was outlined through its colonial origins in Chapter 1. The story is picked up here from the early 20th Century.

Among the more influential and vigorous early Black papers was Abantu-Batho [The People] founded in 1912 as the mouthpiece of the Native National Congress, a forerunner of the African National Congress. Like all the independent small black papers, it lacked capital, newsprint, staff and distribution agents. Above all, it was pitched at a readership that was largely illiterate and poor. It was a publication that changed hands repeatedly and with some unusual owners. In 1931, it was briefly acquired by a consortium with Asian financial backing that called itself the African and Indian Trading Association. In 1920, white business and financial backers started taking an interest in the independent black press. The Transvaal Chamber of Mines launched Umteteli wa Bantu [Mouthpiece of the Bantu] in May 1920. Supervised by the Native Recruiting Corporation, it was staffed and produced by Africans in English, Sesotho, and Xhosa languages.

The paper established a large circulation on the goldfields of the Witwatersrand and further afield into the native territories and reserves. There were suggestions that the entry of the Chamber of Mines into the independent black press market and its establishment of Umteteli wa Bantu set the stage for the white takeover of the black press by the early 1930s. All of the early black papers succumbed to political pressure and financial disaster.

In April, 1932, Bantu Press Ltd was established by Bertram Paver a white South African farmer motivated by commercial gain as well as a desire “to provide the Native people with a platform for fair comment and presentation of their needs and aspirations”. Bantu Press controlled six publications including its flagship The Bantu World with a weekly circulation of 14,600. The newspapers of Bantu Press circulated throughout South Africa, Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Paver’s foray into black journalism was short-lived, and 14 months later it was subsidised by the Chamber of Mines through the controlling interests of
the Argus Group. Argus remained the major stockholder in *Bantu Press* from 1933 and by 1945 had increased the number of newspapers in its stable to ten.

In 1959 *Bantu World* had a circulation of some 11,000. By 1968, it was around 90,000 and by 1976 it rivalled the 145,000 copies daily sold in the Johannesburg region by the *Rand Daily Mail*. In 1962, the Argus took full control of *Bantu Press* and its main paper *Bantu World* which became simply *World*, a lively tabloid newspaper styled in the mould of London’s *Daily Mirror*.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the second generation of black newspapers emerged. Also mainly political by nature, these included *Inkundla la Bantu* [*The Bantu Leader*] in 1946, established by the African National Congress, *Torch*, and *Spark*. All were banned following the Sharpeville massacre of March, 1960 when 69 people died after white police opened fire on black protesters. By 1963 Anglo American, as the major stock holder in Argus and the Chamber of Mines, had full control of *Bantu Press* and acquired a thriving and profitable stable of black newspapers. Independently owned black newspapers, however, did not have similar success, as Potter points out:

> It was impossible for any independent African newspaper to survive the competitive power of the white-controlled *Bantu Press*, and indeed, this was the intention.19

After the *World* was banned in 1976, it emerged again as a bi-weekly named *Post* with similar editorial content emphasising sex, sport and crime. Both newspapers ignored political comment.20 Some exceptions to the populist *World* concept of black newspapers emerged with the publication of *Drum*, a monthly magazine flourishing in the 1950s and 60s. It was owned by Jim Bailey, son of Sir Abe Bailey of South African Associated Press, and focused on contentious issues such as brutality to black prisoners, prison labour on farms, and the evils of apartheid for blacks. Jim Bailey also launched *Golden City Post* in 1955, a successful and racy tabloid with some political comment. It was bought by the Argus group in 1972.21

**News vacuum**

In a country with three million whites, the other 25 million people lived in a news vacuum. Throughout the 1950s, the news media was directed more to the educated whites and largely ignored the mainly poor and poorly-educated black masses. There was no particular economic or commercial enthusiasm to embrace a newspaper market of mainly poor and semi-literate blacks when a more affluent middle-class market was already within grasp.
Middle-class readers underpinned the advertising market so crucial to the success of any newspaper. Simply expressed, it was a case of no funds, no newspaper. No place for black journalists.

The development and progress of a meaningful black press was restricted by a complex variety of hurdles. The problem of illiteracy, though not a defence for an imbalanced media, also presented problems for black African publications such as the magazine, *Drum*. This was launched in the 1950s to secure an untapped market of more than nine million readers stretching from Johannesburg to central Africa. But *Drum* struggled in the 1950s. Efforts to boost circulation involved a variety of promotions that included reader participation. The results were hilarious at times but disturbing because of basic communication problems. Readers could not even distinguish between advertising and editorial material. Amusement came first and education second for *Drum* readers.  

During the 1960s, editorial vacancies for black and coloured persons had still been scarce with most black journalists employed as stringers or casuals, or paid a “tip off” fee for news opportunities. In 1963, the *Rand Daily Mail* moved to redress the imbalance by launching a news “*Extra*” for the black market. Two black journalists were employed and *Township Mail* was launched as one page of “black” news, replacing the sharemarket page. Otherwise, the edition remained the same. By 1970, circulation of the “township” edition had grown to around 20,000 copies a day and was renamed the *Rand Daily Mail Extra*. Not only was the *Extra* offensive to black people, but it questioned the sincerity of the “liberal” or anti-government English press. Even the Nationalists and the pro-Government newspapers were scathing in condemnation of this apparent hypocrisy.

*The Citizen* relished the opportunity to denigrate the *Rand Daily Mail*, then considered one of the most outspoken newspapers against apartheid policies. “What is happening is that the *Mail* is already too black for white readers but not black enough for black readers,” *The Citizen* commented.

It was a view reflected on both sides of the racial divide. The black-consciousness movement condemned the practice as condescending and discriminatory, suggesting that what was printed in the *Mail Extra* was not necessarily good enough to be read by the *Mail’s* white readers. Percy Qoboza, the first black editor of a major metropolitan paper and the editor of the *World*, described the *Extras* as a monumental insult to blacks. His own paper, owned by the Argus company and directed to the huge Soweto market, had a firm white hand on policy, direction and economics.
Like the *World*, the *Mail Extra* was started as a financial rather than a political exercise but with the perverted nature of South African politics, it became ultimately a political exercise with an economic twist.

**Black press late century**

The buy-out of independent black newspapers was the precursor to the black press of the 1970s and 1980s black-orientated newspapers owned either by South African Associated Newspapers or the Argus group. Among these “secular”, racially-orientated English-language newspapers were *The Cape Herald*, an Argus publication aimed at coloureds in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth; *Imvo*, a Xhosa language newspaper; and *Ilanga*, a Zulu language newspaper in the Natal region. Controlled by the major white-owned publishing houses under black or coloured editors, these newspapers faced legislative pressures and also, to some degree, white editorial policies.

At the Argus-controlled *World*, the content was decided by its white editorial director in consultation with its black editor. It mainly reflected, however, the establishment view that black readers preferred “crime and funeral news to political or international news”.

Other racially segmented newspaper markets emerged apart from the blacks, for example, *Post*, aimed at the Indian population in Durban and Johannesburg.

Another business ploy adopted by both English and Afrikaans newspapers was to serve black readers with “Extra” editions. These were appendages to the main newspaper as a wrap-around or 12-page supplements inserted into the main newspaper targeting specific racial groups. “Extra” editions such as *The Sunday Times Extra* and *Rapport Extra*, although good money spinners, did almost nothing for black political aspirations. Nor did they scrutinise government in the public interest, offering instead a mix of sport, sex and township crime, with “social scene” coverage by extensive photographic presentation of community dances, sports awards and school reunion dinners.

In a misguided concession to black politics, under the separate tiers of government of the late 1970s, the “Extras” also devoted increasing space to the Coloured Representative Council [CRC] in the Cape Province, a much-scorned political institution created by the Nationalists to offer limited political development to coloured people.

This major failing of the English-language press to criticise and oppose the establishment of the CRC and its concept of separate development left an indelible mark on its integrity and severely challenged the credibility of the white press.

Rather than opposing such a blatant discriminatory practice by the Government, it provided an opportunity for the major media groups – both English and Afrikaans – to
develop their newspapers along parallel pro-apartheid lines. Apart from giving credibility to
the CRC, an essentially meaningless political institution which had no real executive powers,
the English-language press provided the mainstay of political reporting for the “Extras”.

Thus, the four main media groups developed their metropolitan newspapers in a way
that easily excluded “non-white” newsmakers and journalists. For example, it was considered
unnecessary for the Sunday Times to focus on news as it affected coloureds in the Cape
because the Sunday Times Extra did this. It was unnecessary for Rapport to employ black or
coloured journalists to gather news in coloured and black areas because the Rapport Extra did
this. Admonishing and censuring the racist policies of the government on the front pages,
while relegating more than 90 per cent of the nation to an appendage was a juggling act of
huge magnitude, particularly for the English newspapers. It was not easy to reconcile with the
public interest role of the press in a democratic society.

This paradox was further complicated by a lop-sided editorial staff ratio that included
usually a few coloured staff and virtually no black Africans. These contradictions were
highlighted by Chimutengwende in 1978:

The South African Government is also keen not to damage continually its
international image; this partly explains why the English-language
newspapers have been tolerated up to the present. The other reason is that
these media do not in fact advocate fundamental changes to the present
system, but campaign for social reforms which will help bring non-
Europeans into the economic life of the country for the betterment of the
present economic system.24

According to Hachten [1971] the inability of the press to influence national politics
deepened into helplessness and ignorance where the disenfranchised masses were concerned.

Given the proper conditions of political and economic equality, the non-
white Press might have become the most vigorous and effective of any
indigenous press system on the African continent. But this the white
minority government did not permit. 25

Chimutengwende’s judgment and Hachten’s findings would hold largely true for the
next two decades, until the 1980s. Hachten and Giffard [1984] concluded:

Journalism is one of the most dangerous occupations for blacks in South
Africa today. Furthermore, a black press hardly exists in South Africa. If
asked to describe the black press, a Johannesburg black journalist is likely
to say, ‘There is no black press. It is wrong to even talk about it’. 26
Editorial appointments for black and coloured people on major South African newspapers before 1963 were virtually unknown. The editorial direction and news focus of both English and Afrikaans language newspapers were oriented to the prosperous whites and their advertising preferences in terms of maintaining the political *status quo*.

The media was undoubtedly for the whites, staffed by whites and setting a political and social agenda that reflected not necessarily the National Party’s racist line, but certainly the overwhelmingly pro-Nationalist line of the whites. When the role of the national press is dissected against this backdrop of white politics, white superiority and *baaskap*, it is clear why there was no place for black or coloured people on the editorial staffs of the metropolitan newspapers and why separate or *Extra* editions were produced.

Thus, the major newspapers reported issues relating to the two major black political organisations, the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress. Both these organisations, which held overwhelming support among the black majority, were regularly depicted as “the terrorists” almost up to the fall of apartheid and the first non-racial elections in 1994. Even the most superficial review of South African newspapers between the 1940s and 1960s indicates a serious imbalance in the editorial content and direction of the national press. It was only towards the mid 1970s, and in the wake of growing social unrest that it became imperative for South Africa’s press to address this imbalance.

**The alternative press**

For a decade from 1982, the alternative press enjoyed status as the voice of opposition. It was born out of disillusionment with mainstream English print media in a context of Afrikaner nationalist thrust resonating through the Afrikaans press, coupled with oppressive legislation and restrictions on free speech. Thus, the alternative media aimed to provide a representation of sorts for the majority of the politically unrepresented people of South Africa. It was always faced with financial problems, was understaffed and lacked resources. Its achievement can in some ways be measured by the efforts of the Government to suppress these publications with banning orders, legal restrictions and constant harassment.

Ameen Akhalwaya, a pioneer in alternative press publication, concluded that the alternative press in South Africa developed because “black journalists were thoroughly disenchanted with apartheid in the news rooms, even at newspapers which espoused a non-racial society”.

This fundamental ideological bias diminished an English language press fundamental to any independent or alternative political and social expression in South Africa. More directly, there were imperative needs to set an alternative political agenda for those excluded from the alignment of the English and Afrikaans mainstream press, and to respond positively to the propaganda-driven Afrikaans press. Akhalwaya offers this explanation:
The mainstream newspapers by and large believe in either supporting the government’s political structures or wanting these structures to be modified to include blacks. All of them believe in the free enterprise system. The emerging newspapers believe that the political and economic structures must be radically altered in a society based on universal franchise irrespective of racial or other considerations.28

This was a radical departure from the commercial mainstream press and it is debatable how well the alternative media (established and subsidised in many cases by overseas aid funds) measured up to this challenge.

For the fledgling independent newspapers of the 1980s, it was a constant battle for survival because aid funds could be impeded by government intervention, or just dry up. If these independent newspapers became too troublesome, the government would not hesitate to impose hefty fines or simply shut the newspaper.

The alternative press’s efforts to set a news agenda different from the mainstream press meant that it was constantly at risk. It operated under a veneer of tolerance from an authoritarian government keen to portray itself as non-interventionist yet having a vast web of complex laws limiting press freedom. Other problems were inadequate journalism training, ill-equipped and under-staffed newsrooms, and an inability to match metropolitan pay rates. Constant police harassment, legal threats, advertiser reluctance and distribution problems created further difficulties that frustrated struggling independent newspapers.

In shifting away from traditional commercial structures and adopting a crusading approach, the alternative press was vulnerable to the same criticism of bias, selectivity and lack of objectivity prevalent in the Afrikaans press at the other extreme of the political spectrum.

The editorial objectives for the proposed alternative newspaper *South*, for example included much similarity with the mainstream press but its manifesto went further. Among the tasks included in its manifesto was a desire to articulate the needs and aspirations of the oppressed and exploited, to supporting and promoting media, political, community and worker campaigns, and challenging the monopolistic control of newspapers.

These, of course, are worthy social aspirations, but neglect equally important issues about the role of the newspaper in society: fair reporting, propaganda and agenda setting. It is not, however, an unusual concept. In the United States, black journalism also had its genesis as a crusader in a time of adversity, political struggle and social and cultural prejudice that were reflected in America’s mainstream media. In its charter, *Freedom’s Journal*, the first
black newspaper in the United States, established in 1827 and published by John Russworm in New York City, stated its aspirations:

We wish to plead our cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentation in the things that concern us dearly.29

Nearly a century after the establishment of America’s first black newspaper, a group of Nieman Fellows, at Harvard University, in 1947 accused the US media of being “consistently cruel to the coloured man, patronising him, keeping him in his place, thoughtlessly crucifying him in a thousand big and little ways”.30

This is similar to the development of the alternative media in South Africa where the fringes of society wanted to establish a presence and work for social and political change. The white-dominated press in South Africa excluded the black people, mirroring the historical attitudes of the mainstream American press towards black people, and also demonstrating the need for an alternative.

Charles Loeb, a senior officer of the Negro Publishers Association in the US, observed in 1948 that the metropolitan newspapers “continue to play down Negro achievements while playing up Negro crime,” with only “passing thought to the Negro citizen as an American citizen”. This is comparable with South Africa’s English and Afrikaans newspapers during the apartheid era in their highlighting of black crime and general portrayal of black people in news stories.

The alternative black press in South Africa, like the alternative press in the United States, developed in response to restrictive access and attitudes in the conventional press. It established a new market place of its own making, opposing discrimination and prejudice, and offering a more accessible forum.31

Grassroots

By 1987, more than 200 alternative newspapers had been established in South Africa. Mainly comprising small and struggling publications, the burgeoning alternative press was often subjected to brutal harassment and attacks by the Nationalists. As a descriptive term, the alternative label did not sit comfortably with these independent publications. The assumption was that alternative suggested something inferior to the established mainstream media when in fact it aimed to challenge the established newspapers while reflecting the changing face of South African politics.32

One of the first alternative publications Grassroots, a non-commercial community newsletter, started in early 1980 in the Western Cape to fill the vacuum left by the English
and Afrikaans press. In its first issue, the objectives were outlined in an editorial headlined “A paper for you that fills the void”. It clearly spelled out the pioneering role intended for what was hardly a traditional newspaper but more a community newsletter with wide community input:

The newsletter has been born out of a tremendous need for a communications medium for community organisations in the Western Cape. Civil and community news (items) are increasingly being kept out of newspapers ... (and) we know that these newspapers have never really shown an interest or concern for civic and community matters, especially in the areas where the disenfranchised live. When civic and community news items are highlighted, these are in most cases restricted to separate ‘extra’ editions. Even then, preference is shown for sensational news or the development of ethnic bodies working within separate development institutions ... we, therefore, believe that a vacuum exists in the publication of community news and hope that Grassroots will to a certain extent fill that void.33

As an innovative media communicator, the success of Grassroots can be measured in a rapid increase in circulation, which reached 20,000 copies a week in two years focused on basic community affairs and a direct approach to politics, industrial affairs and health related issues. The organisers of Grassroots claimed the support of 80 community-based organisations by 1984, including church groups, youth groups, civic organisations, unions, and women’s groups working closely with it. When the Government cracked down on Grassroots in 1984, the reaction increased its distribution to 40,000 copies a week. This modest community effort served as a catalyst for similar community newsletters in various regions of South Africa. Among the first was The Eye in 1981 in Pretoria and Ukasa, in Durban in 1982. Despite several attempts, Grassroots failed to penetrate the black townships, its organisers forced to admit that “it cannot be denied that Grassroots is seen as a “coloured” newspaper in [African townships].”34 Grassroots identified one of the main reasons for this failure as the low level of community organisation, but there were other complex reasons for this.

According to author and media analyst Sean Johnson, a major factor was that the majority of the people behind Grassroots were “coloured”.

Thus a problem endemic to resistance in South Africa was played out at the level of the alternate press: how to achieve unity amongst the oppressed and thereby increase the strength of the movement towards
change. In the case of *Grassroots*, there were a number of complex reasons for the existence of such divisions, not least of which was that the majority of the people behind the newspaper were coloured. Although the policy of non-racialism was vociferously espoused and practised, it faced prejudice and fear entrenched by decades of rule by coercion and division. *Grassroots* itself identified the core reason for the failure in the African townships as the low level of community organisation there.  

By 1984, the continued general community support of *Grassroots* encouraged the formation of *Saamstaan* [Unity], another community newsletter established in the small rural town of Swellendam in the Cape Province. It soon moved base to Oudtshoorn, a larger, mainly rural town, also in the Cape. From the start, *Saamstaan* faced enormous hurdles financially, in part because of the large rural area that it covered. It encountered constant police harassment in an area where police vigilance was high compared with Cape Town, a major city.  

The 1985 declaration of a state of emergency seriously affected the development of *Saamstaan*, as did the crackdown on *Grassroots*. Key people in both organisations were banned. This constant disruption and harassment proved costly for the *Grassroots* board which by 1985 numbered around 400. By 1989, it had dwindled to nine still with the paper.  

The intensity of the restrictions finally took its toll on *Grassroots*. The distribution of the paper collapsed in 1989, sales income dropped sharply and financial problems developed. Papers were secretly dropped off outside mosques, churches and shops but it was an unsuccessful experiment as the publication still lost touch with its readership. Even a doubling of the print run from 20,000 to 40,000 copies while battling for survival and compensating for copies lost or confiscated by police barely managed to keep the project alive. The last edition of *Grassroots* appeared in 1989 during the defiance campaign.  

*Grassroots* published six editions in 1980, its inception year, increasing to nine in 1981. Between 1982 and 1989, it appeared 10 times a year. The project developed a basic learning program in 1985, launched *New Era* magazine in 1986, and initiated an education and trading program, a rural organising division to train “media activists”, and developed *Saamstaan* newsletter as an offshoot of its activities.  

Johnson described the *Grassroots* strategy as playing the game of producing a newspaper that appropriated the appearance and style of the capitalist press, but subverted its purposes. *Grassroots* aimed to present news “differently” and it went further than merely covering “different issues”, it also demanded coverage of the same issues as the capitalist press, in different ways. Often the difference between a *Grassroots* article and the commercial
liberal papers was one of emphasis and angle. In pursuit of these aspirations, Johnson summarised the questions posed by Grassroots:

- How can this article make a contribution to initiating organisation or strengthening it?
- Does it expose injustices in our society?
- How can it best be written from the peoples’ point of view, at a level where it relates to their experiences?
- Will it inform, educate … and raise a critical awareness among the oppressed? 37

Other Alternatives

A later commercial independent newspaper, South, reflected similar disenchantment with the mainstream media, and extended the pioneering work done by Grassroots. With the rapid proliferation of new anti-apartheid organisations such as the United Democratic Front, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), with its links to the African National Congress, alternative newspapers such as New Nation, Weekly Mail, South, Grassroots, and Saamstaaan gave a growing platform to what were described as “progressive democratic organisations”. A group of journalists and students established the Concord News Agency which operated for three years, then launched the New African newspaper.

The initial aim was to offer an alternative to the white middle-class mainstream press in the Durban region and opposition to the Zulu-language bi-weekly, Ilanga, later controlled by the media network of Gatsha Buthelezi’s Zulu nationalist movement, Inkatha. Natal Newspapers, a subsidiary of the Argus company sold off Ilanga to an Inkatha-controlled company, Mandla Matla, on April 15, 1987.

From a fairly independent newspaper it was transformed into a mouthpiece for Buthelezi’s political ambitions and the Inkatha nationalist movement. In opposition, the New African published its first edition on March 20, 1989.

Ilanga was formed in 1903 by Dr John Dube, the first president of what became the ANC. During the 1950s, the paper was acquired by white business interests and remained in white hands until 1987 when it was taken over by the Zulu-dominated Inkatha political party, becoming the first major African newspaper wholly owned by black South Africans.

The board of directors was headed by Dr Oscar Dhlomo, a former secretary-general of Inkatha. All the other directors had close links with the Inkatha movement or the KwaZulu government. In November 1987, Dr Mangosuthu Gathsha Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha
Freedom Party, removed from the board of *Ilanga* all the directors who had links to the KwaZulu government.

In its policy guidelines, *Ilanga* stated it would adhere to independent and honest standards of journalism that did not pander to personal and sectional interests but were concerned solely with the public interest. While these newspapers were alternative in the sense that they offered black readers a different perspective to what was available in the mainstream press, the fundamental objectives were far removed from an alternative press targeted at social and political reform.

*Ilanga* faced many serious problems including efforts to disrupt distribution and threats to shut down the newspaper. This came largely from opponents and critics of the Zulu political party, reflecting less the disruptions that the alternative press faced during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. A particular bane was the Home Affairs Minister, Stoffel Botha, who in 1987 initiated a torrid campaign to stifle the alternative press. The government sought to eliminate these alternative publications which Stoffel Botha accused of brewing revolution. Having silenced two of the biggest alternative newspapers, the attack covered a wide spectrum from the working-class and openly partisan *Saamstaan* in a remote Cape Province to the more professional *New Nation*, an alternative preserving detachment from political partisanship.

**Alternatives in Decline**

Manoim [1989] concluded that the South African alternative press was born partly to fill the gap left by the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* and partly with frustration at the blinkered mainstream South African press. The mainstream press, Manoim suggested, was like any other commercial press. It was aimed at the readers most attractive to advertisers:

> In South Africa, inevitably, these readers are predominantly white and middle class and their values shape the newspapers they read. It would be unfair to say that the mainstream South African newspapers ignored events in the black townships and rural areas. They are conscious of injustice and have spoken out strongly often enough in the past. But they tend to cover the townships as if they were foreign lands: exotic, remote, of sporadic interest.38

Thus, the alternative press developed with the aim of redressing these “blind-spots”, but with indifferent results. As journalism, many alternative newspapers probably did not match the technical standards of established newspapers. Some lacked substance, objectivity and balance while others were hampered by mismanagement, surviving by dependency on church and overseas funding. Despite the many differences between the alternative
newspapers, one thread linked them a concentration on political news, (primarily news of township unrest and labour issues), activist groups, community organisations, security crackdowns and detentions. At their worst these papers were turgid and monotonously “preachy”. At their best they pushed back the edges of what could be published, exposing issues that the mainstream press ignored.

The growth of the independent newspapers, up until the mid-1980s, though prolific, tended towards community-based newsletters reliant on overseas funding. The New African depended on overseas funding for 93 per cent of its running costs with advertising generating 4 per cent and sales just 3 per cent. Despite its public policy of independence from party political affiliations or bias, the New African was attacked by critics as the African National Congress’ leaflet. By 1990, the New African was in serious financial trouble flowing from distribution costs, mismanagement, consumer resistance and threatened loss of essential overseas aid.

It called in foreign consultants to assess its viability. After constant attacks by the government, New Nation folded after nine years including a three-month shutdown and at least seven bannings. Its demise was little mourned by white public opinion. South encountered a similar fate. According to Manoim:

These were never larger or highly successful newspapers. But they were brave reflections of a particular South African reality which the government would prefer to wish away. Today New Nation and South. Tomorrow perhaps the more widely known Weekly Mail. And the next day? 39

The demise of the alternative media was swift as political change in South Africa gained momentum. The new media that was so important during the liberation struggle was seriously affected when the mainstream media started muscling in on the traditional territory of the independents. As the apartheid system crumbled, foreign funding for the alternatives dissolved. The choice of switching to a viable commercial newspaper was politically unacceptable and unaffordable for many. Smaller publications that had ably served the cause of change, such as South, Work in Progress and Speak were among the casualties.

Sparks says that the alternatives folded mainly because they failed to establish commercial viability, partly because their readers lacked spending power and therefore advertiser appeal: “...also, to be frank, because they were badly managed and slumbered in a culture of dependency. When their life-support systems were switched off, they expired”. 40

Berger concedes the alternative press collapsed in conjunction with the apartheid system that made it so strong. The mainstream press, which for so long had ignored black
politics and labour issues, was compelled to improve their coverage of issues dealt with in the alternative papers.

And with new democratic freedoms evolving in the 1980s, the alternative newspapers had to find new niche markets or face rejection as repetitive, sounding what Berger described as “campaigning vehicles sounding the same old drum”. By the time President De Klerk lifted the ban on the ANC in 1990, the old white mainstream press had already started to encroach by reporting issues including black politics, human rights abuses, even investigative and educational journalism. The alternative press survived the revolution in South Africa but succumbed after liberation to the commercial realities of South Africa’s subsequently skewed media market-place. This was compounded when overseas aid for the establishment of many of the alternative newspapers either ceased or was drastically reduced.

**Alternatives – another view**

Tyson departs from the established view that the alternative press evolved from a need to redefine the national media because the “liberal English media” failed in its duty to confront apartheid despite its repression of the media.

Following the collapse of the *Rand Daily Mail* in the mid-1980s, Tyson suggests change was so rapid that *The Star* (edited by him), had to shift focus and respond more aggressively to cope with President Botha’s Total Strategy-Total Onslaught policy. Change was not forced upon *The Star* because of the burgeoning crop of alternative newspapers with a radical new approach. Although not as technically efficient, adequately staffed, or economically strong as the leading national daily, the alternatives impeded the expansion of *The Star* as Tyson admits:

... The new vigorous, aggressive approach was accelerated to some extent by the death of the *Mail* in 1985. Its demise left a gap in the national debate which *The Star* expanded its role to fill.

But it was a dangerous balancing act for the conservative daily. Traditional readers responded that *The Star* was “giving too much exposure to allegations against the police and to people with grievances”. Tyson admits many readers felt he was allowing *The Star* to lose its “balance”, and this placed it at odds with the vast majority of oppressed South Africans. The consequent “imbalance” of the mainstream English language press provided impetus for the alternative press:

All [alternative newspapers] made themselves instantly felt. They ranged from that most interesting and unheralded experiment in co-operative community effort, *Saamstaan*, to the well publicised edge-of-mainstream
Weekly Mail ... These and other ‘alternative’ journals such as Grassroots, played a vital role in the final battle for press freedom under the National Party even though their combined circulation hardly matched a single small mainstream newspaper. Their influence went far beyond their size. It reached deep into all communities.\textsuperscript{44}

Tyson criticised the viewpoint of the subsidised alternatives that the commercially independent newspapers were all part of “the system” and therefore allies of the Government. The alternative press actively attacked the opposition press for failing to bring down the National Party and to express the “view of the people”, but their critique had been eroded by a lowering of their journalistic standards.

According to Tyson, most alternative newspapers believed “that things like balance, objectivity and all those other old-fashioned values” were not only irrelevant, but a hindrance in the war against a total onslaught on freedom. While sincere, they felt they had to denigrate the mainstream opposition English language newspapers to justify their own existence and garner overseas funding.

Under the new Government of National Unity, this assertion of the liberal English press as \textit{de facto} opposition during the apartheid struggle was severely challenged. Black journalists suggested that the Truth and Reconciliation hearings should also investigate racism in both the national press and liberal English language newspapers during the struggle against apartheid. Merrett viewed the emergence of the alternative press as “a quest for unbannable media”. It focused on increased news about the ANC, trade unions, and democratic organisations committed to overthrowing the apartheid government, and favoured a “shift in popular communication practices from mere propaganda to cultural struggle”:

The alternative media became a vanguard in anti-apartheid politics, eliciting a response from the authorities that reached its apotheosis in the States of Emergency declared from 1985 onwards.\textsuperscript{45}

In the period of national reconciliation, post-1994, the unfairness of apartheid was readily admitted by the displaced whites. While it prevailed, the English press in content, direction and, most importantly, in staffing, showed that black people had little place in the mainstream print media. The English press was often reactionary, and offered too little and usually too late. To the more acerbic critics of the national press, the difference between the English press and the Afrikaans press was merely that one went further in supporting government policies.

The Afrikaans press was always an extension of the government, although in varying degrees. There were superficial differences between Transvaal and Cape Nationalists, evident
in the Cape Province organ of the National Party (Die Burger), and the mouthpieces of the Transvaal Nationalists (Die Transvaler, Die Beeld and Die Vaderland). Fundamentally, however, there was little difference between “grand apartheid” and the major cornerstones of separate development policy. Tinkering at the edges of “petty apartheid”, the offensive offshoots of the system may have caused some rifts over the years between the verlig (enlightened) and verkramp (right-wing conservative) camps.

Commenting on the role of the national press as outlined to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997, Guy Berger, professor of journalism and media studies at Rhodes University and a former editor of the alternative weekly South, said the media was less than honest in their statements to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see below). The liberal press operated in, and took its cues from, the prevailing white landscape. A handful of white editors rose above the conventional wisdom of the day. Berger states:

They “opened an account” and they paid a price: exile for Donald Woods, loss of their jobs in the cases of Raymond Louw, Allister Sparks and Tony Heard. White journalists like these, who tried to lead the white readership market, rather than follow its prejudices and its interests, also ran into falling circulations. The decline was not compensated for by black readers who failed to attract advertising revenue. If it wasn't such a context that constrained the role of the liberal press, it was the confined outlook of most white journalists.46

And Berger chides the liberal English press for lack of vision and selective opposition to the apartheid system.

Many of these journalists did campaign against “petty” apartheid. But macro-apartheid – especially after Bantustan independence – got less critical attention. Coverage sometimes pilloried the pass laws; it routinely neglected the wages paid to migrant workers. The problem with the liberal press is not only that its opposition did not go far enough. Nor even that its champions like Tyson did not realise that there was a lot further to go. What was worse was the day-to-day reflection of what South Africa was about. Black people were invisible in most newspapers. If you were Desmond Tutu, you got coverage – usually negative – in The Star. If you were a golf caddie featured in a Daily Dispatch picture, you’d be lucky to have even been photographed in the rain standing next to white men enjoying the shelter of an umbrella, with your name captioned as “Jackson”.47
Summary

Chapter Two highlights the complexities and changing loyalties of the South African press against a background of race discrimination, separate development policies and oppression.

In the decade after 1948 and prompted by factional wrangling within the National Party, the Afrikaans press underwent some sort of metamorphosis that changed it from a loyal servant and mouthpiece of the government to a more critical press. That is not to say the Afrikaans press shifted from an apartheid supporting press to a critic of apartheid. It was more a struggle for identity and independence.

During the 1980s, as the alternative press moved into previously unexplored territories as the voice of the oppressed, the Afrikaans press again had to make substantial and far reaching policy changes as the apartheid regime struggled to maintain its grip and ultimately lost power.

For the English press, maintaining a profitable balance between white readership who felt that the papers were leaning too far towards the Left and agitated blacks demanding a more critical focus against apartheid, it was always a difficult balancing act. Black readers mainly reject the efforts of the English press in opposing the apartheid policies of the time as being usually too little and too late, most white readers felt otherwise. But it would be harsh and unfair to demean the efforts of the English press. It worked within the scope and limitations of strict authoritarian controls, faced constant government scrutiny and police harassment, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. And with a predominantly white readership, the English press could not afford to alienate its advertisers by pandering to black social and political aspirations. The English press was a white press with advertisers drawn to the economically powerful white readership.

At the other end of the spectrum, the alternative newspapers struggled for survival on many fronts. Small circulation figures, unattractive to advertisers, mainly local content news and distribution problems hampered all of the alternative newspapers. Driven by a desire to change the status quo but hindered by a lack of experienced journalistic staff and financial constraints, the alternative news papers struggled from first edition until they folded. Chapter Three will focus on apartheid and press repression. The thrust of Chapter Three is on the minefield of legal hazards and obstacles placed on publications critical of government policies.
Notes for Chapter Two


7. Cillie, P.J., address to conference on *The Newspaper in South Africa*, held at the University of Cape Town, August, 1966, p. 2, pamphlet.


10. Tomaselli, K., Tomaselli, Ruth and Muller, Johan, *Studies on the South African Media: The Press in South Africa*, James Currey, London, 1989, p. 87. (Quoting W. Wepner) “...no Afrikaans newspaper was started merely as a commercial venture. Especially the earlier Afrikaans newspapers were all pioneering organs ... therefore don’t be surprised that the Afrikaans newspapers today are still bound to the National Party. The very circumstance of their origin brought this about.” also p. 125.


16. Ibid.


23. Tomaselli and Muller J., op. cit.


30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. The term Independent press only started to gain favour as a descriptive term after 1985. Since its inception in the late 1970s, it was referred to as the Alternative press.
33. Grassroots volume 1, no 1, 1980, p. 2.
35. Ibid, p. 204.
43. Ibid.
45. Merrett, Christopher, op. cit., p. 89.
47. Ibid, Mail & Guardian.
CHAPTER THREE

APARTHEID AND PRESS REPRESSION

Introduction

After the Second World War, before the apartheid era, the South African press resembled the contemporary British press in its functioning. It was subject to legislative enactment, but retained the commitment to free and independent expression and the lack of government interference characteristic of British press traditions. After the Nationalists came to power in 1948 and committed to racist apartheid policies, this ethos rapidly dissolved. The national print media was drawn inexorably into a constant battle against drastic authoritarian controls designed to ruthlessly restrict press freedoms, despite lip-service to the truths.

By 1990, when apartheid disintegrated, more than 100 different legislative provisions moulded the character of press freedom operating in South Africa. Even in 1996, with a black majority, an ANC-dominated government and a commitment to a free press under the South African constitution, the iniquitous and restrictive laws and conditions remained on the statute books. However, by 2002, positive changes were noted. In an annual international survey on freedom in the world, Freedom House found that South Africa continued to provide a remarkable, powerful example of a positive democratic transition in an extremely diverse country but some doubts remain.

The South African press remained one of the most restrictive in the world. Overwhelming political and constitutional transformation was not reflected in any equivalent transformation of the news media. This paradox is examined in this chapter which considers the design and implementation of government coercion and media censorship under apartheid. This chapter takes up the theme of retained controls and consequent repression in the post-apartheid era under a new constitutional dispensation.

Bound by legislation

The apartheid years saw the introduction of many Acts of Parliament and related statutes, for example the Suppression of Communism Act 44 of 1950, and amendments that made it a punishable offence to further the aims of communism and the Communist Party. The Defence Act 1957 was one of the first laws that had serious implications for restricting press freedom in South Africa. The wide-ranging view of what constituted “communism” meant that the government, the Defence Minister and the State President could effectively decide what constituted a “communist”. In reality, the Act was used extensively against non-communists, communists, and even opponents of communism.1
Under the legislation it was an offence to advise, support or encourage the aims of communism and provisions for the banning of newspapers considered to be supporting or advocating change. Under its wide net, several newspapers were banned or shut down during the 1950s and 1960s. It was also a costly burden for media owners. Under the *Suppression of Communism Act*, newspaper owners had to put up a deposit of R20,000 when a new newspaper was started if there was any possibility that it could be banned. This was later increased to R40,000 when the *Internal Security Act* was reviewed in April 1982. The deposit was forfeited to the state if the newspaper was banned by the government. The government also reserved the right to censor the post, telephone, telegraph or radio services and any other form of communication including written or printed material.

The *Unlawful Organisations Act (No 34 of 1960)* and amendments leading to the *Internal Security Act* enabled the State President to declare “any body, organisation, group or association of persons, institution, society or movement” as an unlawful organisation.²

The consequence of this action had the effect of a banning order on publications. Under the *Internal Security Act*, it became an offence to publish the names or anything written or said by a person or persons banned under the provisions of the Act. This included opinions or statements made by banned persons prior to their banning orders and also included organisations that had been declared unlawful.

Among other restrictions on publication were the *Official Secrets Act (No 16 of 1956)* and the *Riotous Assembly Act (No 17 of 1956 and amendments)*. These restrictive laws operated in combination with a variety of other equally repressive measures. In total, these curtailed freedom of speech and the way in which the press was allowed to report on prohibited gatherings, recording or reproducing speeches of prohibited people and reporting in ways that might incite public violence. For example, the *Native Administration Act* and the *General Law Amendment Act* also made news reporting restrictive, difficult and a minefield for an unwary publisher.

Under declared states of emergency, additional restrictive measures came into force.³ These further restrictions outlawed filming, photographing or reporting on any matter involving the security forces in action. Prohibitions also covered reporting on any public disturbance, riotous behaviour, destruction of public property, killings or assault or any of a broad-ranging number of events that could loosely be construed as “subversive”. Under a declared state of emergency, coverage of any disturbances or unrest was restricted to vetted information from the Bureau of Information in Pretoria. Not complying with the regulations could be a dangerous and costly exercise.⁴ Laws restricting the press during a state of
emergency were additional to the 100 or so different pieces of legislation that already affected the freedom of the press in South Africa.

**Legal hazards**

Even with the lifting of the state of emergency regulations, continued restrictions on press freedoms placed a South African journalist in constant legal jeopardy, and facing a constant threat of imprisonment and detention.⁵ Seemingly innocuous laws such as the *Post Office Act* (No 44 of 1958, amended in 1972 and 1974) gave the post office administration the power to intercept postal articles, telegrams, telephone messages, telexes and news reports.⁶ The *Publications and Entertainment Act* (No 26 of 1963) was enacted among other things to keep “undesirable” material out of the country. Under section 5 (2) of the Act, “undesirable” was applicable to material “if it, or any part of it is indecent, obscene, offensive, blasphemous, offensive to the religious convictions of any sections of the inhabitants of the Republic of South Africa, brought any section of the inhabitants into ridicule or contempt, was harmful to the relations between any sections of the inhabitants, or was prejudicial to the safety of the state, the general welfare, peace, or good order”.

This Act was superseded by the *Publications Act* of 1974 to include films, records, stage shows, artworks, amateur photography etc.⁷ The *Customs and Excise Act* (No 91 of 1964) placed restrictive controls on the importation and distribution of foreign publications or goods deemed to be “indecent or obscene or on any ground whatsoever objectionable” by the Publications Control Board. The offending material could be seized or banned at the discretion of the Publications Control Board. The *Extension of University Education Act* (No 45 of 1959) not only provided for the establishment of separate and independent universities and colleges of the various racial groups.⁸ It also placed restrictions on publications by the student representative councils at these institutions.

Under the Act it was an offence to publish or produce magazines, newspapers or pamphlets without the permission of the rector of the university. No student was allowed to make a statement to the press by or on behalf of the students without the permission of the rector.

In addition, provincial laws were passed in the Provincial Councils of the Transvaal, Natal, Orange Free State and the Cape to restrict publications on the grounds of profanity, indecency, offensiveness and material generally considered objectionable.

Under the *Prisons Act* it became a punishable offence to photograph or sketch any prison or prisoner without permission from the Police Commissioner, or to attempt to portray or report on prisons or prisoner conditions.
The need for such a profusion of laws to restrict and stifle the press suggests there were vigorous and powerful news instruments at work for meaningful political change in South Africa, and that the Government felt threatened. But this was not so. It would be wrong to suggest that the South African media did not at times campaign harshly against the National Party policies. Opposition varied in degrees. The Afrikaans press more muted, the English press more critical. Fundamentally, the government’s policy of separate development was overwhelmingly acceptable to the whites though at times the ugly face of racism and differences of opinion caused diversion in the press which basically served the needs of the white community.

The role of the media as critic of the government had limits making it inadequate to appease the aspirations of more than 95 per cent of the population. Black people in the main saw no hope in the campaigns of the mainstream “white press”. Also, with the majority of black people being illiterate and newspaper readership low, the impact of newspapers criticizing the government was minimal. Even so, the need for oppressive media restrictions formed only part of a bigger system to entrench and support the racist legislation in place.9

The cumulative effect of these restrictive laws was a form of censorship. But not only censorship in a way to prevent or restrict the individual’s “right to know” but also to enhance the repressive machinery of the state. Thus, censorship in South Africa was part of the apartheid system, aimed specifically at imposing this ideology on the public.10

Oosthuizen argued that the Publications Act of 1974 was not the only censorship law but that censorship was also exercised in terms of such statutes as the Internal Security Act of 1982, the Prisons Act of 1959, the Riotous Assemblies Act (1956) and the Official Secrets Act (1956).11 Oosthuizen traced this interdependence of censorship legislation to an incident in 1987 when, after the Appeal Board had given the film Cry Freedom unconditional clearance, the South African police nevertheless seized it. According to a report in the Sunday Times (March 27, 1988) certain cabinet ministers were not happy that the film was released. Die Beeld (January 6, 1989) said the ministers had the film summarily removed.12

Chimutengwende interpreted South African legal censorship in this way:

Law is used as an instrument of policy. Its purpose is to protect the state apparatus and the power of the ruling class … In South Africa, the white minority has power. It controls the state machinery and intends to keep it by force and persuasion, forever if possible. The legal system, controlled by the ruling minority, is there to ensure as far as it can that no other forms of power opposed to the present set-up are exercised freely. The legal system and other state pressures are geared to making the utmost
endeavour to see that individuals and institutions facilitate the smooth functioning of the social, political and economic system. They are not to be given sufficient freedom to cause difficulties to or destroy the system.\textsuperscript{13}

Allister Sparks, a former editor of the \textit{Rand Daily Mail}, observed of press censorship in South Africa that it created an information vacuum on black nationalist politics which the government moved to fill with its own tainted version:

Thus, through a combination of censorship and propaganda, the alternative of a negotiated settlement has been effectively closed to the white South Africans and they have been locked into the confrontation option.\textsuperscript{14}

Benjamin Pogrund, a South African print journalist, media commentator and former deputy editor of the \textit{Rand Daily Mail}, divided South Africa’s pre-emergency press regulations into three categories. The first were laws that curtailed individual freedoms in such a manner as to harm press freedom as well. The laws of the second type forbade publication of certain information without permission on topics such as atomic energy, oil supplies and the defence forces. The third category of laws included those that did not ban sensitive topics outright, but created legal hazards for publishers who might choose to cover them.

\textbf{Total Onslaught}

The culture of vigorously-policed censorship reached its peak during the so-called period of Total Onslaught in the mid-1980s, continuing through the State of Emergency from 1985 to 1990. The Total Onslaught theory was coined by President P.W. Botha as a term for what he perceived as a communist-driven attempt by anti-apartheid forces to overthrow his government. South Africa descended into more violence as the government hardened its opposition to the Total Onslaught of anti-apartheid forces who aimed to create an ungovernable country

The repression originated in the early 1950s, starting with the \textit{Suppression of Communism Act} and the \textit{Riotous Assemblies Amendment Acts} to the First State of Emergency (1960), Van Zyl Commission Reports (1962), until the Steyn Commission of inquiry into the mass media (1982) to nearly the end of the apartheid era in 1993. Merrett saw the history of South Africa after 1950 as “characterised by an avalanche of security legislation which among other effects, created a massive structure of censorship and self-censorship”.\textsuperscript{15}

One reason [for censorship] was the suppression, so far as possible, of information about the repressive tactics required to maintain the politico-economic status quo in South Africa for so long in the face of international abhorrence. A second reason was to keep to a minimum contact between
the different racial groups into which the country had been divided, so as
to perpetuate the myth that the differences between people are greater than
their common humanity ... Censorship was a device used to maintain the
illusion that the fine-sounding ideas of apartheid were not only desirable
and moral, but realisable. A third reason was the need to suppress the post-
war history of non-racial opposition to the political order.\footnote{16}

The resort to censorship cannot be attributed wholly to apartheid. The roots had been
sown even before World War Two. In 1935, for example, John Gomas was convicted and
jailed for six months with hard labour for publishing an article under the banner of the
Communist Party of South Africa entitled \textit{King George’s Jubilee: 25 years reign of luxury, pomp, and waste!}

Thus, government intervention in freedom of expression was evident well before 1950
when the Van Zyl Press Commission was established to investigate media concentration and
monopoly tendencies.

In a massive agenda, it also scrutinised the activities of foreign correspondents and
stringers, the accuracy, responsibility and patriotism of the South African journalists,
restraints on the establishment of new newspapers, the incidence of triviality, and the general
condition of the national press. With the \textit{Suppression of Communism Act} already in place,
reinforcing, government policy to ban newspapers or publications perceived as communist,
some of the Press Commission’s terms of reference were already irrelevant. Some were later
amended and others dropped. It was more than a decade before the Van Zyl Commission
finally completed its work and handed down its findings. By then, the horse had bolted
several years before.

In September 1957, the \textit{Commission of Enquiry in Regard to Undesirable Publications}
reported about the undesirability of the propagation of communism, which in effect, was
broadly based, whatever the government found contrary to its separate development policy.
By this time two newspapers were banned. In 1952, the \textit{Guardian} was banned and its
successor the \textit{Advance} was banned in 1954, while \textit{Torch} was charged in 1954 over an
erditorial that questioned and criticised the Government’s education policy. The case was
ultimately dismissed in court. This was a time of consolidation of political power for the
National Party and included a steep rise in the number of publications banned as undesirable
by the Board of Censors. By 1956, this arbitrary Board had a list of 4,000 titles that were
banned and a waiting list of up to 16 months for imported publications awaiting
classification.\footnote{17}
In the late-1950s, the State Information Office was revamped as the South African Foundation, a propaganda machine. It offered a largely uncritical view of the National Party government moving rapidly to implement the major building blocks of the apartheid system. This was the time of the Defiance Campaign, reported extensively in the press. The introduction of the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* and the *Suppression of Communism Act* provided the legal basis to curtail press activity in delicate policy and administrative areas.

Foreign correspondents, among them Doris Lessing, Basil Davidson and John Hatch were expelled from South Africa. The Minister for External Affairs at the time argued that a great deal of South Africa’s internal trouble was due to the political articles in the English press. But the English press, although not favouring the National Party, were not unbiased, nor pro-African, non-racial institutions. It engaged in heavy self-censorship, and policy differences between it and the racist National Party aims was largely a matter of degree to the non-white majority.

**Van Zyl Commission reports**

In February 1962, the Commission completed its first report, a mammoth document of 2,376 typewritten folio pages. Yet it dealt with only two of the seven terms of reference. The second report was tabled in parliament on May 11, 1964, another 1,400 pages plus 3,000 pages of annexes. It focused on news collection and distribution, particularly the work of overseas correspondents and “stringers” and news agencies. The main brief, to investigate the South African print media, was largely ignored, the commission claiming it lacked the time to investigate the role of the national press.

It did recommend the establishment of a statutory Press Council “for the self-control and discipline of the Press”. The proposed Press Council was empowered to impose penalties and fines, with no right of appeal to the courts against decisions. Every journalist had to register annually with the Press Council and accept the Council’s 10-point press code.

The newspapers strongly opposed these plans and the government eventually backed away from this somewhat Draconian model. The owners of the country’s major dailies and magazines moved swiftly to introduce their own press code and board of control to apply a degree of self-regulation. The government welcomed this, exempting members of the Newspaper Press Union (NPU) from regulation under the *Publications and Entertainment Act*.

During its lengthy investigation, the Van Zyl Commission seriously destabilised news generation by publishers fearing investigation and interference from security police.
The First State of Emergency

The Sharpeville massacre of March 21, 1960 was a watershed in South African politics. Led by Robert Sobukwe, leader of the Pan African Congress, and supported by Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress, a large crowd of black South Africans gathered outside the Sharpeville police station to protest against the pass laws imposed by apartheid. The pass laws were statutes that required all black men and women to carry a reference identity book with them whenever they travelled outside of their home towns. In the end 60 protesters were killed and 188 were wounded while trying to flee from police. It was an incident that provoked international outrage and swift reaction by the South African government.

On March 30, 1960, the government announced the first State of Emergency under the Public Safety Act of 1953. Widespread powers under the State of Emergency meant that certain types of reporting could be summarily banned; for example, calls for boycotts, advocacy of protests and strike action, and published statements deemed subversive. Detention without trial and banning orders on journalists further eroded routine news activity during this period. Police or government agents also had the right to search and seize printed matter in newspaper offices.

The Government also sought to impinge on press freedom by trying to force journalists to reveal their sources to police under the provisions of the Criminal Procedures Act. Several journalists were jailed using such tactics, including Brian Parkes for 16 days and Patrick Duncan for eight days in October 1960.

Both refused to name sources. In 1962, Fred Carneson, of the New Age, was charged for refusing to give information about a contributed article. Huge registration deposits were introduced, subject to forfeit if newspapers were banned for contravening the rules. This stifled the development of an independent and emerging radical or anti-apartheid press.

In addition, foreign correspondents encountered difficulties in sending their articles overseas because of an interventionist policy at the Post Office. Often Post Office officials would refuse to send cables dispatched by foreign correspondents. Among the publications banned in the 1960s were titles such as Fighting Talk (1963), New Age (1962), Spark, Contact (1963), African Communist (1964), New African (1965), Forum (1965), and Drum (1965-1968). The national news distributors Central News Agency (CNA), refused to handle or distribute titles perceived as left-wing.

National Party, English press

The government attacks on press freedom and criticism were epitomised by Afrikaner parliamentarian Blaar Coetzee in March 1962:
One reaches a point where criticism stops and treason starts and the English press too often exceeds that point.\(^{20}\)

The Afrikaner press added its demand in *Die Transvaler* that the English-language press should become “truly South African”. The animosity between the leadership of the National Party and the English-language press can be traced back to the creation of the National Party in 1934. During World War Two, when the South African [Nationalist] Government advocated neutrality and relinquishing English control, Dr Danie Malan had warned:

> That section of the press which up to the present has served foreign interests will have to be kept within bounds. Should it try to cause the republic to be undone, this will be regarded as high treason and will be treated as such.\(^{21}\)

The National Party won the 1948 elections with an overwhelming majority despite opposition from the “hostile” English-language press. Prime Minister Malan described it as the most undisciplined in the world. In his view, journalists should be registered, like doctors, and struck off the roll for unethical conduct. At the 1958 general elections, the National Party, returned with an increased majority and launched even stronger attacks on the press, especially the *Rand Daily Mail*.

The *Mail* fought back with an editorial accusing National Party MPs of constant attacks on the English-language press, not only to denigrate it but also to justify further restrictions and controls. Bitter and hostile attacks on the press were constantly reinforced by succeeding Prime Ministers. Prime Minister Hans Strijdom, the National Party leader in Transvaal who succeeded Malan, sustained a campaign of vituperation. Soon after taking office, Strijdom accused the English-language press of “playing the venomous game of inciting the natives, not only against the government but against the white man”.\(^{22}\)

In Parliament, Strijdom immediately went on the attack against the newspapers which he accused of being anti-South Africa. He obtained a vote recording parliament’s strongest disapproval of newspaper attempts “to create strife between the two white language groups ... as well as between white and black, and to undermine the good name of South Africa and its economic stability by publicising incorrect and misleading statements”.\(^{23}\)

Strijdom died in 1958 and was succeeded by Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the former editor of *Die Transvaler*, and an architect of apartheid. Verwoerd firmly believed that if the separate development policy was to succeed, then the media had to be controlled. He viewed criticism of the government or its apartheid policy as intolerable, vicious and disloyal. Verwoerd demanded the loyalty of all whites to the principles of apartheid, and he regarded the English
language press as a dangerous enemy to his plans. His increased crackdown on the press was certainly not unexpected and he did not disappoint.

At the 1960 referendum, when whites voted in favour of establishing a republic, Dr Verwoerd warned the press: “We cannot allow the future of the republic and the future welfare of the nation to be ruined by sensation-mongering, incitement or the besmirching of our country’s name or that of its leaders.”

Merrett described as paranoiac the Government’s policy (bearing the imprint of Hendrik Verwoerd) towards the English-language press:

> It was frozen out of the information flow surrounding Parliament and was subject to Government misinformation tactics. In Nationalist eyes, the English press became not the Fourth Estate but a fifth column.

The English press survived this onslaught because it was part of the white establishment. It was necessary for the “democratic basis” of South African government, without influencing the white electorate enough to unseat the government. Hepple agreed:

> In its ceaseless efforts to maintain the apartheid system, the Nationalist government recognises the fact that its position is not threatened by the white electorate but by the rising militancy of the voteless black masses whose cause is supported almost unanimously by the outside world. Against such formidable forces, the Nationalists desperately need a “responsible” press – that is a press which will represent apartheid and its works in a most favourable light and thereby discourage discontent at home and win friends abroad.

**Verwoerd to Vorster**

Verwoerd was followed by a comparably authoritarian figure. John B. Vorster became Prime Minister in 1966 after Verwoerd was assassinated in Parliament. A nationalist with impeccable National Party credentials, he was jailed during the war years for his leadership of the neo-Nazi Ossewa Brandwag movement. This was an anti-British, anti-democratic, national-socialist movement with a clandestine membership of influential Afrikaners. Vorster aimed to introduce laws against the media “that would provide not so much for the punishment of reporters but to make the publishing companies pay for employing those sorts of people”. And he threatened newspapers that he would be forced to legislate against what he described as ascertainable factual lies in newspapers and magazines.

When the Argus group moved to take over SAAN in 1968, Vorster stepped in to block the move, saying Cabinet believed it was not in the interest of South Africa. Even if the
takeover went ahead he would legislate retrospectively, if necessary, to prevent it. Further warnings followed over foreign investment guidelines, and control and ownership of South African newspapers.

At a meeting on October 6, 1971, Vorster told 40 executives and editors of the major national newspapers that he was holding off the planned legislation to control and discipline the South African press because he was still negotiating. He appealed to the newspapers to apply self-censorship so that legislation would not be necessary. Ministers savagely attacked the English language press for colluding with the enemies of South Africa and undermining the nation’s morale in its struggle for survival. This appeal for self-censorship was repeated by the Minister of the Interior, Dr Connie Mulder, in May 1973. He urged the press to “act in such a way with the freedom they have that it will not be necessary for the government to decide against freedom of the press”.

The 1980s ushered in a renewed period of antagonism between the government and the press. With violence and public unrest across the country seemingly out of control, Vorster’s successor, President P.W. Botha was even tougher on South African journalists and overseas representatives perceived as emphasising continuing civil unrest and instability. The 1980s also saw the development and rise of the alternative or anti-apartheid press in response to Botha’s authoritarian controls.

The Steyn Commission

In early 1980, President Botha established the Commission of Inquiry into the Mass Media – better known as the Steyn Commission after its commissioner, Justice M.T. Steyn. It held hearings from November 1980 to April 1982 and issued its final report and draft regulations to Parliament on February 1, 1983. Justice Steyn held fundamentally antagonistic views on modern trends in journalism. He had been a senior member of the right-wing and secretive Afrikaner Broederbond. The inquiry was designed to reassure whites who were worried about the growing pressure for change. The Steyn Commission was the first of many inquiries initiated by Botha impacting on press freedoms and practice.

The mandate of the Commission was to inquire into and report on the question of whether the conduct of, and the handling of, matters by the mass media meet the needs and interests of the South African community and the demands of the times, and, if not, how they can be improved. The seeds of the Steyn commission were planted in 1979, shortly after Botha, a former Defence Minister, became President and warned the nation that there was a Marxist drive which aims at controlling the subcontinent. Botha said that he needed the help of the private sector to fully support the government in establishing national security and that the co-operation of the press was crucial to these plans.
Steyn and his Commissioners heard testimony from a wide section of the community but no black journalists sought to appear. Although specifically assigned to inquire into the media, the Commission spent much of its time on black nationalism and groups that supported the anti-apartheid and black consciousness movements, the rise of “black theology”, the World Council of Churches and its role in supporting black political aspirations. The Steyn Commission also focused on disparate groups perceived as hostile including the Organisation of African Unity, the United Nations and the Soviet Union. In the eyes of the administration, these unlikely partners constituted part of a Total Onslaught to overthrow the status quo in South Africa.

This could only be prevented by a counterveiling Total Strategy to confound these forces of destruction.

The Steyn Commission was delivered in two parts, with a large section of the second part devoted to a scathing attack on the WCC and South African Council of Churches:

The World Council of Churches is staffed by professional ecumenists and conference-going ‘intellectuals’ who exhibit all the symptoms of the sickness which is common in the West. Consumed by post-imperial and post-colonial ‘guilt’, they are convinced that the West can only expiate its ‘crimes’ by humiliating itself before its former ‘victims’, the Third World, and its future destroyer, communism. Politics are for them, in effect, an elaborate form of suicide for which Christianity affords a moral justification.30

The commission said the South African Council of Churches was trying to provoke internal socio-economic upheaval by means of political action. Included in this far-reaching attack were several clerics and black theologians leading the anti-apartheid cause and the black media workers’ organisation, MWASA (Media Workers Association of South Africa) described as a front organisation for black consciousness. The major black newspaper the Sowetan, a successor to the banned newspaper the World, was depicted as anti-establishment. The two major recommendations were breaking the monopoly of the major national newspaper groups, (the Argus group and SAAN,) and the licensing of journalists. According to Hachten and Giffard:

The differing views within South Africa over the rights and duties of the press and its proper role in that divided society surfaced clearly during the extended hearings. The Government used these hearings as a sounding board to express its unhappiness with the press and to lay the groundwork for further legal restraints on newspapers. In a very real sense, the work of
the commission was a continuation of the process of harassment and intimidation that had begun in 1950, soon after the Nationalists took control. The parade of government officials who testified revealed much about the right-wing attitudes towards the press and echoed anti-press statements heard years before.\textsuperscript{31}

An interesting aspect to emerge from the Steyn Commission was the united opposition from the English-language press and the editors of the leading Afrikaner newspapers. The editor of Die Transvaler, Dr Willem de Klerk, urged the state to be careful not to restrict the freedom of the press by any further legislation. Ton Vosloo, editor of Beeld, said the Steyn Commission recommended “a revision of existing statutory restraints on the press”.

The sharpest criticism came from Harold Pakendorf, the editor of the National Party’s mouthpiece, Die Vaderland, who called for fewer, not more curbs on the freedom of the press, a constitutional guarantee of free speech and legislation based on the First Amendment guarantees of the Constitution of the United States.\textsuperscript{32} This unexpected response from the usually supportive Afrikaner press largely stifled the government’s efforts to implement the proposed Journalists Bill. This aimed to “professionalise” journalism under a vague code of conduct enforced by a central council of journalists.\textsuperscript{33}

This would have made it compulsory for journalists to be registered on a journalists’ list, pass examinations and meet certain levels of qualifications to work as journalists. Any person who had been convicted of “subversive activities” would not be allowed to work as a journalist.

Given the widespread harassment, arrests and attacks on journalists from as far back as the 1950s, the code would have ruled out some of the finest journalists in the country because they had run foul of the myriad laws passed to restrict the free flow of information. After five months of bargaining with the Interior Minister, Chris Heunis, the National Press Union agreed to establish a media council of its own design with powers to reprimand and fine newspapers, but not to de-register journalists.

The government was to formally recognise the new media council. Heunis accepted the offer of self-discipline by replacing the old press council with a new one. But in June, 1982 he introduced a Bill that made the new media council a statutory body, and all newspapers were to submit to it by joining the NPU. The statutory requirement was later withdrawn but a final compromise law that included the right to cancel the registration of newspapers if the publishers did not subject themselves to the NPU’s new media council was passed in July 1982. This was the Registration of Newspapers Amendment Act, No 84 of 1982.\textsuperscript{34}
Although the Steyn Commission’s recommendation for licensing journalists was not adopted by the government, the report was ominous in the continuing struggle to dominate and control the press. In particular, it reinforced the two-pronged threat from Total Onslaught and consequent riposte from Total Strategy. Hachten and Giffard suggest that the real message of the first Steyn Commission was that the press – in particular, the surviving opposition newspapers – was to be co-opted into the emergent Total Strategy. (See below).

The parliamentary opposition rejected Total Strategy, as did a wide cross-section of the community, including the editors of the English-language newspapers, some Afrikaner editors, and the clergy. Respected Afrikaner academics regarded it as an effort to divert attention from fundamental changes to apartheid. According to Jackson, “the (Steyn) report’s conclusions resoundingly endorsed government thinking that a Total Strategy was the most suitable way of addressing this perceived (outside) threat”.

This ignored widespread criticism of the report as unrepresentative of either the media or the public “because the commission included no practising journalists and comprised only of whites”.

**Total Onslaught – Total Strategy**

The bizarre concept of Total Onslaught-Total Strategy was peddled by the Botha government from around 1980-81. It was a sinister strategy which originated in the Defence Force. Its ultimate aim was to maintain the support of the white electorate, get the disgruntled black masses on side, and persuade the press to support whatever the national security forces deemed to be in the national interest. This might be incursions into Angola, Zimbabwe or other frontline states, or savage attacks against the “enemies of the state” and anti-apartheid campaigners.

Tyson, as editor of The Star, became aware of this concept in 1979, when military correspondents of his newspaper were allowed to eavesdrop on major briefings by the chief of the Defence Force, General Magnus Malan, and his colleagues.

The Total Onslaught-Total Strategy campaign really took off after the then Defence Minister P.W. Botha became prime minister, with General Malan as the driving force. This need and desire for secrecy, Tyson suggests, was because of the military’s “dirty tricks” campaigns. From 1979 this covert strategy involved the state security system in targeting civilians in Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho with letter bombs. By the late 1980s “dirty tricks” included unconfirmed reports of nuclear blast tests and the production of six atom bombs by the South Africans all bigger than the Hiroshima bomb. In this climate of secrecy and censorship, it was not until March 1993 that President F.W. de Klerk, under the emerging new order admitted that the International Atomic Energy Agency had made at least 115
inspections of South Africa’s nuclear facilities but found no evidence of any program for
developing nuclear bombs.

Overwhelmingly, the military rationale underpinned the *Total Onslaught-Total Strategy* concept:

General Malan had earlier interpreted the rolling tide of Black Nationalism and decolonisation in southern Africa as a Soviet-inspired *Total Onslaught* by seeking by all available means to spread Marxist influence through the neighbouring black countries with the ultimate purpose of attaining Soviet dominance over South Africa and its strategic minerals. The South African response [Malan] argued repeatedly, had to be a *Total Strategy* that would meet the threat in the political, economic and psychological spheres as well as the military one.38

This threat generated fierce attacks on the opponents of apartheid inside South Africa, and signalled the start of repeated attacks on neighbouring countries that offered sympathy or a home to ANC dissidents. In the *Total Strategy* concept, the ANC was targeted as furthering Soviet domination. The perception was encouraged that the ANC was infiltrating certain sections of the mass media, and presenting the *Total Onslaught* that would see the overthrow of white rule in South Africa. For this reason Prime Minister P.W. Botha harassed and imprisoned both black and white journalists through the 1980s. He implemented the most restrictive legislation imposed on the news media in South African history under State of Emergency regulations.

Under the *Total Strategy* concept, it became clear that Botha and Malan expected opponents and dissidents in the media to get on side with the government. In short, they had to support uncritically the work of the police and the security forces, and the policies of the National Party regardless of where they led the country.

This applied not only to the press. All social classes had to band together in defiance of *Total Onslaught*: businessmen, working people, political groups, the churches, but especially the national press.

*The Star* made a spirited response on behalf of the press, launching a bitter attack on the government and the shift into politics by the Defence Department:

The onslaught [against South Africa] of course, is not total. It is directed more against apartheid and unjust laws than the existence or sovereignty of South Africa itself. And South Africans can, and should, oppose those same things without being branded as enemies of the State. The so-called onslaught should be no excuse for cutting down civil liberties such as the
rule of law and the freedom of information; still less for inflicting minority racist prejudices on a whole country. It is apartheid that the black people hate. If it stays, violent conflict is inevitable. The choice is in the hands of the government. Peaceful change, in other words, will require a very different kind of total strategy.39

The new security machinery included a complex national management system consisting of a State Security Council comprising Ministers and/or officials of the Foreign Affairs Department, police intelligence, and Defence. The Prime Minister was chairman. Below the State Security Council was an executive committee of bureaucrats to carry out its orders. The third tier was a secretariat that became the nerve centre of the entire system where all staff work on national strategies was done. There were 15 interdepartmental committees for planning purposes.40 Finally, a network of joint management centres worked under each territorial military command, apparently to sharpen up government services and encourage co-operation with black South Africans. The Total Onslaught-Total Strategy ploy cast a wide net:

Various elements of the Total Onslaught are presumably all working to the same end, so that even the New York Times and Washington Post as well as the South African English press are aiding and abetting Soviet strategic aims. But even so, there are certain identifiable enemies: Soviet Communism, Western liberalism, black theology and Black Nationalism, and the Black Consciousness movement itself. The main thrust of the onslaught comes from Moscow itself. 41

From the Prime Minister and Cabinet down through all levels of the Botha administration, the press was clearly perceived as an instigating factor for black activism. During the 1980 school boycotts in Cape Town, the Minister for Coloured and Indian Affairs, Marais Steyn, blamed the English press for exaggerating their extent, thus encouraging more students to participate.

Steyn chided that this kind of “propaganda” would not be tolerated. He warned that the newspapers would have to decide whether they were on the side of law and order or those attempting to bring about change by force. In parliament, Prime Minister Botha warned that he was prepared to curb the press if newspapers continued to give prominence to “activities of subversives”.

States of emergency: 1985-1990

From the first half of 1981 through to 1985, South Africa’s civil unrest and uncontrollable violence in the major cities and towns agitated the Botha Government. It was not able to
organise an effective response, though, until the mid-1980s when it reverted to drastic strategies of earlier apartheid years.

Under the Public Safety Act, President Botha declared his first state of emergency on July 21, 1985. It covered 36 magisterial districts including the most volatile areas in the country, mainly in the Transvaal and the Cape Province.

The State of Emergency was in effect until March 1986 and was followed by a second declaration on June 12, 1986, covering the entire country. Under the State of Emergency, the security forces were afforded almost unlimited powers to cope with what could not be quelled or dealt with under the existing laws. According to Cape Times editor, Tony Heard, “pictures of rugby and beauty queens have replaced township violence on many front pages ... the darkness is almost complete”.

Merrett considered the censorship much more radical and effective than before 1985-86. It was not overly ambitious, sought to control information only from within South Africa, depended almost entirely on state employees to enforce it, and encouraged self-censorship. A major purpose of the Emergency was to minimise the crisis for whites so as to engineer a psychology of normality. Thus, the declarations obliterated what was left of the independent role of the newspapers in South Africa.42

The emergency regulations had an immediate stifling effect on the flow and control of information, including a ban on the names of persons detained under the new regulations, and an all-embracing ban on reports that could “cause anyone any harm, hurt or loss, whether to his person or to his property or in any other way”.43 Part of this ban aimed to prevent encouraging foreign countries from considering economic boycotts against South Africa as a form of protest. The partial emergency from 1985-1986 did not include additional curbs on the media. But from June 12, 1986 the police specifically targeted news organisations.

Merrett described it as “a period of bizarre and surreal experience throughout South Africa in which normal discourse, written and spoken, came to a virtual standstill ... all anti-apartheid newspapers were in disarray”.44 Newspaper offices including Grassroots, New Nation, the Weekly Mail, the Sowetan, Sunday Tribune and City Press were raided and journalists detained. Overseas correspondents, both print and broadcasting, were accused of damaging the image of the republic with harmful and inaccurate reports.

The Foreign Correspondents’ Association described the censorship regulations during the emergencies as the toughest its members had encountered anywhere in the world. Some correspondents qualified their reports as censored by the South African government. Others indicated that the reports were “subject to the South African government’s reporting restrictions”.45
Official comment came via the South African Bureau of Information and its spokesman David Steward who threatened journalists who refused to moderate reports. Examples of contentious phrases included “white minority regime” and “riot-torn”. Such control over language was necessary, Steward explained, to ensure that the population was properly informed in a time of national debate.

The Bureau of Information imposed additional burdens by insisting that it would only respond to questions submitted four hours in advance. On September 25, 1986 the media centre in Pretoria was shut down. The bureau would only respond to written questions by telexes. Newspapers reacted in a variety of ways to the difficulties imposed by the Government. Some appeared with thick black rules through the copy where it had been censored.

Others chose to run stories with blank spaces to emphasise the paragraphs amended. Ilanga, Weekly Mail, the Star, and the Sowetan all used blank spaces, and the Sowetan ran a black box instead of a leader. The Weekly Mail used black lines and white space, to identify paragraphs that had been excised. Such indications of censorship were themselves banned. Over an extended period during the mid-1980s; the Star carried a strip that reminded its readers each day that the newspaper was produced under extremely harsh censorship laws. This notice was dropped only after President F.W. de Klerk took over as National Party leader from P.W. Botha in 1989.

[P.W. Botha was elected prime minister in 1979 and became state president in 1984. F.W. de Klerk replaced P.W. Botha as National Party leader in February 1989 after Botha suffered a stroke and in August 1989 De Klerk replaced him as president.]

New bureaucracies

At a meeting in Cape Town in September, 1987, attended by 32 editors representing leading metropolitan newspapers and the “alternative” press, the Minister of Home Affairs, Stoffel Botha, announced that the government had established a Directorate of Media Relations to monitor observance of the new emergency regulations issued a week earlier. Journalists’ organisations, editors, media lawyers, commentators, and some opposition MPs condemned the move as further erosion of freedom of speech and press. The Media Workers’ Association of South Africa said it was clear the Government “would once more be policeman, prosecutor and judge”. The editor of the Sowetan, Joe Latagomo, described the move as the final nail in the coffin of press freedom [in South Africa]:

The Government’s intention must be seen for what it is: a sinister plot, involving faceless people accountable to no-one, prescribing to people what they can read in newspapers and what they cannot. The element of
secrecy is nothing new in the Government’s onslaught against those who disagree with them.48

The new powers under the directorate enabled Prime Minister Botha to suspend publication of offending newspapers for up to three months at a time, or to appoint censors to vet their material for publication. The Prime Minister defended the new legislation saying it could act against newspapers which fostered a climate of violent overthrow of the state.49 It was aimed both at the mainstream press and the Alternative press, although the initial emergency regulations sought to curb directly the increasing role of the Alternative press. The Star described Stoffel Botha’s new curbs as frightening:

In creating a Directorate of Media Relations to control ‘propaganda’, the Minister of Home Affairs has fallen into the old trap. He believes his own propaganda. It is sad to watch South Africa declining into the crude and unsophisticated procedures of unstable banana republics. And puzzling too.

Why should the State want yet another mechanism to threaten and frighten the press? It already has a law which allows it to close down newspapers without even giving a reason. Its actions in the past were ruthless and unjust, but at least the Government avoided hypocrisy.50

Explaining the new Directorate of Media Relations, Stoffel Botha said the Government would use a system of “scientific evaluation” to decide whether newspapers were promoting violent revolution. In his briefing to the editors, Stoffel Botha tried to dispel notions that the aim was outright censorship.

The proposed directorate, set up by the Department of Home Affairs, comprised a panel of experts including political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, lawyers and journalists drawn from universities and research organisations.

Action would only be taken against a newspaper after the Minister and his expert advisers had satisfied themselves that the publication, as a general policy, was promoting violent revolution. It was a wholly subjective exercise, but reviewable by the courts under common law. Stoffel Botha had by this time managed temporarily to shut down the alternative papers New Nation, Saamstaan, and South. His sights were then set on others, including the journal Work in Progress, Weekly Mail, and the Sowetan.

Although the Minister was empowered under this new emergency legislation to place censors in newspaper editorial offices, he resisted the temptation. Merrett suggested this was “probably because of the poor international publicity which would have ensued, since it
enabled him to argue that there was no censorship under the Emergency, and because he had other effective weapons at his disposal.\textsuperscript{51}

Between 1986 and 1987, an average of one new Act a week was passed to tighten the grip on suppressing vital topics. Percy Qoboza, of the \textit{World}, (and later the \textit{Sowetan}), observed that the emergency regulations had reduced the credibility gap of the press. Township people, who had suffered at the hands of the police, the army, and other elements of the Nationalist government, came to distrust the newspapers because traumatic events were not being fully reported.\textsuperscript{52}

Shortly after the announcement of the new media directorate, Tyson tried to explain the mechanics of the new legislation:

\begin{quote}
The Minister has announced a five-step censorship programme, but in practice it comes down to three steps that pretend to be—or mock—scientific and judicial process.

Step one: A ‘scientific’ assessment is made of the newspaper’s reports and comments, weighing ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ news.

Step two: Should the anonymous panel feel that the accumulated impact amounts to ‘subversive propaganda’, then the Minister issues ‘fair warning’.

Step three: Unless an editor can satisfy the Minister, or voluntarily tries to read the Minister’s mind more carefully in future, the newspaper must accept total pre-censorship. (So papers are closing down, as I speak.) ... My analysis does not claim to be scientific—there can be no such thing. I offer only the opinion of an average newspaperman.\textsuperscript{53}

Yet another ploy by Stoffel Botha and the Home Affairs Ministry was a plan for licensing journalists under Section 11 of the \textit{Newspaper Amendment Bill} making it compulsory for freelancers, news correspondents and local news agencies to register with the government.

The net was cast too wide by including organisations not gathering news in media terms such as stock brokers, currency exchange staff dealing with overseas publications, and other providers of information on a limited basis. The plan was much too vague, and legal implications forced Botha to abandon it, claiming that he wanted merely to stifle some far right-wing publications, among them the racist \textit{Patriot}. Mathews concluded that the fundamental problem with South Africa’s system of public law, “stated shortly and sourly”, was that it was an instrument of power rather than justice:
There is of course a strong power element in the most enlightened systems of public law, but in South Africa it is so grotesquely bloated that it now occupies – indeed overflows – all space within the system ... In the sphere of censorship, the powers of the ordinary courts have been reduced and their functions transferred to a Publications Appeal Board whose present policy of liberalising censorship appears to be due to the transient factor of the personality of the office-holders rather than to rules or institutions.\(^\text{54}\)

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to public accountability was the statutory shroud of secrecy which had been thrown over vast areas of State administration. The basic anti-disclosure law was the *Protection of Information Act* of 1982, which re-enacted in substantially the same form the former Official Secrets legislation inherited from Great Britain.

This law enabled government to make a state secret of almost any official information it did not want disclosed, including information relating to mismanagement, waste and bureaucratic bungling.

Not unexpectedly, additional legislation extended the pervasive controls over information permitted by official secrets legislation, especially involving security matters. The police and prisons department had long been protected by laws prohibiting the publication of “untrue” material relating to their activities. These legislative trends reached a climax in the media regulations which were promulgated under the 1986 State of Emergency and reintroduced, with additional restrictions against court “meddling”, in the emergency provisions of June 11, 1987. The media regulations made a virtual state secret of the entire law and order operation, with the public bottle-fed on government pap released selectively.

Van Der Merwe argued that the media curbs were not designed to stop all criticism of the government but to stop the promotion of revolution.\(^\text{55}\) Stoffel Botha agreed, saying that the government would not allow the press “to be used as a tool of war in the hands of foreign or other aggressors”. According to the minister, “freedom of expression: would not be allowed to the extent that it fostered chaos, murder, confusion and revolt in South Africa”. Government intent was to “secure and promote the welfare of the people”, to promote development and to rule according to a set of fundamental principles within a given system and given parameters. The press must have a right to act as public watchdog but in a “qualified” manner:

> In this country, freedom in general, and press freedom in particular, must be looked at in the context of an attempted revolution by such violent organisations as the ANC and its mentor, the South African Communist
Party. When the leaders of these organisations themselves blatantly admit that they collaborate with the mass media to further their violent struggle for the take-over of South Africa, it should be clear to everyone that sections of the local and international press in this revolutionary process is no flight of the imagination on the part of the government. . . . Whatever your reaction may be to what I [Stoffel Botha] have said, I must, in all frankness, add that if I have failed to convey to you a perception that there is substance in South Africa’s case, that will not deviate me from my course and my obligation to my country.56

Taking a stand

At the height of the media clampdown in the mid-1980s, The Star took a defiant stand against the continued assaults, threats of closure and harassment. It warned that South Africa was rapidly relinquishing any differences it had from totalitarianism because of the prolonged state of emergency:

Even for unaware South Africans seeking no more than limited legal protection and “responsible” freedom of information in these difficult times, warning bells should be ringing loudly and urgently. The Star takes the unusual step of editorialising on its front page today because the dimming lights and warning bells appear to go unheeded ... the threat facing all South Africans is that the new rules, given disguised respectability through elaborate procedures and publications in the Government Gazette, blatantly deny proper legal process to any publication practising freedom of speech. Freedom is denied for the sake of peace and protection of legal government, the public is told. A small minority, mainly white South Africans, swallow this. Their forebears, the Voortrekkers and the 1820 Settlers, would not – and did not.57

The Government had placed a severe restriction order on the ANC veteran Govan Mbeki, released from prison a month earlier, and several other national activists. In December 1987, it banned an edition of the weekly New Nation alternative newspaper, declaring it undesirable in terms of the Publications Act of 1947. (Three earlier similar decisions had been appealed and overturned by the Publications Appeal Board.) Acting editor Gabu Tugwana said the government’s actions had wider consequences:

People will probably only realise this when it [New Nation] is gone.58

At the time of this banning, the founding editor of New Nation, Zwelakhe Sisulu, one of South Africa’s best known journalists, had been in jail for a year under detention orders
invoked under the State of Emergency regulations. He had been arrested and detained on the orders of Police Minister Louis le Grange on December 12, 1986. (*New Nation* was launched earlier that year.) The South African Society of Journalists (SASJ) said the banning order on *New Nation* was part of “a well-orchestrated state attack on what little is left of press freedom in South Africa, the brunt of which is presently borne by *New Nation* and other newspapers which fall outside the mainstream commercial press”. The South African Police Commissioner, General Hennie De Witt claimed the orders were necessary to prevent promotion of a revolutionary climate.

President P.W. Botha had an opportunity to fine-tune the second State of Emergency in terms of the *Public Safety Act*. Two days before it lapsed on June 11, 1987, the Government signaled its intentions to extend and toughen restrictions, and to close loopholes in the legislation. On June 10, 1987, notices were promulgated in the *Government Gazette* extending all regulations under the expiring Emergency, as well as tighter controls on the media.

New restrictions under the third State of Emergency since 1985 made it an offence to quote an unlawful or restricted organisation in any way, even by spokespersons who were not banned. It became an offence for any person or organisation to encourage a boycott of the municipal elections, with the exception of registered political parties.

All news agencies had to be registered, with the exception of 13 organisations which included the established news agencies such as the big four international agencies and the national news agency, South African Press Association (SAPA).

Regulations on periodicals published irregularly were tightened, and the Minister of Home Affairs given powers to close down irregular publications for three months. This was increased subsequently to six months, after which the Minister could order copies of the offending periodical to be seized, or both. The government also assumed wide powers for the seizure of television film and sound recordings if they were considered to contain subversive statements. The new emergency regulations gave the Home Affairs Minister and the Police Commissioner powers to seize all copies of the film, sound tape, or publication.

This was based on a judgment that the material, on publication or distribution, would foment or promote revolution, uprising, unrest, feelings of hatred or hostility towards the security forces, or promote banned organisations or boycotts. They also had the power to enter any premises and use whatever force was “reasonably necessary to carry out the orders”. The security forces were also empowered to carry out these orders.

National and international outrage was predictable and the national media was united in its condemnation of the third State of Emergency, as it had been of earlier crackdowns. Jolyon Nuttall, the vice-president of the National Press Union and manager of The *Star*, described the
additional powers to extend the suspension of publications simply by placing a notice in the Government Gazette as particularly worrying for the media:

    The Government seems intent on converting the written word to the hidden word. It keeps adding to the list of things that may not be published, in the apparent hope that ignorance will create bliss ... This is censorship by edict in its worse form.59

Bob Steyn, of the South Africa Media Council, saw the new measures as seeming to go further than the previous regulations which had been criticised by the council was critical:

    Our task is to try to secure the freest possible flow of information in the public interest.60

**The regime changes**

On August 14, 1989, President P.W. Botha resigned and was replaced the following day by Acting President F.W. de Klerk as head of the National Party. The end of the Botha era signalled the passing of the most sustained and bitter attacks on the national media. Jackson described the 1980s as “the blackest years of the press”. Even so, the South African press carried a vast amount of legal baggage on its journey towards a post-apartheid society:

    Especially ironic was that for all the power the security laws granted the government, South Africa’s security situation was far worse in the 1970s and the 1980s than when the laws were first introduced starting in the 1950s. In the absence of a solution to the country’s political problems, even the far-reaching South African security legislation could not hope to contain political opposition in the long term.61

Tyson [1993] considered the battle of an authoritarian regime against an independent press as becoming, over the years, a game of chess in which both sides knew most of the gambits:

    Each side was too wary to try all in a single blow ... Instead, the general pattern was for the authoritarian crocodile [P.W. Botha] to lash its tail and snap its jaws, and hope that the press, with an irritated push from the white establishment, would fall into the water in terror. The press, however, would woo the public, then pretend to feed the crocodile a sacrificial meal – which usually turned out to be an empty bag of bones.62

In the period immediately before the transition and continuing through into the post-apartheid era, the South African media faced continued pressure to curtail press freedom. In addition, the national press lost many of its most promising and talented black journalists.
Disillusioned by a lack of career opportunities and low pay in journalism, many left the
profession for more lucrative jobs in newly created government positions.

Print Media Association of South Africa warned in April 2001 of South African
government plans to form an independent Media Diversity and Development Agency
(MDDA) to regulate the media industry. The PMA feared it could lead to political
interference with press freedom and responded to earlier comments by the Minister in the
Office of the Presidency Essop Pahad who complained that the South African media were still
suffering from a colonial mentality.

Pahad complained that the media only represented a narrow range of interests which
did not do enough to cover communities marginalised by gender, race, disability and the
broad democratic movements that fought against apartheid.63

In its 2001 annual survey on world press freedom, Reporters sans Frontiers also
targeted Pahad’s criticism of the national press and complaints that the South African
government was a victim of systematic hostility from the press. In February 2001, while
reaffirming his attachment to press freedom, Pahad denounced the “irresponsible journalism”
of certain publications:

We face a situation that is almost unique in democratic countries. The
ultra-majority political tendency in South Africa represented by the ANC
[African National Congress] does not have the slightest representation in
the media.64

However, Reporters sans Frontiers found that on the whole press freedom was still
observed in South Africa even though tension between the media and the State President had
become frequent. Throughout 2001, the South African press fiercely criticised the diplomatic
and Aids policies of President Thabo Mbeki and attracted fierce government hostility and
accusations of bias.

The Freedom House global survey of press freedom in 1999 found that after years of
apartheid and white minority rule, the democratic government of South Africa was still in
transition leading to an election later that year. Even after a new constitution was approved,
the oppressive apartheid legislation, including some 100 laws affecting the news media,
remained on the statute books, though not enforced. The majority of the print press — all but
two of 33 papers — remains in the hands of white owners. The daily and weekly black press
edited mainly for a black audience.

By 2001, the Freedom House global press survey indicated continued improvements
in press freedom in South Africa but laws allowing the government to restrict reporting on the
police, national defence forces, prisons, and mental institutions remained in effect, as do laws that may compel journalists to reveal sources.

However, these laws are not generally used to restrict the media. A freedom of information law was passed in January 2001. Several journalists and media offices suffered harassment during the year.\(^5\) Although South Africa has one of the world’s most liberal constitutions to protect freedom of the press, in 2002 many of the old apartheid era restrictions remained in effect such as laws that compel journalists to reveal their sources. In addition, the restrictions on reporting matters affecting the police, the national defence forces, and other institutions remained in effect and the government was considering an Interception and Monitoring Bill to empower the police and defence forces, the intelligence agency and the secret service to maintain monitoring centres. The government had already seized journalists’ equipment and compelled them to reveal their sources under the provisions of the Criminal Procedures Act.\(^6\)

**Summary**

The National Party’s reign from 1948 was marked by ever tightening restrictive measures to control and silence the press. Merrett confirms in 1986 and 1987, an average of one new regulation a week tightened the net around vital topics. At issue was the preservation and prosperity of the apartheid system. Restrictive legislation, banning orders, states of emergency, shutting down and banning of individual newspapers and the imposition of hefty fines all contributed to a growing authoritarian culture.

This chapter has considered the effects of such restrictive measures on the press and the way in which the press coped with the restrictions. Harvey Tyson examines the issue in considerable depth in *Editors Under Fire* and offers the view from the perspective of a senior Argus executive and editor of *The Star*, that despite the obstacles placed in its way, the press somehow managed to play a meaningful role in society and refused to cower to an authoritarian government that demanded support. Tyson’s idea of a meaningful role for the press was from the perspective of a white editor who worked on a conservative white English language newspaper aimed at a select middle-class Johannesburg readership trying to appease politically restless blacks and fending off intense government scrutiny and harassment. A seemingly impossible task.

It is against this background that there emerges conflict. By white standards and in the face of such vast government machinery Tyson claims credit for a defiant press while on the other hand, blacks who suffered under apartheid felt the press, especially the liberal English press, was not doing enough. There were accusations of self-censorship to avoid government crackdowns, police spies in the newsrooms.
In such a repressive era, mistrust and suspicion was rife. Accusations of bias against white-controlled newspapers and complicity with the government’s aims were regularly made. It is this sharp difference that still retards the development of the South African press in the post-apartheid era.

While there remains significant validity in the argument, it is not simply a case of every white journalist or every white editor being a closet racist and in the government’s pocket. Far from it. A case of too little too late for some but the efforts of crusading editors like Tyson, Donald Woods and Tony Heard in the fight against apartheid cannot be dismissed. Heard, in particular, paid a huge penalty for publishing material in *The Cape Times* that the government and his management found undesirable and he was sacked.

To answer the question of accountability, Chapter Four looks at post-apartheid press paradoxes and the same complaints of media control, authoritarianism and government threats. But this time it is the black Government of National Unity that stands accused of trying to nobble the press.
Notes for Chapter Three


4. Hepple, Alex, Censorship and Press Control in South Africa.


13. Chimutengwende, Chinhamo, *South Africa: the Press and the Politics of Liberation*, 1978, cf. The Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Mr F.C. Erasmus, told a National Party rally in 1949 that: “As Minister for Posts and Telegraphs I want to say to those people who send reports overseas slandering South Africa hat they must not expect of me that all their reports will reach their destinations. It is time for the government to put its foot down and it is doing so.” quoted from Chimutengwende. Sommerlad, E. Lloyd; *The Press in Developing Countries*, Sydney University, 1962, offers similar material.


20. Ibid, p. 43.


22. Ibid, p. 11.

23. Ibid, p. 11.


25. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid, p. 89.
The Steyn Commission report, page 109, describes the external threat or *Total Onslaught*: “The external onslaught has as its aim nothing less than the political and moral subversion of the White man, his replacement by a black majority government in a unitary state with, depending who wins, guidelines for a Marxist, radical-socialist or liberal democratic welfare-capitalist, socio-political system. The UN is the main protagonist in the external propaganda onslaught against the Republic. It is eagerly assisted by Third World and some Commonwealth countries and the Soviet bloc. The first aim is to isolate the Republic by mobilising the international opinion against it; the second aim is the destruction of the present government in South Africa by, inter alia, supporting terrorist movements, directly aided by non-governmental organisations such as the World Council of Churches. In this process, the Soviet strategic objectives are promoted. The Republic of South Africa has been singled out for a bitter, ongoing, biased and relentless onslaught.”


Hachten, William, and Giffard, C. Anthony; op. cit. chapter 4.

Tyson, Harvey, *Editors Under Fire*, quoting his newspaper The Star.

Ibid, p. 189.


Merrett, Christopher, *A., Culture of Censorship*, see chapter 6, pp. 113-117.


Ibid, p. 119.


51. Merrett, Christopher, op. cit. ch. 6.

52. Ibid, p.119.


55. The *Star*, October 9, 1987, Conflict and the Press reports, *Curbs “not designed to gag critics”*, page 12.

56. Ibid, *Govt won't allow press to be used as “tool of war”*, p. 12.


60. Ibid.


65 Freedom House global report on press freedom 2001: [www.freedomhouse.org/pfs2000/reports.html1#sout](http://www.freedomhouse.org/pfs2000/reports.html1#sout)

**Online resources:**

Freedom of Expression Institute, South Africa: [http://wn.apc.org/fxi/](http://wn.apc.org/fxi/)

Independent Online archives: [www.inc.co.za/online/news/](http://www.inc.co.za/online/news/)

Mail & Guardian online news: [www.mg.co.za/mg/](http://www.mg.co.za/mg/)

The Argus homepage: [www.inc.co.za/online/cape-argus/](http://www.inc.co.za/online/cape-argus/)

The Star internet edition: [www.inc.co.za/online/star/](http://www.inc.co.za/online/star/)


Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ): [www.iaj.co.za](http://www.iaj.co.za)

Freedom House reports: [www.freedomhouse.org/pfs2000/reports.html1#sout](http://www.freedomhouse.org/pfs2000/reports.html1#sout)

Reporters sans Frontiers: [http://www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)
CHAPTER FOUR
POST-APARTHEID PARADOXES

Introduction
This chapter reviews the apparatus of apartheid, its impact on freedom of speech and press freedom in general and its lingering impact after the disintegration of apartheid in the early 1990s and the transitional period to its eventual demise by 1994. Chapter Four also highlights sharp differences of opinion between the emerging black press and some sections of the Government of National Unity, it offers a snapshot of the post-apartheid press and the impact of a submission by Independent Newspapers to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

New forms of attack
By 1994, a new interim Constitution was introduced to guarantee freedom of the press in South Africa. On October 11, 1996, a revised new Constitution was adopted and came into force on February 7, 1997. It has an extensive bill of rights section headed by a human dignity provision which makes it similar to the German Constitution.

A black majority government was in power and a redevelopment program in place to redress the imbalances of the apartheid years. Yet the cumulative impact of years of interference, even sustained repression, was hard to dissolve. Indeed, new forms of attack emerged to threaten hard-won rights and freedoms. The ANC-led Government of National Unity claimed unfair treatment at the hands of what was still perceived by blacks as a white-dominated English and Afrikaner national media. In turn, the press responded to what it perceived was sustained government pressure on its traditional prerogatives.

Mike Siluma [1996] then editor at the Sowetan, believes government criticism of the press was a result of both the media and the new government trying respectively to define their new role in society. The black press, defiantly opposed to the views and practices of the previous apartheid government, now had to review this traditional opposition. In place was a black government largely supported by the press. On the other hand, the transition from liberation organisation to government and the closer scrutiny of the media attracted unwelcomed criticism and led to a complex dilemma:

Both sides are grappling with new realities. We are trying to define a new role for ourselves (as black journalists). Government is trying to grapple with the idea of being in government, working very hard in their view to transform society, and to make things better, and everyone continues to criticise them. And, in many cases, justifiably so. Government should not
be above criticism…but I think that this transformation is giving rise to a lot of hot air.

There is a lot of confusion [in the media and government] some people still feel that the media should be oppositionist. There are people, black journalists who hold very strong political views and who do not agree with the ANC for instance, who feel that the whole transformation has been a sell-out. And then you have the white editors who are still rooted in the old system who want to take a view that the media must distrust everything and anything the government does. And then of course you have other people who believe you have to support the ANC in the interests of the transformation. So there is no universal kind of position the media is taking.¹

In August, 1993, the South African Institute of Race Relations assembled five senior black journalists, a leader writer and a prominent celebrity entertainer to consider perceived deficiencies in media coverage. The discussions revealed incipient pressures on publication which amounted to new forms of censorship applicable to certain institutions and issues. Thami Mazwai, a senior assistant editor and business editor of the *Sowetan* newspaper put it this way:

> We have now reached a point where the journalist is told: You are either for us or against us. It is sheer political blackmail. Many of us have been in jail several times, and we don’t mind going to jail if it is in pursuit of what we believe in. I am a journalist and have been one since 1969, and I don’t think I am going to write distortion simply because a law has been passed by the government. I will take whatever risk I can to make sure that the public knows what is happening.²

Although journalists under the new dispensation were far less exposed to arrest or detention and incarceration by the government, they were threatened and manhandled by political activists in the townships, and told to “toe the line or else”. In short, they were expected to be propagandists. According to Mazwai at least 50 per cent of newspaper content “takes up a particular political position, specific distortions and an attempt to influence the reader – the public – to think in a particular direction.” Pressure from the so-called comrades – mostly young and poorly educated black political extremists – could be extremely persuasive and dangerous for reporters, particularly those considered as “against the struggle”. Mazwai states:
The weapon being used is to whisper, to spread the word around that so-and-so is against the struggle. Heaven help you should you ever be cornered by youngsters. They will make you pay for being against the struggle.³

Connie Molusi, a South African Press Association journalist, ascribed this radicalism largely to political intolerance built up during a period of the mass insurrection era from 1984 to 1986:

[This was] when a culture of people’s war was born, which assumed ideological homogeneity among black people; and as a result you had the formation of street committees pursuing the political aims and objectives of particular community organisations. No-one could absent himself from those street committees because he would then be declared “an enemy of the struggle”, therefore you had to participate even if you were opposed to the decisions being made.⁴

These “street committees” gave rise to new fears about the integrity and direction of the media, causing dangers for working journalists and in some cases threatening staff, who invariably lived in the same townships, with death or injury.⁵ But the growing assault on the role of the press in South Africa did not end there. There were rumblings of political pressure from the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, and Essop Pahad, a senior ANC member with close links to the Communist Party of South Africa. Both adopted increasingly adversarial positions, and some newspapers accused them of threatening the media. Pahad was particularly sceptical:

It will take a sea change to convince me that sections of the media do not have secret agendas or that some of them have not positioned themselves as the political opposition of the ANC. I trust one day they will have the courage to state this publicly instead of pretending that they are ‘objective’ observers, reporters, commentators and editors.⁶

Mbeki raised a more sombre hint of media intervention, urging changes in media ownership dominated by whites “who prospered under the former apartheid system and therefore were against reforms”. He called for African media to increase reporting on their own countries and continent instead of relying on the international wire agencies:

 Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, the BBC ... what they tell us about neighbouring countries, we must do ourselves honestly, objectively, and accurately.⁷
The South African President, Nelson Mandela, entered the debate in 1994, arguing that the print media had to change and adapt to better reflect post-apartheid South Africa. Mandela warned against an unproductive dogfight between government and news media. He called for the “expansion and deepening of media freedoms” which should be linked to greater access to information and freedom of expression for people disadvantaged by more than 300 years of white domination and four decades of apartheid.

Mandela challenged South Africa’s editors to adapt South Africa’s media structures developed under apartheid to fit South Africa’s new democracy:

What are the perceptions feeding what could develop into an unproductive dogfight? It is in the nature of your trade and it is absolutely crucial that you should be searching, critical, and even sceptical. At the same time you also have to exercise the responsibility of accurately reflecting the hopes and fears, the aspirations and apprehensions ... as they exist in society.  

Mandela’s address was made 100 days after the ANC took government and followed growing concern within the ANC that the print media, owned almost exclusively by three white organisations, were biased and deliberately antagonistic towards the new black government. The ANC complained especially about biased print media comments about legislators and ministers accepting lavish perks and pay, including luxury cars and free air travel.

This growing tension between government and the press was also echoed by Tokyo Sexwale, the premier of PWV province, which includes Johannesburg. Sexwale accused the print media of trying to undermine public confidence in the new government and threatening the initiatives of the Reconstruction and Development Program.

In our view society with all its elements, is constantly changing. South African society is changing rapidly. The media must capture and address itself to these states of affairs which is aimed at providing better quality of life for all our people, entrenching political stability, the reduction of crime levels, especially socio-economically related crime, and of course serious crimes largely unrelated to adverse socio-economic conditions and the creation of a healthy economic climate for both domestic and foreign investment.

It was Sexwale’s thinly veiled threat that caused ripples of concern in the national press:

Let us well, rectify an incorrect perception that suggests that the business of media is only or largely related to being critical of government …
Media should reflect fairly on the entire society … the media must be seen to be critical of itself. When shall we hear media self-criticism? 11

What Sexwale alluded to was the need for the media to be more critical of its own reporting and behaviour, and for the media to be more aware of the needs of a transitional post-apartheid society. However, in the white dominated press Sexwale’s comments were interpreted as a sinister threat to the role of the press and an attack on its criticism of government and the Reconstruction and Development Program. The Freedom of Expression Institute also challenged the statements by Sexwale, interpreting it as an attack on free speech.

The FXI expressed fears that the statements could be construed as fertile grounds for restricting certain sections of the press critical of the government and demanded clarification as well as a reaffirmation of the government’s commitment to freedom of expression generally and press freedom in particular.

This episode from the Premier of the PWV region provided yet another avenue of concern and an attack on the news media in South Africa. To interpret yet another paradox in the long struggle of the South African press for political and legal tolerance of its freedoms, it is necessary to go back to the dismantling of apartheid structures.

**Beginning of the end**

As President, F.W. De Klerk ushered in a new era which ultimately transformed South African politics, seemingly pointing as well to profound change in the national media. In a momentous speech to Parliament on February 2, 1990, De Klerk announced the Government’s declared intention to normalise the political process in South Africa without jeopardising the maintenance of good order.

With this announcement came dramatic changes: the lifting of bans on 32 proscribed organisations including the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress and a variety of groups ranging from Marxist to Far Left, all proscribed previously under the Internal Security Act. All publications specifically banned under the Internal Security legislation were also freed from bans. The State of Emergency was substantially amended and relaxed. The effect on the national news media was not immediately apparent despite the easing of some regulations that now permitted publication of news about unrest and riots. Some controls were maintained over the right to publication and police retained the right to restrict journalists from restive areas, but restrictions on photographs of unrest were lifted.

The changes ushered in by De Klerk did not immediately free up the national media, whether English, Afrikaans or alternative. Despite some notable concessions, for example newspaper registration fees were refunded to some newspapers. In November 1990, *Vrye*
*Weekblad* received its registration fee of R30,000 plus R9000 interest dating to 1988 when the fee was first imposed. In 1991, *New African* received R20,000 plus nearly R14,000 in interest payments but efforts to suppress the news continued. This was especially so in the KwaZulu-Natal region where legislation existed to exclude journalists from specific areas.

Under the Natal Emergency, passed into law on June 8, 1990, the security forces could still restrain journalists from entering and reporting on what was happening in restive areas. Provision was made for detention of up to six months for breaches of the legislation. By October 18, 1990 it was dropped in favour of a comprehensive new law, incorporating the Unrest Areas under the *Public Safety Amendment Act*, which included 19 magisterial districts and 27 townships in the Transvaal alone. The government continued to use its Emergency regulations, especially to pursue the radical Afrikaans weekly, *Vrye Weekblad*.

It chose to use powers under the Emergency regulations rather than the *Defence Act* which required more specific amendment. In the changing environment of the early 1990s, with the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the move towards the first non-racial general elections and later the installation of the ANC-led Government of National Unity, the role of the media and the easing of restrictions would have resulted in an unprecedented free flow of information. But this was also a torrid period of change for the mainstream and the alternative press.

The Argus Group moved to acquire the *Cape Times*, and the *Sowetan* changed owners and was acquired by a black consortium of businessmen. Consequently, the concentration of media ownership was marginally reduced. It was a difficult period for the alternative press with *New African* folding in 1992 and *Vrye Weekblad* less than two years later, in February 1994. It also signaled the end of the radical academic monthly magazine *Work in Progress*. The *Mail & Guardian*, started in 1985 by Anton Harber and Irwin Manoim, struggled on as an independent but failed to crack the big mass circulation market dominated by Independent Newspapers’ metropolitan English-language newspapers.

**New masters, old conflicts**

In post-apartheid South Africa during the 1990s and leading up to the first non-racial general election, emerging as it did from decades of oppression and harassment of the print media, the expectation was that better days were ahead for the traditional watchdog role of newspapers. But this was not to be.

The complaints came quickly and they came from across the political spectrum. The common theme was that the national print media, more particularly the liberal English language print media, was not doing its job properly. Newspaper criticism of government policies and shortcomings were interpreted as an attack on the new black leadership. Critical
reports on rising national crime figures, the slow response by the government to improve housing and basic facilities such as domestic electricity and water supplies, fraud and rorts by government officials were interpreted as an attack on the black government by a “white press” unable or unwilling to come to terms with the new political dispensation.

There were accusations from the ANC-led government that the English press was protecting vested interests and big business that thrived under apartheid, and that it also had a hidden agenda that ran counter to the aims of the new administration. Now the complaints came from a black government.

From the leading partner in the Government of National Unity, the African National Congress, came complaints that the national media was slow to change and even slower to embrace the new order, antagonistic towards the government, and largely staffed by the agenda setters of the old regime. The implications clearly were ominous that the white dominated print media was reluctant or tardy in its efforts to reshape to meet the new challenges.

It was a complaint based on unfairness and lack of balance. The criticisms levelled against the press included being unsupportive, and even dismissive, of government attempts to improve the lot of the victims of apartheid, an almost obsessive focus on the nation’s spiralling crime rates and its effect on foreign investment, a tendency to ignore major instances of white-collar crime, and generally negative, confrontational approach to government initiatives. The ANC complained especially about what it perceived as biased comments about legislators and ministers accepting lavish perks and pay.

On the other hand, the National Party accused the ANC of trying to manipulate the national news media to be a supportive and uncritical lapdog. The print media, for its part, complained it was being pressured by the government, suffering because of poor government communication networks and, in some departments, an absence of formal government communications structures.

Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, who accused the media of perpetuating its apartheid era role of criticising the government and looking for crises, said the media could guarantee its own freedom by helping to ensure that South Africa’s fledgling democracy became a strong and stable society. It was “quite correct” to seek to ensure that the press was not controlled either overtly or covertly by government and that it remained independent “but one could not view press freedom outside the context of freedom of society generally”.13

Mandela also raised the issue of growing confrontation between the new government and the press. He admitted that after only a brief period, relations between the government and sections of the media were at a relatively low ebb. In February 1994, Mandela gave an
assurance that he believed a critical, independent and investigative press was the lifeblood of any democracy and had to be free from state interference. But he said it was “clearly inequitable that in a country whose population is overwhelmingly black, the principal players in the media have no knowledge of the life experience of that majority”.

Mandela’s comment sparked criticism from media organisations who viewed it as a call for some sort of affirmative action to dilute the upper echelons of the media and reflect national diversity. The National Party immediately accused the ANC of trying to manipulate the media while the interim constitution, the Bill of Rights and guarantees of freedom of speech were still being formulated. The ANC replied that it had no lessons on media freedom to learn from the South African media barons, again accusing the media of lagging in the transformation process and calling for radical change to ensure the free and accurate flow of information.

Kaizer Nyatsumba, political editor at The Star, conceded Mbeki’s complaints about an unrepresentative national media were justified. He suggested, though, that the government was in many ways to blame for how national unity was portrayed. Nyatsumba offered three examples of how the government failed in its efforts both to lobby and to keep the media informed of its basic programs, its difficulties and its plans for the immediate future.

The first involved a proposed informal briefing program by which senior government officials and Ministers could get to know the political journalists writing editorials and comment pieces about them. This was an initiative by The Star based on the British parliamentary briefing sessions. Nyatsumba saw this as an important opportunity both for political journalists and politicians:

For us it is an opportunity for an off-the-record briefing with the political movers and shakers, and for them it is an invaluable opportunity to interact with our political writers ... And yet the response was not exactly overwhelming.\textsuperscript{14}

The second weakness identified was simply the government’s failure at many levels to communicate at all:

Among those represented here are ministries which have a non-existent media profile. Perceptions of Government non-delivery abound in the townships and frustrations growing in some Government circles, and this leads to accusations from some top Government figures that the press does not communicate sufficiently to the public the good things the Government of National Unity does to bring about change. Reality, however, is that there are key Government ministries and departments
which are simply not aggressively communicating their successes, limited though they may be, and not explaining what problems they encounter and which may impact on the rate of delivery.\textsuperscript{15}

The third complaint involved coverage of important overseas trips by the President and his deputies and the government’s failure to accommodate news media in the travelling party. “We don’t want to travel and be accommodated free of charge; we are more than happy to foot our part of the bill,” Nyatsumba said.\textsuperscript{16} Arranging individual itineraries for journalists however, was often difficult so formal visits were either not covered or covered less fully than they might have been. These were all legitimate complaints, the government conceded, and promises were made to rectify the shortcomings in government information.

Rumblings persisted about threats to media freedom in the new administration and complaints about a lack of media diversity and ownership. Mbeki said, though, that the government remained committed to “the policy of transparency and accountability to the citizenry” and the rights of “members of society to participate fully in the shaping of the destiny of our country”. He reiterated the aims of the Reconstruction and Development Program:

\begin{quote}
The government fully recognises and accepts the role of the media to be a critical commentator on government activity. The media should be beyond the control of government. They should at all times retain the right to determine how and what to cover. For the media to reflect the needs, desires, and views of society, they must remain independent. Having said this, the question rises in sharp focus: are the relations between media and government of necessity hostile? Our own view is that such a relationship is not generic to those two institutions. Hostility must, I believe, derive from the pursuit of agendas that are inherently hostile to each other ... We cannot afford a situation where the majority of our people are mere consumers of information and opinion whose content is determined by one sector of society. The people out there are crying out to be heard.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

With the majority of the country illiterate, the penetration of the print media was estimated at only around 5 per cent of the population. According to Mbeki, the use of the electronic media, particularly radio, appeared the most viable outlet, especially to the rural poor.

Recalling the intensifying of media repression almost 20 years earlier [see Chapter 2], the national secretary of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa, pledged that as long as the ANC was the
leading force in government and for as long as it existed, it would resist any attempts to undermine the independence and the integrity of the media:

We have inherited a media which reflects in its ownership and control many of the economic distortions of our apartheid past. It is a situation which mitigates against the free flow of ideas and the airing of a broad range of views and ideas ... Some people have attempted to portray our stated position as a challenge to media freedom. Nothing could be further from the reality. The position which the ANC has expressed on several occasions over the last few years ... is intended to enrich media freedom and give it real substance.18

This spirit of goodwill soon evaporated. A year after Ramaphosa’s declaration, Deputy President Mbeki was pessimistic. He accused the four major newspaper institutions in South Africa of going slow on implementing the previously disadvantaged program. Between them, these institutions controlled more than 80 per cent of the South African print media market. Yet staff recruited under previously-disadvantaged (affirmative action) programs were almost non-existent, black journalists were few, and blacks occupying higher levels in the companies were even fewer.19

*Beeld*, the Afrikaans paper owned by Nationale Pers, offered in-house training for reporters with a marginally successful affirmative action recruitment program. Two black reporters were employed in the news room – one at *Beeld* in Johannesburg, the other at *Die Burger* in Cape Town. Nationale Pers editorial manager Dolf Els said it had difficulties attracting black reporters to an Afrikaans newspaper for obvious reasons. In addition, many black people were unable to write in Afrikaans, did not have the required entry standards of at least a diploma or a first degree.

At *Rapport*, another Nationale Pers publication, there were no training programs for journalists. *Business Day* (Times Media Ltd) had three black reporters out of 17 on its finance side and four out of 16 news reporters. *Business Day* had no specific affirmative action policy but preferred locals (or South Africans) for journalistic vacancies, provided they had the necessary skills. *The Mail & Guardian* had five black journalists but the editor, Anton Harber, said the independently owned paper had trained dozens of young blacks but they were poached by the bigger news organisations.

These were either reluctant or slow to start their own training facilities for journalists from black and coloured backgrounds. *The Citizen*, owned by Perskor, had no affirmative action program or training facilities for young black journalists, but had some interest in hiring black journalists.
At Independent Newspapers, emphasis was placed on training all journalists but focused on potential reporters from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Independent Group led the way in training and appointing affirmative action candidates, for example, the first black editor at *The Cape Times*, Moegsien Williams. The group had five editors in Natal, of whom three were Indians, and there were two black deputy editors.

The government’s appeal for an aggressive affirmative action policy was supported by the editor of the *Sowetan*, Mike Siluma, a former labour reporter at *The Star* and one of the few black journalists to work in the Argus company’s London bureau. Siluma said a “whole backlog of neglect” characterised black journalism in post-apartheid South Africa, and skills of black journalists had to be enhanced.

He agreed that “the strengthening of a democracy is partially the role of the press, and freedom of expression does not mean that reporters are unaccountable.” Greater consultation with government would help media stakeholders:

If you assume that a democracy needs an effective press to assist civil society to make informed decisions and ask intelligent questions, then we need to ask ourselves what is our role. If you assume that proprietors run commercial enterprises and are profit driven and we, as reporters and editors, are involved because we want to inform people, then we need to find some common ground because our objectives are far removed from [government].

This great divide between government and the press and the conflicting objectives of journalists on both sides of the colour line, and effects, of a predominantly white newspaper ownership was a driving force towards establishing an emerging black press. A black consortium, New Africa Investments Ltd, led by Soweto medic Dr Nathato Motlana, was formed to secure all or part of Anglo American’s 48 per cent stake in Johnnic, a strategically-placed media company. Among other core assets of Anglo, this company included Omnimedia which in turn owned Times Media Ltd, the smaller of the two leading English language newspaper groups. Included in this Group were titles such as the *Sunday Times* and the *Financial Mail*, as well as some magazines.

With a prospect of new black ownership looming, Times Media Ltd editors moved swiftly to incorporate a new editorial charter “as an appropriate means of preserving the traditions within TML”. Johnnic and Omnimedia explained why: “With Anglo American having been the custodian of newspaper publications for about 50 years, there is a sense that they would want their traditions preserved”. This drew sharp criticism from black journalist groups including the chairman of the Black Editors’ Forum, Thami Mazwai. According to
Mazwai, it confirmed the desperation of some white editors eager to cling to the past of white ownership. All of a sudden a charter had become a matter of urgency.  

The Government’s complaints against the national media reflected a perceived reluctance by the white-controlled media to embrace the post-apartheid transformation. There was also an accusation of bias and implied racism, although consistently and strongly rejected by editors and journalists on the white English-language papers. They argued that they had always been at the forefront of opposition to the apartheid policies of the Nationalists and ultimately played a leading role in their demise. While it would be wrong and unfair to reject outright the important role many of these newspapers played in the political struggle, it would be just as much an exaggeration to suggest that the liberal English press took on the hue of the society in which it operated. These were “white papers”, whichever way one looked at it.

At a Commonwealth Press Union meeting of editors, Reverend Frank Chikane, a leading anti-apartheid campaigner closely linked to the ANC and the Mandela Government, said that in the new order, there were new roles for the media. He questioned the future of aggressive media policy and freedom of the press, suggesting instead a developmental media that “helped the national project to develop a just, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic society”. No place for a watchdog here! Chikane also suggested that the national press only concern itself politically with the “different views of different parties in their debate around the question of the national interest”. Chikane did not define his perception of the national interest nor who should define it.

Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting Minister Jay Naidoo saw the future of a free and independent media in South Africa as based on the willingness of the press to be accountable to the community at large and not to the government of the day. Naidoo also supported a charter of the press to ensure a code of practice for journalists:

In South Africa, a stricter adherence to a press charter on the basic ethics of professional journalism will greatly strengthen the credibility of the press.

Climax of the debate

Towards the end of 1996, the simmering debate between the government seeking transformation of a national media it did not own nor control, and the press accusing the government of constant media bashing, reached a climax.

President Mandela accused the press of failing to discharge its duties. He stridently criticised the South African media for failing to expose the role of the so-called Third Force behind political violence in the country. Mandela asserted that senior black journalists had a
“secret agenda” and were doing the dirty work of their bosses by trying to destroy the democratically-elected government. The black journalists were pawns because the government could not accuse them of racism when they objected to government policies.

Mandela did not name journalists whom he said were acting in their own self-interest and for promotion. It was a sharp and bitter rebuke, the government’s first stinging indictment on the work of South Africa’s black journalists who, in turn, complained bitterly that the President had got it wrong.

The outcry against the president’s accusations was swift and fierce. The Media Workers’ Association of South Africa, representing the majority of black journalists in the country, said it was “terrified by Mandela’s consistent attacks on black journalists”. The Star was particularly fierce in its rebuttal of the president’s claims:

President Nelson Mandela’s smear campaign against unnamed senior black journalists is as unsubstantiated, unbalanced, and ridiculous as that waged by the Nats [National Party] during the worst days of the onslaught ... We challenge Mandela to name these Judases – and their masters. And we challenge him to conjure up proof of their dishonesty and cowardice. Of course, he cannot.26

In response The Star provided a centrespread to ANC MPs Carl Niehaus and Tony Yengeni under the headline, The Star accused of gutter journalism to address the government’s concerns. Three of The Star’s senior black journalists Kaizer Nyatumba, Justice Malala and Newton Kanehema were accused of spreading articles based on “misinformed opinion”, “distorted facts”, and in some instances “outright lies”. The editor of The Star, Peter Sullivan, was presented as sponsoring gutter journalism.

The South African Union of Journalists’ president, Sam Sole, feared that media freedom was again under threat but from a new direction:

The frequency and intensity of the attacks on the media by senior government figures, including President Mandela, are becoming very worrying ... The protection granted to the media in terms of the law can come to mean relatively little if journalists face brow-beating or even intimidation ... Black journalists are particularly vulnerable, hence the attacks specifically against them are of great concern.27

The Mail & Guardian was puzzled by Mr Mandela’s remarks, taking pride in its investigative journalism into the “dirty tricks” and shady practices of the Nationalists. It pointed to its extensive investigative coverage of the Caprivi invasion and several other
atrocities committed during the apartheid years. The *Mail* recalled the Vlakplaas terror unit, a clandestine security forces group accused of murder and torturing political opponents.²⁸

Responding to Mandela’s criticism that investigative reporting on the so-called “Third Force” in South African politics was inefficient or neglected, the *Mail & Guardian* argued that its obsessive pursuit of the “Third Force” was commercial suicide and had bored its readers:

> To now be attacked by our own president for a dereliction of duty in failing to pursue the Third Force, would be painfully ironic, were it not laughably so.²⁹

Ryland Fisher, a coloured editor at the *Cape Times*, was more conciliatory. In an open letter to Mandela, he denied the accusations of bias and rejected suggestions that he and other black editors were merely token figureheads appointed to appease public and government concerns while doing the work of their white masters. Fisher rejected allegations that in the three years that the Government of National Unity was in power, the bulk of the national press was working towards the demise of the ANC.

> I did not expect to be told that I was part of a “counter-revolutionary” conspiracy, nor that I was a token. I plead not guilty on both counts.³⁰

Fisher countered that the transformation for black newspaper editors was as challenging for him and his colleagues as it was for the new government and that if they were failing in their duties then it was by design:

> [I] would readily admit that my colleagues and I sometimes fail in our duty to inform the public properly. This is not because of lack of trying, Mr President. It is also not due to conspiracy, complicity, or connivance, but because of less flattering reasons such as ignorance or our inability to always understand our complex society properly.

> I think that most white journalists at English-language newspapers are trying to understand a part of our society from which they were legally and forcibly separated over many decades. At the same time, I believe that black journalists at these papers are committed to make sure that our newspapers begin to reflect this part of our society which has not been properly reflected in the media.³¹

The post-apartheid press – a snapshot

This account of the post-apartheid period has focused so far on the general cut-and-thrust between Nelson Mandela’s majority government and the traditional national press, firmly
white in its orientation. The arguments articulated somewhat randomly in the mid-1960s were refined and strengthened in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Before looking more closely at the dialectic of the TRC, it is helpful to give a further snapshot of the structure of the national press as it had evolved to the mid-1990s. In essence, it was a near-monopolistic market in which 1.3 million newspapers were sold each day, a market with too few players and an awesome grip on the market by Independent Newspapers. Few countries in the world could boast such a massive concentration of power, as Cohen observed:

Whether these monopolies employ black or white editors is a very important issue ... but what matters more is their power in the market, in their extraordinary influence and control over the advertising and distribution channels whether anyone else (black or white) could ever get a foot in the door.32

Of the 1.3 million newspapers sold each day, 57 per cent belonged directly to Tony O’Reilly’s Independent Newspapers or were controlled by it. Independent Newspapers took over the Argus group in March 1994. If the Afrikaans press was ignored then 75 per cent of all English-language metro daily newspapers sold in South Africa were controlled by Independent Newspapers.

In the second and third largest cities, Durban and Cape Town, all the morning and afternoon metro daily newspapers were controlled by Independent. In Johannesburg and Pretoria, where around 580,000 metro daily newspapers were sold each day, Independent controlled 70 per cent of the market via The Star, the Sowetan and its stake in the Pretoria News. In the East London-Port Elizabeth area, the smaller rival Times Media Ltd group had absolute control over the English metro dailies.

Unquestionably, Independent Newspapers dominated the national English press with much the same power and reach that the Argus group wielded during the apartheid years, which its editors had claimed credit for opposing and helping to dismantle. Independent Newspapers published in excess of 160 newspaper titles and magazines worldwide. In South Africa, Independent was the country’s leading publisher with 31 per cent of the total newspaper market and 58 per cent of the English language market. It published 14 daily and weekly newspapers in South Africa and also had a 14.9 per cent shareholding in Kaya FM Radio.

By 1996, there was a dramatic shake-up of South African media ownership. The new media barons include former trade unionist and ANC secretary-general Cyril Ramaphosa, Mandela's personal physician, Nathato Motlana, former Robben Island inmate Eric Molobi,
past Inkatha general secretary Oscar Dhlomo and Irish business tycoon Tony O'Reilly. It left only two of the country's major commercial newspapers, *Die Burger* and *Beeld*, in the hands of conservative white South Africans. In the past, the two Afrikaans press groups Nasionale Pers and Perskor were unashamedly National Party mouthpieces.

**Independent Newspapers and the TRC**

In the context of transformation in the South African print media, a crucial factor was the submission in February 1997 to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Jerry Featherstone, the chief executive of Independent Newspapers (formerly the Argus group). Featherstone’s expression of regret for the failures, shortcomings and omissions of the company was a momentous and historic occasion in the South African print media.

Furthermore, it indicated a more profound role by the press in the political trauma of the apartheid years and their aftermath than had been previously acknowledged. Furthermore, it discredited the claims of an influential group of former editors who said they had nothing to apologise for.

While the former white editors felt they did everything within their power and the law, the new cluster of black executives considered that the former bosses did too little and that often too late. Featherstone lent weight to the argument that the English-language press, despite its constant carping and opposition to prevailing Government policy, still fell far short of expectations. It was always a white press for, and staffed mainly by, whites. Now, in the post-apartheid era, this English liberal press faced a formidable challenge in reflecting the totality of South Africa’s mixed heritage, particularly 30 million blacks.

Written by a former Argus company executive and retired editor, John Patten, the submission’s brief was “to provide an independent and objective overview of Independent Newspapers (previously the Argus group) from 1960 to 1993. It sought to identify areas in which the company and its staff were either victims or perpetrators of human rights abuses or, either directly or by default, played some part in allowing human rights violations to occur”.33

Featherstone explained that the report recounted the hardships experienced by the company’s editors and staff. It emphasised shortfalls in achievement while expressing regret for failures. But, he said, there were successes in combating human rights abuses during the apartheid years for which the company could be justifiably proud.

The 55-page document provided valuable insights into the way the largest newspaper group in South Africa operated. It was an overview, and not definitive. While it considered mainly the role of the editorial section of the group, the TRC approached the media in its totality, with editorial only one facet of the inquiry. However, Patten’s efforts were
illuminating and it is worthwhile to focus on one specific section that goes to the heart of the problem.

**Collusion with apartheid**

In the submission to the TRC, under the heading, *separate Black Editions [Section 11c]*, Patten said that these had been a sore point with certain black journalists. Although it created jobs for black journalists, and some black journalists liked them, it was an unsatisfactory venture tinged with tokenism. Senior journalist Mathatha Tsedu said the *Rand Daily Mail* had a black edition called Extra, “meaning by inference that blacks were the extra readers”. The *Sunday Times* also had an Extra “which concentrated on lightning strikes and witchcraft stories”. Patten had supported the abolition of an “Extra” edition in *The Pretoria News*, but a subsequent editor had reintroduced a separate “Soccer” edition reflecting blacks’ greater interest in soccer, while the other edition emphasised rugby to suit white readers.

Patten had introduced a Metro edition to *The Mercury* during the 1990s as an attempt to provide a Natal paper catering to black readers wanting to read English. Such an edition had the potential for hiving off as a separate newspaper catering specifically for black interests. A change of ownership in 1993 re-positioned *The Mercury* as an upmarket newspaper, and the Metro edition was abandoned as inappropriate. It was decided then to expand the *Sowetan’s* circulation in Natal to cater for black readers wanting a paper in English.

In summary, there were two ways of looking at special editions for blacks. Some journalists, like Tsedu, regarded them as apartheid editions. Management and other journalists saw them essentially as zoned editions aimed at specialist readerships. There was no suggestion of inferiority or discrimination in news selection; only special provision for specific reader interests in certain sections of the paper. Ian Wyllie, editor at the *Sunday Tribune*, long resisted a special edition for Indian readers in the *Sunday Tribune*. He changed his mind when the *Sunday Times*’s metro edition in Natal started making inroads into the *Sunday Tribune*’s readership in Chatsworth, a predominantly Indian area.

This seemed to show that targeted readers actually supported these editions and sought them out, despite the connotations of apartheid. The argument raged on, with the *Sunday Tribune* subsequently abandoning a special edition for Indian readers, and the *Star* also jettisoning its extra edition. Though differences of opinion are very evident, there was no human rights abuse in the practice, merely a difference in marketing strategy.
Liberals versus liberationists

As if to deflect accusations of human rights abuses, Jon Hobday, editor of the *Saturday Argus* and the *Sunday Argus*, observed that the Argus company was always a very conservative company:

It paid conservatively, it took to innovation conservatively. It was a slow-moving company. To try to class us in the category of pioneers and pace-setters is a mistake. It was not the nature of the company. It was conservative economically. It was conservative in every way. It was an establishment company run by establishment people... but that is not to say we did nothing.35

The confrontations of editors with the government, legal wrangles and court challenges, harassment by senior government officials, warnings from successive authoritarian prime ministers and the constant battle to negotiate a maze of legal hazards and determining the law on an almost daily basis during the 1980s were all well documented and not in dispute. The indifference of the Argus company towards equality for all staff, with career prospects for black and coloured journalists, implied far-reaching bias in agenda setting and compromised the role of the English press in South Africa. It facilitated the complaint that the liberal English language press, just as much as the Afrikaans press, was a “whites only” press.

The role of the newspapers in South Africa, as Wilbur Schramm suggests, reflects the society in which it operated.36 So, when Patten quotes Hobday as saying: “…we should perhaps have recruited, done the process of getting more people of colour into our news rooms earlier”, it may have been the wiser option. The political and social climates, however, were just not favourable to integration. Hobday raises some of the ambiguities involved:

The fact is, I can recall recruitment beginning in the early 1970s, generally in association to boosting soccer coverage. But you must remember, black reporters couldn’t go anywhere. This was still apartheid. You could hire a black reporter, but you couldn’t send him to court, because the magistrate would throw him out. So there were practical problems.37

Certainly, black and coloured were taken on mainly as soccer writers where the white reporters either would not go or it was supposedly unsafe for them to go.38 But to suggest black or coloured reporters would be barred from the courts is inaccurate. The courts were usually filled with black and coloured people, either facing trial or consoling friends or relatives.

In the TRC submission, an unnamed former editor points a finger of blame at the way in which the Argus company evolved and developed:
The fault lies in the fact that we were almost exclusively white, male. WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant], certainly Western-orientated. That was our heritage, that was our system.... It happens that the Western liberal press is virtually the only free press in history and on earth. There isn’t any other ... It is this very press which reports criticisms of themselves. So I think if there is an accusation that we are liberal, that does not require defence. It is a fact of life. And it is probably preferable to any other ideology.39

Did the South African press, and more specifically the major English language press, operate along the Western democratic model? The Afrikaans press was a party political animal, the Government policy was one of authoritarian control and the media was subjected to a battery of laws inconsistent with traditions of a vigorous and free press. Under the authoritarian concept, diversity of views is wasteful and irresponsible, dissent is an annoying nuisance and often subversive, and consensus and standardisation are logical and sensible goals for mass communication.40

This was the objective of the Nationalist government. It was an ideology that the English press did not subscribe to, yet it is wrong to suggest that the Argus company operated under the Western libertarian model of a free press. Hachten concedes the Western press concept is “comparatively rare in today’s world, although many authoritarian governments give it lip service”.41

Whether or not the South African print media in general, and the former Argus company in particular, managed to maintain Western standards of a free press in the face of extreme pressure is largely dependent on political perspectives.

Patten summarises this as the difference between the liberationist black journalists’ view of what role the media should perform or should have performed, and the more traditional liberal view maintained by the editors stressing maximum objectivity and balanced reporting whatever the circumstances:

I believe it is of key significance in considering this report to take note of the two main vantage points from which the issue of human rights abuses under apartheid is being viewed from within Independent Newspapers and in press circles. So fundamental is the division of opinion based on these separate agendas that it can colour the whole field of assessing arguments presented from both sides in this report. Unfortunately, there is little common ground between them in handling the apartheid issues (though the liberals’ view may be quite widely accepted by black journalists under
a full democracy), resulting in a so-far unbridged chasm between the two schools of thought when looking back at many of the fraught issues of those times.42

Patten concluded that the difference could be summarised briefly as the liberals’ view versus the liberationists’ view. The liberals’ view was held generally by white editors and many of their white staff. The liberationists’ view was held generally by black journalists, so it had the added disadvantage of representing a racial divide in the company.

It would be seriously defective, though, to suggest that this split along racial lines within the largest media group in South Africa was simply the result of clashing media ideologies, and a company policy that was more in keeping with British and American traditions of the press. The split was more primal. No Argus company journalist could argue convincingly that traditional freedom and liberty were also extended to journalists who were not white. Whether as crude and petty apartheid policies in the workplace, such as barring “non-white” staff from the company canteen, separate toilets for different racial groups or simply not extending invitations to black journalists to the office Christmas party, to the more esoteric arguments that black journalists were not sufficiently educated for senior editorial positions, the divide was clear and pervasive.

Former Saturday Star columnist Jon Qwelane argued that South Africa’s media owners and operators should be made to explain their “naked collusion with apartheid” to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He argued that “it is not only the manner in which our bosses failed us as journalists which must be investigated and exposed but also the hopelessly indefensible treatment which they gave the news”.43 However, in defence of the Argus company from 1960 to 1993, Patten argued:

Argus company newspapers supported increased political rights for disfranchised groups of colour. It is probable, if individual editors had been asked during much of that period for their view on what political rights blacks should have, that a variety of answers would have been given. It is also probable that most would not have expressed support for a simple transfer of power from whites to blacks. But the question would have been somewhat academic, in that their editorial policies were determined by practical issues of the day.44

Inequity and discrimination

Certainly, a wide range of discriminatory practices within the Argus group extended nationally from Cape Town to Johannesburg and Durban where the major publications were found. Patten found numerous examples of discriminatory practice during the course of his
inquiry. Police raids investigated new staff appointments at the *Daily News* in Durban. Editorial intervention at the *World* and *Ilanga* in Johannesburg, the two biggest black newspapers in the country, meant that black editors submitted to the editorial whims of white directors. The *Cape Herald* was designed as a coloured newspaper, staffed by coloureds and aimed at the coloured market in Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. There was a separate journalists’ cadet course for black journalists because it was felt they could not cope with the demands of the Argus cadet school.

Concluding, Patten listed 24 points marking the history of the Argus company during the most troubled years in both South Africa’s history and the history of its press. Considerations of the commercial viability of the company the need to make profits, to relate especially to core market readers and to attract advertisers placed limitations on how far the Argus Company could go in being a tool against apartheid. It remained first and foremost a newspaper chain and did not see its role as primarily political. This may have blunted its cutting edge in exposing all the wrongs of apartheid, including human rights violations. Apartheid, security and media laws and regulations proscribed or restricted free news coverage of newsworthy, but politically sensitive, subjects. This interfered with the function of a newspaper as a watchdog of the people in an ostensibly open democracy.

Laws enforcing separation of different racial groups in many spheres of life made free access to a full range of news sources more difficult. The laws as such were an interference with human rights, making the company a victim, but the company also made insufficient effort particularly in the earlier years of the period under review – to overcome this obstacle. It was discriminatory in the staff selection process, particularly as the company did not try to make the target market for its newspapers the white community exclusively in spite of its historical roots. Laws prevented black reporters from practising freely in large areas of public life and this was a disincentive to newspapers employing them. In this respect, both the company and black journalists were victims of government-generated human rights abuses.

Besides apartheid, security and media laws, Patten highlights other legislation on politically-sensitive subjects seriously inhibited the company’s newspapers in generating relevant news. The laws included nuclear matters, fuel supplies and transportation, defence matters, police matters, prisons, and even the publication of trade figures with certain countries. These obstacles amounted to a human rights abuse affecting the general public and the newspapers that served them. Journalists were harassed and intimidated, arrested, detained and sometimes prosecuted by police and other agents acting for the government.

Harassment and intimidation were also applied by agents of the liberation struggle, to a degree where property damage, physical injury and even lives were threatened. These actions
by participants in the political struggle for the control of power in South Africa were a gross human rights violation on journalists. The violations even overflowed into harassment and threats from individuals in the general public.

Though objectivity was the aim of most of the company’s newspapers, proper balance to coverage in the political events was not achieved. Imbalance in the racial complements of editorial staffs, judgments made on white perceptions in news identification and news gathering, and a white monopoly of news selection in most sub-editors’ rooms, caused distortion.

In the company’s black newspapers, a reverse situation applied, made more obvious by the open commitment of staffs to the liberation cause. Political developments polarised emotions in society, and some of this rubbed off on journalists, even though they tried to be objective. Black journalists were affected by the many acts of oppression and brutality applied to their black communities.

White journalists were affected by the effects of liberation struggle strategies which included bombs in streets, shops, parking areas and restaurants, land mines on country roads, sport and commercial boycotts, economic sanctions and disinvestment campaigns. All these factors led to human rights abuses on such a scale that journalists themselves were victims of those abuses.

The inherited political situation of enforced racial separation and separate communities led to black and white journalists becoming isolated from, and disinterested in, communities other than their own. With most of the company’s papers mainly white, news coverage concentrated on white political rivalries. Issues affecting blacks were at the heart of many of these rivalries, causing them to be covered, but from the angle of white decision-making. It was only late in the day that the imbalance in this respect was rectified, as liberation movements became centre-stage players in the political drama. To the extent that the newspapers cultivated attention to white political rivalries and overlooked full coverage of black political aspirations and activities, Patten concluded that the company should regret the imbalance that occurred.

There was a lack of commercial incentive to pursue certain black-interest subjects. Advertising support was more evident where white interests were involved. Black readerships generally lagged behind white readership, giving blacks a minority status in the company’s main newspapers. While this reflected market conditions, it was a distortion of the overall national picture, and the newspapers perpetuated that distortion. Though a Press Council had been established to prevent government control of the press, it was set up under duress in the face of government threats. It was often viewed as doing the government’s dirty work for it,
making the industry partly responsible for its own endangered plight, compromised by association with the oppressive government. Not only was it disliked for this role, but it was not representative of the whole South African population.

When editors eventually sought to avoid the restrictions embodied in laws and regulations, many loopholes were found enabling the press to do its job better. Such efforts were only made on any scale during the emergency regulations applied during the latter 1980s. This meant the press languished under laws it could possibly have evaded if efforts had been made earlier. Some editors of smaller newspapers such as *The Daily News*, in Durban, *The Eastern Province Herald*, in Port Elizabeth, and the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, in Kimberley were less willing than others to test the limits of legal restrictions the government imposed on the media. This situation meant some human rights abuses were not addressed when they might have been.

A major problem in assessing culpability on human rights abuses arose from the different agendas of liberal journalists as opposed to liberationists. There was friction over what were considered realistic political rights for disenfranchised groups. Argus company newspapers, while steadfastly opposing apartheid, pursued gradualist goals within white politics for many years before opting for constitutional settlement through negotiation with all representative groups. This led to accusations that it kowtowed to apartheid.

The alternative press showed the Argus Company had to some extent lost touch with the oppressed masses. Participation in government news conferences, briefings, and conducted tours subjected the company’s news gatherers to naked propaganda.

Though this was identified and countered to some extent, it was not always possible to counter-balance such propaganda equally, because of lack of sufficient access and contacts with liberation movements. The company applied the government’s petty apartheid laws on its premises, and this was broken down in some cases only by black disobedience action in the face of abuse from other company employees.

For many years the company’s newspapers followed the practice of publishing the names only of white accident victims, while mentioning black accident victims as statistics. This was discriminatory.

Argus management appeared not to trust black editors with full editorial responsibility for their newspapers. While this was probably done to protect the business from threat of government closure (and some closures did occur), it was a paternalistic practice that caused bitterness among black journalists. Although not dismissive of the problems of white companies and white journalists under an invidious system, Patten’s report in total portrayed a system skewed ruthlessly against black and coloured journalists.
Voices of dissent

The response to John Patten’s report was as quick as it was bitter. More interesting in many ways was the difference between emergent black editors and the recollections of the “Old Guard” white editors from the apartheid years. Even before the report was made public, Harvey Tyson, a prominent Argus editor, rejected accusations of complicity and any need for a public apology. In a public outburst, Tyson asked what gross violations of human rights did South Africa’s English language press commit between 1960 and 1993, then proceeded to answer:

Speaking for myself, I worried throughout all the years of legalised racism about not doing enough as a professional, trying to be a balanced journalist, or enough to help save the oppressed from violations of their rights.

In deflecting the pointing finger of guilt, Tyson argued that journalists had perhaps themselves to blame. Their petty squabbles within the mainly-white English language press were partly the cause of the huge divide between the liberals and the former liberationists. For his part, he did not believe he owed any apologies:

I shall never apologise for a single thing I did as a journalist. I feel no guilt, only pride in the record of the Star, with which I was associated for more than 20 years.

Three former editors of the Argus company John O’Malley, Ian Wyllie, and Michael Green rejected the apology by Independent Newspapers in a statement entitled We Stand By Our Record:

Independent Newspapers, which is based in Ireland, played no role in public affairs in South Africa before 1993, when it bought control of the Argus company and changed the name to Independent Newspapers. It is therefore, in our view, inappropriate that the directors and chief executive of Independent Newspapers should apologise for actions for which they were not responsible.

The triumvirate denied that the conduct of their newspapers was cause for apology to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The English press was the strongest visible and legal critic of government excesses during the period of review.

Shortcomings were perceived as the result of oppressive and restrictive laws introduced by the government “with the express intention of muzzling the press, laws which were opposed and circumvented by our newspapers wherever possible.” And they pointed to
four decades of constantly opposing, criticising and challenging National Party apartheid policies, exposing injustices, cruelties and wrongdoing:

Our newspapers were by no means specifically white-orientated. For the past 40 years they have had a very large number of readers from other sections of the community. This was one of the reasons why we did all we could to employ and advance black editorial staff, though this was often difficult because of the lamentable education policies of the National Party government.  

There were few black journalists who could accept this proposition. More importantly, the claim that these newspapers were not white-oriented because they had large numbers of readers from other sections of the community hardly strengthened the argument.

Rafiq Rohan, political editor at the *Sowetan*, seriously challenged this claim with some personal recollections of his experience as a rising star within the Argus group in the 1980s. Then, he was convicted and jailed as a member of the ANC’s military wing *umkhonto weSizwe* [Spear of the Nation]. Rohan was sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment on Robben Island and says he did not receive a single message of support from his employer, *Post*, a division of Natal Newspapers:

My golden boy status came crumbling down in the eyes of my white overlord at Natal Newspapers. From star status, I became a source of huge embarrassment to the bosses. During my time in prison, while awaiting trial, my colleagues at Post-Natal were forbidden by the editor to visit me. I was allowed visitors only on Mondays and Thursdays and staff were warned not to visit me during working hours. Working hours were the only time I was allowed visitors. Staff were not amused. Only after they had written a stinging letter to my editor, did he shamefacedly put in an appearance at the prison.  

Rohan said his release from prison in 1991 further tested the good faith of the Argus Group and gave clear indications why most black journalists regarded it as supine during the apartheid years. He did not get his job back. As Rohan told the TRC: “The irony of it all was that my avowed enemy at the time, the apartheid state, had seen fit to pardon me yet my own company had seen fit to put me back on trial!”

The deputy editor of *The Star*, Rex Gibson, wrote a leader page article stating that if it were up to him to decide, he would banish Rohan to a back room “where he would not be able to tamper with the news”. Rohan’s attack on the Argus Group’s record and the way it operated during the apartheid years was not unique. As far as black journalists were
concerned it was always a “white” employer and the market was clearly white-orientated, even if it sometimes provoked the more extreme elements of the Government.

The aftermath of TRC

In the late 1990s, the Government was apprehensive that the very fabric of society in the emerging democracy in South Africa would be threatened by a combination of extreme social, economic and political problems. These genuine fears were underpinned by massive socio-economic problems facing the Government of National Unity.

Such massive difficulties could ultimately undermine the fragile democracy if the ruling African National Congress failed to deliver a better life for its millions of supporters. The role of the national media was closely linked to how this problem could be resolved. This was the sort of rationale used by Nelson Mandela, as when he established a commission of inquiry in March, 1998, to investigate leaks. It was alleged that the government faced possible revolt, and that unnamed sources plotted to destabilise and eventually overthrow it. This, however, was later proved untrue.

At a news conference in July, 1997, Mbeki said it was “quite clear that if corruption in the police, the judicial system, the prisons services, and the Department of Home Affairs is not stopped, you could have a collapse of the entire democratic system”. He warned that crime was halting investor confidence and damaging the economy. Pointing to evidence of extensive corruption in the police and criminal justice systems, he contended that greed was not the cause of the problem; rather, a lack of commitment to a democratic South Africa. Major crime syndicates included security force members from the apartheid era. Mbeki painted a chilling vision of a struggling democracy in crisis and almost on its knees. This was a major problem not only for the Government, but it also has serious ramifications for the role of the national media in a time of crisis. The media was independently owned, guarded its independence jealously and pursued a vigorous watch on government.

For the new black government, it was too vigorous. Constant negative press was unhelpful and undermined government initiatives to speed up social change. More than that, the vigorous watchdog role of the press stirred accusations that it was a media campaign designed to embarrass and undermine the black government by showing it was unable to govern.

Under normal circumstances, there would have been nothing wrong with this approach. It is traditional of the Western media in developed democracies. The response from the South African press was that it was simply doing its job. The South African Government, though, accused the national media of pursuing a hidden agenda of undermining the new government. The plea was clearly for some sort of developmental media system but without the onerous
burden of censorship or government restraint. There were as many problems, though, with adopting a developmental media framework that aimed to work towards some loosely defined national interest as there was pursuing a vigorous Western libertarian media approach.

Summary

Sharp differences between the national press and the new black Government of National Unity escalated almost immediately with high-profile ANC leaders accusing the press of maintaining a hidden agenda by working against the aims of the new government. Chapter Four has revisited the simmering conflict between the ANC-led government and the white-dominated media. Attacks on the press by Nelson Mandela and his successor Thabo Mbeki accused the national press of being bitter, conservative and out of touch with black society.

The ANC government was urging a more compliant and sympathetic national press, which reflected its inability to cope with fiercely critical, sharp scrutiny.

Mandela angered both black and white journalists by accusing newspaper owners of manipulating and using black journalists to give greater credibility to their attacks on the government and to avoid charges of racism. The reaction was predictable with the South African National Editors’ Forum rejecting the charges. But the government maintained its line that the media remained in the hands of conservative whites who found it difficult to reconcile themselves with the fact that a black democratic movement had destroyed white supremacy.

This chapter has also focused briefly on the Truth and Reconciliation’s inquiry into the media and the submission from Independent Newspapers to the inquiry expressing regret for any failures, shortcomings or omissions by the company during the apartheid years.

A group of former editors opposed and criticised the apology from Independent Newspapers chief executive Jerry Featherstone and said they had nothing to apologise for during their years as editors of the Argus publications.

This chapter highlights the sharp distinctions between the government, journalists and media companies about the role of the press in an emerging democracy, the perceived racist bias of the national press, and the difficulties in trying to transform the landscape to what Mandela refers to as “more representative of the black majority, both in ownership and staffing”. And as a consequence, Thabo Mbeki’s veiled threat to the media to change or be changed.

In the following chapter, different media systems in operation around the world are considered. The objective is to canvass lessons from the most workable systems and to consider its effects as suitable for new directions in the South African press.
Notes for Chapter Four


5. Ibid, p. 28.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


20. Siluma, Mike, quoted in Mail & Guardian, November 1, 1996,

21. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Mail & Guardian, October 18, 1996, Watchdog or Pussycat? quoting the Rev Frank Chikane’s address to the Commonwealth Press Union meeting of editors.


26. The Star November 16, 1996. This matter also received extensive national press coverage.

27. SAPA, local wire service report, November 15, 1996.

28. Explanatory Notes: Vlakplaas was a farm, seven kilometres from Erasmia, on the Schurveberg road west of Pretoria which had been hired by the South African police in 1978. The farm's southern border is the Hennops River. There was an old farm house with an outbuilding, a garage, and two domestic houses. The farm was used to convert ANC/MK soldiers into police informants. These informants were called 'askaris', a Swahili word meaning 'black soldier'. The task of the askaris was to mix with the population at public places such as "shebeens" (illegal taverns), bus stops, railway stations, and taxi ranks in order to locate other members of the ANC to be arrested (and sometimes killed and tortured) by the police. [reference: Dirk Coetzee; The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa, Editors: Anthony Minnaar, Ian Liebenberg, Charl Schutte, (1994) Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria.

The Caprivi invasion refers to illegal South African army intervention and was reported extensively in the Mail & Guardian which first broke the story.

29. Mail & Guardian comment, November 16, 1996.


31. Ibid.


34. Tsedu, Mathata, the Star, January 7, 1997.


38. The author recalls personal experience of this because he was one of the “reporters of colour” employed to cover soccer matches in the late 1970s.


45. The Immorality Act barred love across the colour line, the Group Areas Act of 1950 and amendments determined residential areas for various race groups, the Land and Population Registration Act, Separate Amenities Act, various influx control measures, the Urban Areas Act with extensions and amendments, even the Extension of University Education Act 1959, contrived to keep the various racial groups distinctly apart.

46. The apartheid laws worked either singularly or in combination to make reporting difficult. For example: A black reporter covering the National Football League would be covering a white soccer match being played at a stadium in a white area (Group Areas Act) and would be allowed to attend. But sitting in the press box in the area demarcated for whites (Separate Amenities Act) would be difficult. Attending the post-match briefings would be even more difficult, especially if there was entertainment, alcohol or a celebration.

47. Tyson, Harvey, Former Editor-in-chief tells it like it is, the *Star*, March 1997.

48. Ibid.

49. *We stand by our record*, a statement by group of five former Argus editors, March, 1997.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.


54. Ibid.


**Online Resources:**

Freedom of Expression Institute, South Africa: [http://wn.apc.org/fxi/](http://wn.apc.org/fxi/)

Independent Online archives: [www.inc.co.za/online/news/](http://www.inc.co.za/online/news/)

Mail&Guardian Online archives: [www.mg.co.za/mg/](http://www.mg.co.za/mg/)


The Argus Homepage: [www.inc.co.za/online/cape-argus/](http://www.inc.co.za/online/cape-argus/)

The Star internet edition: [www.inc.co.za/online/star/](http://www.inc.co.za/online/star/)


Rhodes University, Department of Journalism, resources online: [http://journ.ru.ac.za/](http://journ.ru.ac.za/)

Stellenbosch, University, Journalism Department: [http://www.sun.ac.za/journalism/](http://www.sun.ac.za/journalism/)
CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARDS A FREE PRESS

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to consider a variety of media systems and ideologies in practice and to consider whether there is a way to facilitate a workable solution to find new directions for the press in post-apartheid South Africa. This chapter also reviews sharp criticism from senior ANC-government members who accused the press of orchestrating a hidden agenda to destabilise the fragile new government, and responses from sections of the print media accusing the government of trying to nobble the press.

Authoritarian controls or developmental approach

The hallmark of the authoritarian concept of the press is that it is strictly controlled by the government. The authoritarian model seems to be the preferred policy of Third World countries and totalitarian regimes to control the flow of information and regulate the operations of the national press for what is considered to be “in the national interest” – as was the case with the National Party government that was in control in South Africa from 1948 to 1993.

Hachten [1994] found that the basic principle of authoritarianism was quite simple: the press was always subject to the direct or implied control of the state or sovereign. A printing press or a broadcasting facility cannot be used to challenge, criticise, or in any way undermine the ruler. The press functions from the top down: the king or ruler decides what shall be published because truth (and information) was essentially a monopoly of those in authority.

The authoritarian theory can be traced to the mid 15th Century and Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type which made printing possible. The rulers had a monopoly over the printing press virtually from inception, and press freedoms were won only after centuries of struggle. It was a logical extension of the theory by which monarchs ruled by divine right or absolute power.

Merrill [1991] considers the authoritarian model, first presented in 1956 by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in *Four Theories of the Press*, has not faded with the waning of monarchies. Authoritarianism continues to exist in countries where strong rulers wield power. And, unpalatable as it is to the Western model of the press, Hachten concedes that there is much in Western political philosophy that stresses the central importance of authority in political theory:
From Plato’s *Republic* through Hobbes’s *Leviathan* to Hegel and Marx, the all-powerful state is given both the right and duty to protect itself in any way necessary for its survival.²

John Stuart Mill, a fierce defender of a libertarian press and an advocate of virtually absolute freedom of thought and discussion in his essay *On Liberty*, first published in 1859, also seems to suggest limited controls over the press:

The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.³

In the case of the South African press, with its history of media repression, it remains an option in the new democratic South Africa to seek ways in which the national press can be made to function in a way that is more supportive of national security and survival. If it is the aim of the national press to charge ahead in an adversarial way, then perhaps the Government can look at ways in which the national media can function responsibly without infringing the provisions and guarantees of freedom of information nor threaten the slow process of nation building, reconstruction and development.

There are options other than restrictive measures which can be pursued to sway the press in a different direction without it having to be a sycophantic or a feeble mouthpiece of the government. This could include improvements in the way that the government communicates with the press, enabling free and easy access to government information, policies and ambitions. It could also include measures whereby the press and government can find some balance for working in the national interest without the need for censorship or a compliant press. Among other options, the press can swiftly correct mistakes and work towards reducing claims of bias, distortion, implementing more stringent quality control to improve the standard of journalism generally and more specifically providing more training and education for journalists.

The Western-libertarian model of the press is not without shortcomings and there is a long history of basic criticisms against the near monopolisation of information by the major Western news services. This criticism does not only come from developing nations where governments try to fulfil national, social, political and economic goals and where differences in ideology exist on the roles and functions of the media in society.⁴
The criticism also comes from developed nations concerned with the imbalance in the cross-flow of information and the hurdles faced by journalists reporting from developing countries where they are impeded by a lack of access to government, censorship and restrictions of various sorts. The pleas for a new world information order are not new. However, it is a call that has since fallen from favour. The developmental journalism theory, largely denounced by the West, which holds that the media has a role to play in national development, stemmed from the New World Information Order debates of the 1960s. It is a theory that failed to live up to its expectations and there is general disappointment especially from Third World countries where development-orientated news has erroneously been equated with government-controlled news. However, some aspects of the developmental journalism theory could have a positive impact on the way journalism is practised in the new South Africa will be considered in the final chapter.

Media theorists also have been challenged by the question of what constitutes the ideal Press-State relationship. Siebert et al, in *Four Theories of the Press*, preferred what they described as the Social Responsibility theory of the press although they concede that their initial four theories are in fact just derivatives of two basic theories: the Authoritarian, and by extension the Communist theory; and the Libertarian theory, and its extension, the theory of Social Responsibility. Theodore Peterson [1953] says briefly the social responsibility theory has as its major premise that “freedom carries concomitant obligations”. John Merrill [1983] argues that uneasiness about the growing power of media owners and managers to control information, much as the authoritarian rulers had done in Gutenberg’s day, led Siebert, Peterson and Schramm to the social responsibility theory.

Social responsibility differs from its roots in that the function of the press is to provide a medium for discussion of conflict, whereas under libertarianism the press was to check on government. And whereas the libertarian theory provides that the media are available to all who have the economic means to use them, social responsibility theory holds that everyone with something to say has the right to use the media. A third distinction between the two theories is that a socially responsible press will be controlled by community opinion, consumer action, and professional ethics, whereas libertarianism relies on the free marketplace of ideas for its correction.  

The social responsibility theory implies recognition by the media that it must perform a public service to warrant its existence. It is a theory that draws much of its roots from a report published in the United States by the Commission on Freedom of the Press under the chairmanship of Robert Hutchins, of the University of Chicago. The Hutchins Commission as it became known in 1947, studied the American press and assessed articles for sensationalism and the extent of unfair reporting.
The Hutchins Commission found that because of the pervasive impact of the media, it had gone beyond such libertarian concepts as the search for truth and the right to access to information so the Commission determined that “the importance of the press in modern society makes it absolutely necessary that an obligation of social responsibility be imposed on the Communications media”. The Commission demanded that the press not only present the facts in a meaningful context but that it should also disclose the “truth behind the facts”. Objective facts were not enough, the Commission found. Reporters also had to find out what lay behind them and to present the truth of what they had discovered by closer scrutiny and analysis.

The Hutchins Commission’s plea in 1947 is the plea of the new South African government – that reporters not take cheap shots at a number of serious socio-economic problems facing the government and which they have little hope of rectifying over many years and the plea is that the media present these problems in a meaningful context rather than in a sensationalist, muckraking way or in a way that threatens the national interest.

Merrill says in recent years many Third World countries have gravitated towards “a kind of press responsibility concept which would increasingly make journalism a co-operating partner with the governments for the sake of national progress and development”. It is a concept which most Western journalists view with caution and suspicion and which they reject as threatening the free flow of communication and information. Since its first publication in 1956, *Four Theories of the Press* has been an influential yardstick in assessing media models. It is now quite dated and has been revised by other media theorists. Among them, Ralph Loewenstein [1979] who finds the Siebert, Peterson and Schramm typology inflexible. Loewenstein revised the social responsibility theory to become the social-libertarian theory “to be rid of the ambiguity in the original term and to reflect more readily the roots of this theory in libertarianism. The new term retains the sense that some regulation of the media may be required to ensure public benefit”.

While Ralph Loewenstein and John Merrill tinkered with the four-theory typology and offered refinements of the original model, it was Hachten [1981] who offered the first significant changes to the four theories of the press. Hachten proposed a five-concept typology ie. Authoritarian concept, Western concept, Communist concept, Revolutionary concept and the Developmental concept. Hachten holds that “the differing perceptions about the nature and role of journalism and mass communication are rooted in divergent political systems and historical traditions” and they are broadly reflected in these five categories. He combined libertarianism and social responsibility into what he called the Western concept and he added two more concepts viz. the Developmental and the Revolutionary (see below).
In the context of future options for the South African media in an emerging democracy, Hachten’s Western concept and also his Developmental concept offer some directions. In the Western concept, Hachten combines the theory of social responsibility with libertarianism and he concedes that only a handful of Western nations meet the criteria although many pay lip service to the concept. The Western concept, Hachten said, holds most strongly that a government – any government – should not interfere in the process of collecting and disseminating news.

The press, in theory, must be independent of authority, and of course, exist outside of government and be well protected by law and custom from arbitrary government interference. And so an independent press usually means one situated in a free enterprise capitalist economy, enjoying the same amount of autonomy as other private business enterprises.9

Hachten concedes the Western news media are not without their shortcomings – commercialism, sensationalism, concentration of ownership, triviality, and entertainment orientation and he admits that the Western media is not immune from pressure within its own governments. He sees some modification of the Western concepts falling under the umbrella of social responsibility and a view that the media have clear obligations of public service that transcends profits.10

Hachten’s Western concept of the press is a distinct deviation from the traditional authoritarian controls that developed and evolved during the rise of democracies in Europe and North America. An important facet of the Western model is the right to talk politics, the right to criticise the government without fear of retribution, censorship or harassment. It subscribes to the self-righting principle, the free marketplace of ideas first championed by John Milton and others and Hachten lists five characteristics of a free and independent press that is found in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Norway, Denmark, Austria, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Switzerland and Japan. They are:

1. A system of law that provides meaningful protection to individual civil liberties and property rights;
2. High levels of per capita income, education and literacy;
3. Governance by constitutional parliamentary democracy or at least with legitimate political oppositions;
4. Sufficient capital or private enterprise to support media of news communication;
5. An established tradition of independent journalism.
By this definition, the press in South Africa meets all the criteria of the Western concept of the press. But it is argued that perhaps with the societal complexities and the diversity of socio-economic and political problems facing the emerging nation, it is definitely the desirable goal but in the interim it can hardly be the preferred option. Is it fair, for example, for an ANC government to allow the Afrikaner press to continue as it did before, and in doing so undermine and destabilise the efforts of the government or would the preferred option be for the government to step in and be decisive by setting temporary parameters?

In answering this question on the future direction of the South African press, it would be prudent to consider the merits or otherwise of press freedom as it operates in democratic countries such as England, Canada, Australia and the United States where there is a long history of freedom of the press. And by focusing on the peculiarities of the *pancasila* model of Indonesia, there are lessons to be learned from a national media that is controlled and operates within strict government guidelines.

**Liberty of the press**

Under the Western or libertarian system, even with its guarantees of non-intervention by government in the free flow of information, it is not unusual to find serious infringements on the liberty of the press in some highly democratised countries. We should view the theories of the press along a continuous line with authoritarian controls at one end and the free expression libertarian model at the other extreme with various shades in between.

For instance, Canada is a highly democratised country with a Western model that guarantees freedom of the press. Eaman [1987] pointed out that despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press, there are in fact many constraints on freedom of speech in Canada. He points out that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the new Canadian Constitution states that the fundamental rights of all Canadians include “Freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including the freedom of the press and other media of communications” (Canada Act, 1982). This ostensibly gives Canadians the same written guarantee that the Americans acquired in 1791 by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which declared that ... “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.” He says:

But it is not enough, of course, simply to have such words on paper. We need to look beyond the letter of the law to the legal and political reality. After all, Section 25 of the Constitution of the [former] Soviet Union states that “the citizens of the USSR are guaranteed by law (a). freedom of speech and (b). freedom of the press”. The reality in Canada is that
freedom of speech and of the press is subject to a number of constraints. This does not entail that such freedoms do not exist, but it does mean that they are not regarded as absolute.11

In Australia also, freedom of the press operates by convention rather than constitutional guarantees. Australia has a highly developed Western-style libertarian media where there is robust investigation and criticism of the government.

Freedom of the press is cherished as a symbol of a free and open democratic society yet in recent years even the Australian government has intervened, for example, to refuse entry to persons whose views it finds offensive or contrary. Among those who were refused entry to Australia were the Palestine Liberation Organisation chairman Yasser Arafat (June 23, 1997), the controversial British historian David Irving (November 8, 1996), Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams (November 8, 1996) and former Black Panther Lorenzo Kom’Boa Ervin (July 8, 1997).

We turn to Britain, with a history and tradition of fearless journalism and a commitment to freedom of communication. The noted media commentator and the former editor of *The Sunday Times*, Harold Evans, challenges the existence of a free press in Britain – and by implication, in other democracies.12

Evans concedes there are certain freedoms in the UK which are guaranteed by convention in what he terms “the half-free press” and he makes a stand for almost unfettered freedom of publication and he opposes the impediments of prior restraint, based mainly on the situation in the United States where freedom of the press is guaranteed under the First Amendment of the American constitution. In Britain, as in Australia, freedom of the press is not guaranteed by a Bill of Rights or the constitution but operates with some success by convention. Evans seems almost jealous of US press freedoms by comparison.

But constitutional guarantees of press freedom do not necessarily mean that freedom actually exists and, conversely, that there may be freedom of the press without constitutional guarantees. Even under first amendment guarantees, the American press remains subject to a variety of State and Federal laws.13 Constraints on freedom of the press in Britain which sit uneasily with Evans include the rules of contempt of court, the cry of sub judice:

There are certainly exaggerated ideas about our powers … we must keep within the laws of libel, the law of trespass, of slander, of confidence of copyright, of contempt of court, of Parliamentary privilege and the bureaucrats of the all-purpose chastity belt, the Official Secrets Act.14

Evans makes a case for the *Washington Post*’s investigations that subsequently led to the Watergate scandal. Under the constraints of British law, Evans would have been unable to
put the scandal on the national agenda and he makes a case for the abolition of civil contempt laws and relaxing the straitjacket of sub judice.

In Britain, at the point of litigation, fair comment ceases at the risk of prejudicing fair trial: “Once a writ is issued there must be no reporting of fact, according to the Law Lords, because it might prejudice the issues.” Evans indicates the wide gap in but two legal areas between the freedom of the press in the US and the half-free press in Britain.

John Keane traces the historical basis for the freedom of the press in Britain. The landmarks of the British struggle for press freedom commenced with the English Revolution running through to the works of Milton, Locke and Mill, Erskine’s defence of Tom Paine, charged with seditious libel, and continued with the collapse of the licensing system, cheap and portable printing presses and the expiry of the Regulation of Printing Act in 1694, which led to the publication of the Daily Courant in 1702 as the first daily newspaper.

Keane identifies four basic justifications for press freedom in Britain:

1. the theological approach expounded most eloquently by John Milton’s Areopagitica;
2. the idea that the conduct of the press should be guided by the rights of individuals as outlined by John Locke;
3. the theory of utilitarianism viewed state censorship of public opinion as a licence for despotism and as contrary to the principle of maximising the happiness of the governed as espoused in the writings of William Godwin and James Mill;
4. a fourth defence of liberty of the press is guided by attaining truth through unrestricted public discussion among citizens. Some of this concept is contained in the writings of J.B. Priestley and Leonard Busher.

Evans embraces the objectives of the British model of press freedom but goes a step further than the legacy bequeathed by Milton, Locke and Mill in defence of “the public’s right to know”. Evans agrees free expression is a natural right for human dignity and happiness but argues it is not enough. The ethic is too much centred on the rights of free speech which was alright in the historical context but it is too much concerned with the individual’s opinion.

Evans describes it as “more invective than investigative”. Lord Windlesham, however, suggests “there are evident similarities between people who work in the media and people who work in politics”. He argues that the political role and the journalists’ role are interdependent, with the balance between them being a matter of fundamental concern to all practitioners in the communications environment.

He believes the state of the press in the UK is maintained in freedom and although there is at times conflict between the media and government, it is not “by adherence to any
ideological standard but by a shifting balance of conflicting interests”. All have equal access to the media and are regularly briefed by party headquarters and the Parliamentary lobby. While discussion must take place and public debate must be allowed to develop in a democracy as we understand it, Windlesham suggests ultimately journalists and politicians are on the approach that fits in snugly with Evans’ description of the “half-free” press.

The press and politics may feed off each other in the public’s interest but the role of the press in a democracy is to inform, interrogate and keep the government clean, not to pander to government ideology. Windlesham suggests a vigorous exchange between the media is necessary and desirable Keane’s fourth justification for freedom of the press ie. that the press is guided by the idea of attaining truth through unrestricted public debate but he appears “soft” on the idea that state censorship of public opinion is license for despotism and contrary to the principle of maximising the happiness of the governed.

He raises the question of media impartiality and agenda setting in the context of private ownership and the suggestion hangs that in criticism of the government, freedom of the press could reflect freedom of the publishing owner to publish or pursue individual interests. And he poses the question: Does the press, I wonder, have any responsibilities towards Government as distinct from the community? The inference here seems that an unfettered press as guaranteed by the constitution of the United States would not sit very well with Lord Windlesham, who appears willing to concede the public has a right to know. It’s just a case of how much they should be allowed to know and in whose interest.

Graham, the publisher of The Washington Post, champions the cause of a free press as it exists in the United States but in the Guildhall Lectures on freedom of speech she makes the important distinction that the British parliament has several mechanisms in place whereby the government can be called to account, even ultimately be dismissed – there is Question Time in Parliament, and there is a history of official inquiries. The contrast between the British and the American idea of freedom of the press is grounded in two very different concepts of democratic government. The British system has quick and conclusive ways to expose and deal with the sins and errors of Ministers. The burden of inquiry does not fall too heavily on the press. Under the US system this is not the case. Power is entrusted to officials for fixed terms.

Graham defends British claims that the American press should be much more discreet and tractable because “... unbridled freedom which we assert can easily become a licence to distort events, destroy reputations, and inflame public opinion recklessly”.

The former United States president, Richard Nixon would never have been impeached if this was the case. The Washington Post publisher describes the essential
function of the American press as “to probe, to ask inconvenient questions, to report fully and fairly what is going on, and thus to keep the government accountable. It is an adversary system ... less efficient than it ought to be. But it is a necessary job and one which could not be performed if the press in America were subject to the constraints which our colleagues (in the UK) must operate”.23

The role of the press under the British system aims at exactly the same virtues espoused by Graham. It is what the media in the UK and Australia, for that matter, have always aimed at. Whether they do it more or less successfully because the Americans have constitutional guarantees on the right to publish, is another matter. The liberty of communication is but one of a great diversity of liberties.

While the Americans can be accused of conducting trials by publicity in the media and prejudicing an accused’s right to a fair trial (consider here the O. J. Simpson case as an example), under the British constraints of sub judice and contempt of court lurks Harold Evans’ gripe of a “half-free British press”. But the problem of a free press versus a fair trial has, as Graham describes, “the ring of a genuine constitutional dilemma, a head-on collision between two fundamental tenets of our free society”. Without the free and probing press, the events and import of Watergate would, in all probability, never have been revealed.

If any lesson has emerged from the turmoil and tragedy so far, it is that the press in America should be more free, not less. More vigorous and more probing. More alert to its larger responsibilities – and less easily satisfied with its own performance, says Graham. Of course, there is no way of telling but there is more chance than not that corruption on the scale of Watergate would sooner or later have been discovered had it occurred in Britain, whatever the model of press freedom because things have a habit of coming out – especially when loyalties are strained.

**Freedom of the press revisited**

Freedom of the press at its most basic level is the right to gather and publish details, information or comment without fear of punishment and restrictions or government controls.

It can apply to the print media as well as television and radio, magazines, books, pamphlets and a range of information materials. The issue of censorship is closely related to matters affecting freedom of the press. Governments can [and often do] restrict publication or dissemination of information by censorship. It usually works in two ways, (a) by prior restraint, whereby the press is restrained from publishing specific material and (b) by punishing those who publish material considered to be libellous, seditious or obscene.
In the United States, and in most democratic countries, prior restraint is rare. and any restraints on the freedom of the press are vigorously challenged. Freedom of the press is guaranteed and protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution. It states that “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press”. It is a restraint on the federal Government that was made binding on the state governments by a Supreme Court interpretation of the 14th Amendment. Even with press freedom guaranteed under the US Constitution, the right to publish is not absolute in the United States.

There are restrictions on matters that affect national security, obscenity and indecency, school textbooks and libraries and restraints on the mass media of communications. The US Congress has passed many laws over the years deemed to be “in the public interest” that infringed or restricted freedom of the press despite the provisions of the First Amendment that was first ratified as part of a Bill of Rights in 1791. Academics remain challenged by aspects of the First Amendment and articulate a vision for the future where the First Amendment remains important, but no more important than other rights. And political leaders regularly put forward proposals that seek to amend the First Amendment or would, for example, censor the Internet, or decide what television programs should be watched. Among ordinary citizens too, there is unease about speech that is too free.

Donna Demac [1998] finds two centuries after its ratification, the First Amendment is under threat. Huge libel awards and other forms of litigation, Demac finds, are weakening the inclination of the press to carry out its watchdog function. Demac says:

Courts often consider press coverage to be inimical to the goal of fair trials. The federal Government and the Pentagon want to control what journalists report during military conflicts. The country’s youngest journalists – that still in school – are often denied the very rights they are taught about in civics classes. To make matters worse, the American public seems to have developed a suspicion of the press that breeds tolerance of disturbing developments.24

Demac says the American press certainly bears some responsibility for these attitudes that show an erosion of public support of the First Amendment that has reached “alarming levels”. She blames a tendency towards sensationalism, a rush to report unsubstantiated statements and other forms of sloppy reporting that continue to weaken the relationship between the press and the public.

The media should be – and routinely are – taken to task for their shortcomings and lack of accountability. Yet it should be kept in mind that freedom of the press does not require the press to carry out its duties flawlessly. Intimidating reporters and editors with lawsuits and
government restrictions will not improve the quality of journalism. Such actions, she says, would only serve to make the press more timid, which in the end will work to the detriment of everyone in a democratic society. Freedom of the press is one of the grand themes of American liberty. The ability to report on government behaviour and contemporary events without fear of official censorship or retribution is indispensable to democratic self-government.\textsuperscript{25}

However, levels of intervention, or censorship, differ across countries and remain essentially a political decision dependent on the level of political freedom of the citizens. There is no denying that there are instances where public debate can lead to conflict, national instability, or security issues that place the national interest at risk that could require some intervention in the dissemination of information to the public.

The levels of intervention are what matters and gives cause for concern in some countries. What works in one society is not necessarily beneficial in all societies. So, it is not only the claim of Asian nations such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia who proclaim that the Western model of the press is not a suitable model for them, it is also the claim of African nations where the imperative is to reduce poverty and hunger before freedom of the press. The Western model has its faults. The Asian approach of control and censorship also has its faults. For the South African media, there is a unique window of opportunity to reshape the way in which the press can operate by using as a yardstick the prevailing media systems in other countries.

**A developmental approach**

Gordon Jackson [1993] offers a detailed and comprehensive analysis which he describes as rewriting the map for the new South African press and in deciding what kind of approach the post-apartheid press would have to contend with and he suggests newspapers will be called upon “to draw maps that differ as their land continues to change” and this must also be seen against the background of the ground rules by which the authorities will allow them to operate.\textsuperscript{26}

Jackson looks to the major press theories, authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet Communist styles as well as developmental journalism. In assessing the future of the South African media, of the five systems, Jackson immediately rules out as unsuitable the libertarian system and the Soviet Communist style “because each has minimal prospects of being embraced”, the authoritarian, social responsibility and the developmental modes appear to have more prospects of being embraced.\textsuperscript{27}

Jackson suggests one of the three models may be accepted yet it may even be a combination of the three that is preferred. This is much in accordance with the views of Guy
Berger who also suggested a combination of media systems can be the answer to the future directions of the South African media. Jackson maintains that the system that will actually emerge will correlate very closely with the kind of political changes that occur. He says:

A black government might also promote developmental journalism, seeking to use the press with some level of compulsion to advance government policies, especially on economic, racial, or ethnic issues. Because of South Africa’s apartheid history, a black government might well forbid the media from carrying racist material, however that might be defined. Proactively, the government might implement subsidies to benefit some financially weaker newspapers.28

He feels that the developmental approach will have little chance of success although it may be the plan of the government to seek to use the press with some sort of compulsion to advance government policies, especially on racial and ethnic issues or economic matters. This is quite tangible because the new government does not own its own newspapers nor does it have a sympathetic media such as benefited the National Party.

However, there is a strong and well established tradition in the mainstream press of independent journalism and a developmental approach will militate against the aspirations of the press as well as interfering in the process of freedom of speech. The press is likely to cling to the social responsibility approach for as long as possible and Jackson maintains this is the correct approach. But he concedes it is not to suggest that the social responsibility model has served South Africa flawlessly in the past and should continue unchanged in the future.

The point here, however, is that despite the South African press’s evident and ample shortcomings, whether in the mainstream or alternative segments, developmental journalism as a whole offers little to redress these weaknesses. Elements of developmental journalism are indeed likely to be incorporated into tomorrow’s press and ought to be welcomed. But any future government that decreed this approach to be the marching orders for the press would not only be misguided but also meet intense resistance.29

Jackson points out that only the most naive would expect South Africa to move rapidly and smoothly towards a markedly more open and democratic society. He says:

Not only is that unlikely to occur soon, but the press is equally unlikely in the near future to enjoy the freedoms typically marking most Western societies. The press is thus likely to function under a hybrid model, largely, influenced by the tenets of the social responsibility approach but
adapted to South Africa’s realities. For the country is itself a strange hybrid, with a mix of First World and Third World components. Accordingly, its press system reflects the tensions of many papers aspiring to follow the social responsibility system while operating in a clearly pre-democratic society. [This was written in 1993]… One crucial factor underlies how the exact mix of these three models will take shape. Will the press be regarded – by the government, the public, and perhaps the press itself – as primarily a First World or a Third World institution.30

The question is then how can one expect to operate the media by First World standards in a Third World society? Jackson answers by saying:

When it comes to the press, however, it seems the editors and journalists desperately hope that they can maintain what has primarily been a First World model, knowing that newspapers might increasingly operate as if they were running according to Third World standards… If those in the press conceded that it was indeed changing into a Third World institution, it would be virtually impossible to adhere to its previous standards. Worst still, if editors openly acknowledged that their papers could be evaluated to Third World standards, that would open the way to, and even legitimise, a wide range of government anti-press actions, Government officials could say: ‘We always said you people in the press had unrealistic expectations, now that you’ve admitted our country’s Third World needs and special circumstances, these are the ways we all need to work together for the national good.31

Jackson admits such a development is not only a logical step but it would seriously curtail independent journalism in South Africa. This was a valid observation before the historic political transformation in 1994, but with the benefit of hindsight and ten years later it is clear that the press in South Africa did not slip into the mould of a Third World media operating in a Third World environment. Despite its many failures and shortcomings in the post-apartheid era, the national press has struggled yet continued to maintain its role as a public watchdog. And in answer to Jackson’s question, the post-apartheid press is regarded primarily as a First World institution that struggles with a government that views its actions with suspicion. The mainstream press, bolstered by the provisions of the Constitution, operates independently without direct government intervention. At times the relationship between the government and the press has been fragile and strained but there is no threat of censorship or intervention by a dissatisfied government.
The Indonesian press model of a developmental media system during the Soeharto era may hold some lessons for the press in the emerging “new South Africa”. The noble aspirations of a press that was forced to operate under strict government guidelines determined by the national interest was a system flawed in its execution. However, it evolved from a developmental into an authoritarian model that served to hide government excesses and was forced to cover up graft and corruption under the rule of President Soeharto.

Backed by the powerful military, Soeharto established his New Order regime through which he tolerated little dissent in the pursuit of political stability and economic growth. Among the significant changes included were changes to the national press system and the introduction of the philosophy-driven *pancasila* press.  

The five tenets of *pancasila* are:

1. Belief in the one and only God: this principle of Pancasila confirms the Indonesian people’s belief that God does exist and it is embodied in Article 29, section 1 of the 1945 Constitution.

2. Just and civilised humanity: This principle requires that human beings be treated with due regard to their dignity as God’s creatures.

3. The unity of Indonesia: This principle embodies the concept of nationalism, of love for one’s nation and motherland.

4. Democracy guided by inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representatives: This principle embodies decision making through consensus and with a deep sense of responsibility.

5. Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia: This principle calls for the equitable spread of welfare to the entire population.

The role of the national press is central to the aims of *pancasila*. The principle of pancasila democracy is the ideology of the State and the life philosophy of the Indonesian people. This was a shift towards a unique and radically different press system. It was also a major element in the process of nation building. Soeharto described the role of the press as an important institution since the beginning of independence and he viewed the press as having an integral role to play in developing Indonesian society, the nation and State. At a National Day address in 1988, Soeharto explained:

The press has an important role to assist in managing this nation in all its complexity through the dissemination of news, opinions, ideas, grievances, and hopes to the masses. In other words, without the national press we will be living in a restricted, ignorant environment, knowing only about
ourselves. It is in this respect that the press has a role to play in helping build and preserve our unity and cohesion as a nation.\textsuperscript{33}

Soeharto warned that a successful press would accelerate efforts to achieve national targets while a press which did not achieve its role would “no doubt delay the attainment of identified targets” and he urged the national press to adhere to and to support the slogan “positive interaction between the press, the government and the people”.\textsuperscript{34}

Explaining the role of the media in Indonesia, Soeharto commented just before the elections of March 1997 that there was no room for political dissent in Indonesia. He said that critics of his government did not understand the country’s political system and he warned that the globalisation of information and economic activity was in some ways posing a tremendous threat to the nation’s unity.

The free flow of global information has brought people in all countries closer to those in others. This enables people to receive foreign values that can erode their sense of nationalism. So extreme is the impact of foreign influence in some people they no longer care about maintaining their nation’s unity.\textsuperscript{35}

The role of the media in Soeharto’s New Order Indonesia had a determined role to play in maintaining national unity and stability under the principle of \textit{pancasila}.

However, during the Soeharto era legislation and government intervention kept the Indonesian media under strict control with demands for the press to act only in the national interest under the broad political umbrella of \textit{pancasila}. Soeharto did not hesitate to shut down newspapers or magazines, or use the censor’s pen to restrict the free flow of information when he considered the boundaries of tolerance were exceeded and the national interest was being undermined or threatened.

But, what exactly was determined as being in the national interest was often unclear. The effects of such repressive measures were much clearer. Journalists were arrested, harassed and threatened by the military and many journalists were driven into hiding as the Soeharto government ran roughshod over the media to prevent open and independent coverage of business and politics.

Newspapers and magazines that once dared to challenge the establishment by reporting on the Soeharto family’s business deals have been shut and reporters remain in fear of their lives if they dig too deeply into the country’s financial troubles, rampant cronyism in business and corruption in high office. This repressive media policy has been blamed for exacerbating Indonesia’s economic and social problems. It has also provided the impetus for widespread political unrest and upheaval and for sending the Indonesian currency into an uncontrollable
free fall that led to widespread changes and political instability and national unrest. The argument here is not whether the media had any influence or impact on the turbulent events in post-Soeharto Indonesia, but rather whether aspects of the *pancasila* press such as its focus on nation building and issues of national interest holds any worth for the press in South Africa.

The Indonesian, and by association, much of the Asian doctrine of journalism challenges the fundamental Western theory of journalism that incorporates among other things a free flow of ideas, the public’s right to know, reporting fully and fairly about what is going on in government and in so doing keeping government’s honest and accountable and the population suitably informed. By contrast, this theory sits uneasily in the developing nations of Asia and elsewhere where the attitude towards the media is developmental in theory. Unfortunately, in practice it remains more authoritarian.

Hemant Shah [1996] suggests because of the negative connotations associated with the term *developmental journalism* it is preferable to replace it with the term *emancipatory journalism* to facilitate recognising “a role for journalists as participants in a process of progressive social change”. Shelton Gunaratne [1996] expands Shah’s point in the context that “communication can contribute to participatory democracy, security, peace, and other humanistic principles that are at the core of the discourse on modernity.”

*Emancipatory journalism* requires not only provision of socially relevant information but also journalistic activism in challenging and changing oppressive structures; gives individuals in communities marginalized by modernization “a means of voicing critique and articulating alternative visions of society”, and encourages “journalists to abandon the role of neutral observer while reporting in a manner that is thorough, deeply researched, and historically and culturally grounded, and that promotes social change in favor of the dispossessed”.

**Public journalism model**

Spawned in the United States from 1993 to 1997, the concept of public or civic journalism developed as a controversial experiment in a push to reshape the way news is presented. At the heart of public journalism is the aim to connect newspapers with the community in a mutually beneficial way.

A core element is the belief that journalism has an obligation to public life and that it is an obligation that goes well beyond simply telling the news or unloading the facts.

Developed out of a perceived need to reshape American political reporting, Jay Rosen [1998] singles out *Washington Post* political commentator David Broder as among the first to argue it was time to rethink a fundamental assumption of political journalism. It was Broder’s
belief that “the [political] campaign and its contents are the property of the candidate” and newspapers should show new leadership in the way politics was reported.

What can I do? My answer is tentative and expressed without any great confidence. But if we are going to change the pattern, we in the press have to try deliberately to reposition ourselves in the process. We have to try and distance ourselves from the people we write about the politicians and their political consultants and move ourselves closer to the people that we write for the voters and potential voters.38

According to Rosen, it was Broder’s leadership and foresight “that had some tangible effects, most notably in the experiment that has come to be known as civic or public journalism. Driven by media research foundations – mainly the Pew Centre for Civic Journalism in Washington, the Kettering Foundation, and the Knight Foundation who between them provided funding for research, conferences and experiments in the field, Rosen finds much was accomplished in the years 1993 to 1997 when “public journalism” or civic journalism came to the attention of the American press. Rosen states:

The profession had some trouble coping with this development because public journalism was not a single phenomena, but a broad pattern of activity that moved in many directions and relied on a multiple sources of support.39

Public journalism attracted a great deal of criticism, in particular the elite press which attempted to dismiss the experiment as a gimmick or fraud but as one of its main advocates Rosen finds that “even the most shallow critiques revealed where the critic stood on some key questions: What does civic purpose mean in journalism? What should the power of the press be used for? What’s the best way for this profession to serve democracy? What is the role of a journalist?”40

Another major advocate of public journalism, newspaper editor Davis Merritt [1994] says public journalism is “about fundamental, cultural change in journalism; about attitudes and traditional concepts that no longer serve either us or our communities well” and that journalists must move beyond simply telling the news, journalism can improve public life, and news organisations can become more than reporters and recorders of events.41

Skjerdal [2001] suggests that although public journalism was a reaction to a particular American struggle with democracy, this kind of journalism can be exported to other parts of the world as well since the fundamentals are assumed to be universal.42 As a vehicle for change in the South African press, Skjerdal finds some use for public journalism especially
where the press faces growing antagonism for the way it reports politics. (This aspect will be revisited in the concluding chapter.)

*Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie is among the many critics of public journalism and he challenges both the methods and the motives of public journalism: Downie says:

Too much of what is called public journalism appears to be what our promotions department does, only with a different kind of name and a fancy evangelistic fervour.43

And the ombudsman at the *Washington Post*, Joann Byrd agrees:

The goals of civic journalism can be accomplished without compromising journalism’s important principles. It does not help the community or the paper to have the paper acting as a booster or as champion of its own agenda. Communities always need a paper that can stand back, take the long, broad view of the conflicts and the possibilities and avoid, in service to the whole community, taking sides.44

The aims and objectives of public or civic journalism correspond in some ways to the objectives of developmental journalism with its focus on agenda setting and community upliftment but there are serious divergent principles. Developmental journalism focuses on nation building and the role of the media in developing countries. It has its origins in the New World Information and Communications Order movement driven by UNESCO in the 1970s and its central theme was that the national media could be used by developing countries to build themselves. The media has a role in nation building. But in most cases, the objectives were overlooked by developing countries who preferred to interpret it as a way of controlling the national press and this was where the developmental theory and the developmental practice was on a collision course. Civic journalism is a return to the aims of developmental journalism, but instead of the media being used to push the government’s agenda, it is used to push the people’s agenda. Civic or public journalism can be described as an experiment to “democratise the media” and making the media responsive to the needs of the community.45

A broad spectrum of media theories and models have been canvassed here with a view to providing options for the press in South Africa to be distinctly different to the authoritarian controls imposed elsewhere in Africa. The history and tradition of freedom of the press in Africa has for the most part been a legacy of oppression and censorship marked by
authoritarian government controls. Journalism is a hazardous occupation in most African
countries and the environment is hostile.

In 1980, about 90 per cent of black Africa’s daily newspapers were either government
owned or controlled by the government or a government corporation in at least half of the
nations of Africa, as of 1980, no privately-owned or commercial press of any kind exists. This
is either through the actions of government or a lack of investor capital and finance.

Wilcox points out that most of the newspapers in Africa are directly under the control
of the information ministries of the various countries and of the 38 independent sub-Saharan
nations, 14 nations have only one daily newspaper while five nations – Chad, Gambia,
Lesotho, Swaziland and Rwanda – have no daily newspapers. 46 Nigeria has a law under which
journalists can be prosecuted if they publish anything that could bring public officials into
disrepute, notwithstanding that the reports which they write may be true.

Uganda considers itself to have a relatively free press by African standards. It has in
place a constitutional guarantee of the right of access to government information. But in
practice, freedom of the press is a myth. The national press is government controlled and
stringent limitations are imposed in an effort to muzzle the press. Journalists are also routinely
arrested on flimsy charges as a way of intimidating and stifling a vigorous press. And in
Ghana, the national constitution protects freedom of expression, which theoretically affords
some guarantee of press freedom yet the country’s libel laws are flexible to the point where
the state is allowed to arrest and punish journalists for criticising the government.

Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia all protect freedom of speech in the constitution but in
all three countries, journalists have been jailed for sedition, libel and defamation. Military
rulers in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and the Gambia have rejected court rulings and suppressed
press coverage by executive decree.

In Botswana, the government keeps the state-controlled media in place with onerous
censorship legislation similar to the Section 205 legislation that was so viciously used by the
National Party during the apartheid years in South Africa.

And, any attempt to emulate the Indonesian pancasila model of the press is fraught with
dangers for the transformation of the print media in South Africa. Despite the dubious appeal
of some aspects of commitment to the upliftment of national ideology, it is a restrictive and
oppressive system in which cronyism and corruption flourishes with impunity.

The unrealistic demands of government and the influence of the military and Soeharto
placed an onerous burden on the investigative role of the national press. For all its lofty
intentions of working in the national good, the Indonesian press was hobbled and allowed
much of what was bad and corrupt in government to flourish because the role of the media was not that of keeping the public informed and keeping government honest.

**Constitutional directions**

At the heart of South Africa’s transformation to a new democracy is the country’s new Constitution and Bill of Rights. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press is guaranteed under the provisions of the Constitution. For this reason it is timely to consider the rights to free speech and a free press.

Section 16 of the South African constitution provides for freedom of expression:

Section 16. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes: (a) freedom of the press and other media; (b) freedom to receive and impart information and ideas; (c) freedom of artistic creativity; and (d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.

And it further states:

(2) The right in subsection (1) does not extend to: (a) propaganda for war; (b) incitement of imminent violence; or (c) advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.47

**Constitutional Court directions**

A suggestion that some sort of limitations upon the freedom of the press would not be out of place was raised by the president of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, Justice Arthur Chaskalson. In an address to the Commonwealth Press Union’s biennial conference in Cape Town in 1996. Justice Chaskalson pointed out that South Africa was engaged in a brave struggle to establish democracy.

He warned that the difficulties in the way of obtaining that goal were very real and should not be underestimated in a country with a history of denial, deprivation and oppression.48

He argued that there was in place a framework for democracy in a constitution that guarantees open government and fundamental rights but added “we must breathe life into that framework, give substance to the rights that are guaranteed, and establish a culture of democracy”.49 The press will be intimately involved in that process, Justice Chaskalson says, and so too will the courts. And, he warns that the two will sometimes clash. What do we mean when we talk of the freedom of the press, he asks and then proceeds to answer:
Do we mean that the governments ought not to interfere with the press through legislation or other means designed to curb its activities and secure a compliant press? Or do we mean more than that; that the law should also recognise the special role of the press in a democratic society and allow it the space and freedom that it needs to fulfil that role?\textsuperscript{50}

Justice Chaskalson concedes a free press is an indispensable pillar of democracy and he says there can be no doubt that the law should be sensitive to the importance of a free and independent press, and in particular, to the needs to protect it against government actions that threaten such independence. But he queries whether the press should be privileged by the law and, if so, in which respects he asks, because it is a complex and much more difficult question.

By illustration, Justice Chaskalson points out those journalists who are particularly concerned to protect their sources almost at all costs, and rightly so. But what is to be done where the information sought from a journalist is needed for the investigation of a serious crime? Justice Chaskalson says:

This is a frequent bone of contention in South Africa where journalists invariably refuse to provide such information to the police. When that happens the media tends to portray the conduct of the police or the prosecuting authority in attempting to obtain such information as being an invasion of a universally recognised right, yet the converse is true, for almost all countries have and enforce laws requiring such disclosures to be made.\textsuperscript{51}

In the past the South African courts have adopted a fairly rigid and strict approach to refusals by journalists to reveal their sources. Even during the social unrest, riots and protests that swept the country in 1976, it was often unnecessary for the police to demand that journalists reveal their sources. Many white South African journalists, reporters and photographers rode shotgun with the police patrols into the riot-torn townships and in this cosy relationship journalists would be provided safe haven and easy access to police accounts of the unrest.

In exchange, photographers would hand over their photographs so that police could more easily track down community leaders whom they described as agitators. This is an aspect that would in all probability be denied by the liberal white English press. It is, however, a situation that was not uncommon, whereby the press in many cases colluded with the police.
But there were times when some journalists refused to comply and refused to disclose their sources. South African courts have always held that such material is not privileged and that the press has no immunity against search warrants or subpoenas.

However, in post-apartheid years this has been somewhat relaxed because under the present constitution it is not yet clear what the implications of the constitution will be on this issue or whether, in fact, it will result in greater protection being given to the press against subpoenas and search warrants than has been the case in the past.

Justice Chaskalson says information in the hands of journalists is not necessarily confidential information and he says that confidential information is not necessarily privileged information, pointing to other relationships in our society eg “priests, doctors, psychologists and others who are often recipients of confidential information yet their interests are subordinated to the overriding principle that the public interest requires the prosecution of crime and the co-operation of all people to be able to give material evidence needed for a successful prosecution”.

It is in this direction that Justice Chaskalson raises the complexity of freedom of the press – freedom which must be pointed out is still freedom within bondage, there is nowhere to be found absolute press freedom – especially in the context of a struggling and developing nation coming to terms with democracy:

There can be no doubt that attempts to procure information from journalists in order to mount a criminal prosecution gives rise to sensitive and difficult issues ... I raised the question, not to answer it, but to illustrate the complexity of according special rights to the press. Press freedom cannot be seen in isolation; it impacts on other rights and interests and has to be balanced against them. The problem, as far as the law is concerned is according to what principles, and how, should the balance be achieved ... Rights are never absolute and press freedom is no exception to this rule. Press freedom does not entitle journalists to trample upon the dignity and privacy of others; a constraint that some journalists and newspapers are reluctant to acknowledge.

Despite constitutional guarantees on press freedom, the media in South Africa has continued to face difficulties when reporting on matters of national importance. Assaults on journalists have become common place, increased pressure from political parties intent on influencing the media and repressive legal provisions have all contributed to the difficulties confronting the media when attempting to report or comment on the news.
Hazards and limitations

Issues of confidentiality and the protection of sources remains a major hurdle with on-going legal action setting the limits of confidentiality for the media and defining the role of journalists. A case in point is the efforts of the Directorate of Special Operations who subpoenaed editors of *The Cape Times*, *Reuters* news agency, *Cape Argus*, *Associated Press* news agency, *Die Burger*, *South African Press Association*, and the *South African Broadcasting Corporation* to hand over all photographs, video footage, notes and transcripts pertaining to meetings, gatherings and demonstrations of an anti-crime and drugs vigilante group, PAGAD, in Cape Town. Five senior members of the group People Against Gangsterism and Drugs faced charges of murdering a leading gang boss involved in the drug trade.

*Cape Times* photographer Benny Gool refused to testify for two reasons: first because of his profession, it conflicted with constitutional guarantees on freedom of the press and would compromise him as a journalist if he were to reveal his sources. Secondly, Gool feared for his life.

He complained that witnesses in this particular case were “being killed left, right and centre”, police were forcing him to testify under threat of prosecution while not even affording him any security.

The South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) objected and argued that the subpoenas were in breach of an agreement reached with the ministers of justice and safety and security as well as the national director of public prosecutions. The undertaking recognised the need, under appropriate circumstance, to protect media sources and information.

SANEF chairman Mathatha Tsedu described the dilemma:

We go into situations where we present ourselves as journalists and people allow us into these situations because they know we will respect their confidentiality. If we are called to testify, then we may as well be police consultants.54

The simmering feud between the press and government dramatically raised the levels of mistrust and animosity with the South African National Editors’ Forum expressing growing concerns and fearing that the relationship had gone beyond a tolerable and accepted point and fearing that it could damage South Africa’s young democracy. This led in 2001 to an historic meeting of the editors forum and Mbeki and his Cabinet to try and resolve their differences. Tsedu, as chairman of the group, put the case for SANEF:

We feel there’s a fundamental misunderstanding of the role and the current state of the South African media, and its ability, for various reasons, to
fully and accurately reflect the transformation process. This is a pity, because the truth is, South African editors do not disagree with President Thabo Mbeki’s definition of press freedom.\textsuperscript{55}

Tsedu debunked government complaints of media bias and misrepresentations, pointing out government inadequacies in communicating policies and programs and “an inclination to resort too easily to media bashing when failures and mistakes are reported”. And he called for a more transparent and open administration:

> At the administrative level, the core problem is poor communication between government and the media. There is a gap between our expectations of each other and the reality. Journalists need but often don’t get quick responses and access to the right people at the right time. The problem is exacerbated by poor performance of government media liaison officers as well as a lack of understanding by some of them of the basic tenets of journalism and how the media works.\textsuperscript{56}

And, in a provocative note, Tsedu chided the government:

> In the end, the expectation of both ordinary members of the public and government on what the media in South Africa can deliver, must take cognisance of the economic environment in which we operate. It would indeed be foolhardy for a government hell-bent on a capitalist market system to expect the media that operate in that environment to deliver or operate on the basis of an agenda that is essentially socialist.\textsuperscript{57}

**Promoting free expression**

The Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) is a South African-based non-governmental organisation dedicated to opposing censorship, and promoting the rights to free expression and access to information. It was formed in January 1994 following the merger of two organisations involved in campaigning for freedom of expression during the apartheid years, namely the Campaign for Open Media and the Anti-Censorship Action Group. The FXI also established the Media Defence Fund to sponsor freedom-of-expression court cases on behalf of media representatives who are not able to afford the legal costs. An analysis of the cases of censorship handled by the FXI in 2001-2002, pointed to the following trends:

- **Censorship is on the increase:** Censorship is definitely on the increase, with more and more limitations on freedom of expression becoming increasingly apparent.
• **Public and private sector censorship on the increase:** Not only is censorship taking place at the level of the state; there is increasing number of cases involving private sector censorship, especially company censorship of employees.

• **Recourse to apartheid legislation becoming more commonplace:** Public and private sector bodies are making increasing use of the legislation and practices of the former government, where apartheid legislation that is still on the statute books is invoked to effect censorship against journalists and ordinary citizens.

• **New censorship provisions being introduced in legislation:** Apart from invoking apartheid legislation more and more often, there is also increasing evidence of the democratic government introducing censorious provisions in new legislation. At the World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban during September 2001, concerns were raised that new legislation would be used to suppress the media. A proposed Interception and Monitoring Bill that would empower the police, the national defence forces, the intelligence agency and the secret service to “establish, equip, operate and maintain monitoring centres” aimed at combating terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, also raises concerns for its impact on press freedom.

In April, 2002, the South African government announced plans to form an independent Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA) to stimulate the development of community media. The proposed Bill was attacked by the Print Media Association of South Africa which feared it could lead to political interference in the media. [The Newspaper Press Union (NPU), established in 1882, restructured itself on December 1, 1994 to become the Print Media Association (PMA).] Brian Pottinger, as spokesman for the PMA, said:

The proposed mandate for the MDDA is broad, which then creates a legal entity with much wider powers of investigation, lobbying, intervention and advocacy in virtually every area of publishing The wider the powers for MDDA, the more it sets itself up as a target for potential sectarian political appropriation … there is a definite threat to press freedom if the draft document is adopted as it is.
Shaun Johnson [1997], at the time editor of The Argus and later group managing editor, also takes up the question of press freedom in his editorial column and asks:

Will the government and, more importantly, the people, accept and endorse a definition of media freedom akin to that of the world’s successful democracies in the late 20th century, a definition which is predicated on a delicate but vital balance between true independence and genuine responsibility. The question is not banal, as recent exchanges between media and the government have shown. There remains a philosophical chasm over what precisely constitutes “acceptable criticism”, and what is subversion or treason.  

Johnson says two extreme positions have developed between the government and the press and somewhere in between rests the case for a new relationship between press and state. On the one side the government accuses the national press of disloyalty and antagonism on the other side the media accuses the ANC government of showing signs reminiscent of the previous government.

Simplistically, one side of the coin shows a situation whereby the corridors of the fledgling state power (where portraits of apartheid’s architects still hang in less travelled thoroughfares), many in government grow impatient with the demonstrably imperfect media – but conclude that the failings are not the result of human frailty and the frustration of gradually transforming inherited institutions, but of conspiracy “to undermine the transformation”, in the angry words of President Mandela.

For their part, some in the media quickly equate signs of growing adversarialism between media and their government with a return to the pre-1990 era: ‘The ANC is behaving just like the Nats did’ school of thought. The conflict cocktail is potentially wicked, but both positions are wrong.

Johnson denies there is a widespread conspiracy plot against Mandela’s black government although he concedes some individuals in different quarters of the media may be pursuing such an agenda. And he rejects the notion that legitimate ANC government with its commitment to freedom of the press and its guarantees under the constitution can be compared to the illegitimate government of P.W. Botha with its many restrictive rules and regulations. As for the future, Johnson accepts that there are at the present time crucial philosophical differences between the government’s and the media’s definition of what constitutes proper media freedom. He says:

We can predict that these questions, among others will form the nub of the great debate (on the freedom of the press): Will it be accepted that as
long as private sector media remain within the law, the appropriateness of the content they choose to publish must be judged by consumers and advertisers, not government?

- Will it be accepted that criticism of government, even particularly robust criticism, does not necessarily indicate disloyalty to the new democratic society, but is part of the duty of a free media?
- Will it be accepted that a view sincerely expressed, even if it is wrong, has the right to be expressed?
- Will it be accepted that while the private media should and do have a role to play in nation-building, this should never be equated with blind loyalty?
- Will it be accepted that media groups are sincere about rectifying the internal skewness of the apartheid era, and are doing so voluntarily?62

These are valid questions that need to be addressed and it forms the nub of the hard decisions facing both the media and the ANC-led government and Johnson concedes there could be endless permutations to the questions on this basic list and without offering suggestions, he says his own view of the debate on the future role of the media is that it can only proceed if a greater degree of trust is achieved on both sides – trust in the sense that the integrity and *bona fides* of the protagonists are accepted.

This is a crucial issue and while it remains vitally important in the debate, it is far from an easy option. Grudges and hatreds still run deep in the South African press and while it may be disputed and denied in various quarters, there is still much distrust between black and white staff journalists. In addition, attempts to implement an affirmative action program generates further problems when black journalists are promoted ahead of better trained and more qualified or more experienced white journalists. This adds yet another dimension of animosity to the argument. But it is a situation that demands to be settled.

At a different level, we hear from the inquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s hearings into the media [1997] that there is still much anger and antagonism between white and black journalists in South Africa, there are complaints from black journalists that the transformation process is moving too slowly, and that the agenda of the metropolitan newspapers still remain by and large the same rather than adapting to the change that has enveloped the country.

On the other hand, newspaper managements in the English press have reacted with disappointment, claiming they were moving towards change at a faster pace than at any time
in the history of South African newspapers. For the Afrikaans press, however, there seems little movement and even less inclination to embrace editorial and managerial changes in keeping with the changing face of South Africa. They remain an ethnic, Afrikaner press. It is the reluctance of the Afrikaans press, more than any other group, that refuses to move with the changing times and that could provide the impetus at some stage for the ANC government to implement a media policy that despite the guarantees of free speech under the constitution, will force the Afrikaans press, among others, to perform its role in society in a way which not only discards the baggage of the past but also projects in a manner that is socially responsible.

While the Independent Newspapers group have made rapid and far reaching changes in terms of staff development and training, reshuffling the senior managerial levels of the group’s newspapers and the appointment of two black editors, Moegsien Williams at *The Argus* and Ryland Fisher at *The Cape Times* and various other senior appointments around the country, the Afrikaans press has stubbornly refused to budge – just as it also stubbornly refused to testify before the Truth Commission hearings into the role of the media during the apartheid years. Along this confrontational route signalled by the Afrikaans press, the future can only be described as gloomy and it paves the way for action from a government that is already totally disappointed with the role of the national media.

At an address to the Foreign Correspondents Association meeting in Cape Town on November 19, 1996, President Nelson Mandela raised the issue of a (journalism) “profession that is itself struggling to redefine its role in a changing society”. And he stresses that the media debate, which will continue for many years, “will inform the actual practice, as the Fourth Estate transforms itself to become part of the new South Africa both in word and deed”.63

And he praised the foreign correspondents for bringing with them decades of experience about the role of a free press in a democracy and the necessary tensions that exist between government and its relationship with the media as well as the dangers that would certainly befall government and media alike if such a free press were to cease to exist.

Mandela confirms the ANC’s commitments to a free press despite his confrontations, especially with senior black journalists whom he accused of not doing their jobs properly. It is an altercation with serious overtones which Mandela dismisses as “creative and healthy tension between government and the media that is natural in a democracy”.

In light of this confrontation, Mandela restates the desire and commitment of the government to a free press. He says:

Firstly, media freedom is not, has not been, and will never be under threat in our country as long as the ANC is the majority party in government.
This is not merely because of the provisions of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It is in the selfish interest of the ANC that we should have probing, robust and critical media. We cannot change society in a fundamental way; we cannot change the state in a fundamental way, if we do not have a questioning media to expose the weaknesses of our inherited bureaucracy, security forces, judiciary, and indeed the new politicians themselves who can easily be corrupted by power.

Secondly, freedom of speech is enshrined in our basic law of the land, as elsewhere in the world, not as an exclusive right belonging to this or the other sector or individual in society. Thus, to the extent that we should have a robust and critical media, to that extent we should have a robust exchange of views between the media and other role-players in society ... What should be crucial though, is that such debate should be within the normal bounds of decency; it should not be aimed, without justification, at impugning the integrity of any of the role players. Thirdly, in terms of distribution, wealth and power, ownership, management and senior positions in the media are predominantly in white hands. And we would not be talking about South Africa if this did not impact on the mindsets of the actors in the media industry ... and our hope is that this (media) debate will inform the actual practice, as the Fourth Estate transforms itself to become part of the new South Africa.64

It should be remembered that Mandela is regarded as a moderate within the ANC and whether this direction will stand the test of time after the ANC’s 50th national conference held at Mafikeng from December 16, 1997 where Deputy President Thabo Mbeki was formally elected to replace Mandela as party leader when the 79-year-old president stepped down. Mandela remained the elder statesman and President until the following general election in 1999 when he was formally replaced as president by Mbeki.

It was a critical test for the media and it is a moot point whether the direction in which Mandela steered the media debate will be eventually overtaken by a more sinister and tougher hand on the role of the media. Consider for example the message from Mbeki to the Cape Town Press Club in 1994:

The media could guarantee its own freedom by helping to ensure that South Africa's fledgling democracy became a strong and stable society.65

The implication is clear that Mbeki does not support the way in which the national media exercises its role within the bounds of press freedom and subsequent attacks on the
press have made his views clear. It is a stance that does not find favour with a new government struggling for a more sympathetic review of its efforts, aims and directions and Mbeki is one of the main ANC leaders who has been constantly sniping at the print media. At an address to the Organisation of African Unity, meeting at Sun City, in 1994, Mbeki also criticised the South African media for not doing its job properly and peddling unfair stories about the African National Congress, called for a change in the predominantly white ownership of the media and then lashed out at the big four foreign news agencies for maintaining a Western bias.

But the pledge towards freedom of the press and freedom of information runs deeply in ANC statements. The then secretary-general of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa, was another high-ranking party official to confirm this objective under any circumstances in a statement to commemorate National Press Day on October 18, 1995 to mark the 18th anniversary of the darkest day in the history of South Africa’s print media. On October 19, 1977 the apartheid government forced the closure of the World and Weekend World, detained their editors, banned 17 organisations including the Union of Black Journalists, and opened the way for wide-scale harassment of journalists. It was also an appropriate opportunity for Ramaphosa to echo party sentiment.

In a statement issued on behalf of the party, he said: “On the 18th anniversary of this day, the ANC wishes to make a simple pledge: Never again. Never again can a government be allowed to act in such a manner to silence dissent. Never again should the state be empowered to flagrantly violate people's rights to information and alternative views. Never again can we allow a government to suppress the freedom of the media. As long as the ANC is a leading force in government – indeed, as long as the ANC exists – we will continue to resist any attempts to undermine the independence and integrity of the media”.

If a week is a long time in politics, then the prudent question to ask is whether this political ideology still holds true. The party rhetoric remains firm to the commitment, yet there are signals that indicate that the ANC is committed to a free press but the free press which it has inherited is perhaps not the monster that it envisaged and may be looking at ways in which it could be “reformed”.

If there was ever any doubt that the media is facing a crisis of confidence, then President Mandela made it absolutely clear in his opening address to the ANC conference at Mafikeng where he accused the media of peddling lies aimed at undermining the achievements of his government. Mandela said:

We must refer to the issue of what has, in the general vocabulary, come to be known as ‘deliver’. Our opponents make the false accusation, based on
a refusal by the mass media to tell the truth, that since our election into government in 1994, we have failed to deliver. The reality is that the masses of our people’s experiences that: the formerly oppressed are now governing themselves, the homeless are being housed, those without access to modern power are now getting electricity, millions are no longer condemned to travelling long distances to fetch unhealthy, unprocessed water for personal and domestic use, the formerly oppressed are gaining access to free and adequate medical services, many among the very poor, including women and children and the elderly, who had formerly been excluded now have access to welfare benefits, people who had been forcibly removed from their land are regaining their land, and greater numbers of people are gathering access to education at all levels.66

And it was President Mandela’s unusually harsh criticism of the national press that made it unequivocal and clear there were serious problems ahead for the press. He said South Africa had to confront the fact that the bulk of the mass media in our country has set itself up as a force opposed to the ANC.

In a manner akin to what the National Party is doing in its sphere, this media exploits the dominant positions it achieved as a result of the apartheid system, to campaign against both real change and the real agents of change, as represented by our movement, led by the ANC. In this context, it also takes advantage of the fact that, thanks to decades of repression and prohibition of a mass media genuinely representative of the voice of the majority of the people of South Africa, this majority has no choice but to rely for information and communication on a media representing the privileged minority.

To protect its own privileged positions, which are a continuation of the apartheid legacy, it does not hesitate to denounce all efforts to ensure its own transformation, consistent with the objectives of a non-racial democracy, as an attack on press freedom. When it speaks against us, this represents freedom of thought, speech and the press – which the world must applaud!

When we exercise our own right to freedom of thought and speech to criticise it for its failings, this represents an attempt to suppress the freedom of the press – for which the world must punish us! Thus the media uses the democratic order, brought about by the enormous sacrifices
of our own people, as an instrument to protect the legacy of racism, graphically described by its own patterns of ownership, editorial control, value system and advertiser influence.

At the same time, and in many respects, it has shown a stubborn refusal to discharge its responsibility to inform the public. Consistent with the political posture it has assumed, it has been most vigorous in disseminating such information as it believes serves to discredit and weaken our movement. By this means, despite its professions of support for democracy, it limits the possibility to expand the frontiers of democracy, which would derive from the empowerment of the citizen to participate meaningfully in the process of governance through timeous access to reliable information.

I know that these comments will be received with a tirade of denunciation, with claims that what we are calling for is a media that acts as a “lapdog” rather than a “watchdog”. We must reiterated the positions of our movement that we ask for no favours from the media and we expect none. We make no apology for making the demand that the media has a responsibility to society to inform. Neither do we doubt the correctness of our assessment of the role the media has played in the last three years. All of us know too much about what happens in the newsrooms. In any case, we have to confront the product of the posture of the media daily. This daily product, reflected in all the media of communication, stands out too stark in its substance to allow us to doubt the conclusions of our analysis.

Conference will have to consider what measures we have to take. In addition to what we are doing already, to improve our communication with our population at large.67

By dragging up the ugly ghosts of the apartheid past and comparing the role of the national press with that of the National Party as the architects of black oppression, Mandela highlighted growing impatience and dissatisfaction with the direction of the press from the black government. He is signalling to the national conference a desire for change in the way that news is handled. And he points to the privileged position of the white population in general and the white-controlled press in particular as it represents a privileged minority.

It follows earlier calls from more radical elements within the African National Congress for at least attitudinal change in the press. Mandela stresses that while there is a need for change, the government is not seeking a compliant press, they are asking no favours
and expecting none from the media. But it is his argument that the media’s “stubborn refusal to discharge its responsibility to inform the public” and its “vigorous disseminating of information to discredit and weaken” the efforts of the new government despite its professions of support for democracy that needs to be addressed. Mandela appears to adopt a threatening approach, stating “we have to confront the product” and he urges the conference to “consider what measures [we] have to take”. Some measures have been outlined in this chapter.

Despite Mandela’s sharp criticism of the South African press to the national conference of the ANC, the vague nature of his demands for change should not be interpreted as a signal for a crackdown on the free flow of information or censorship. Statutory guarantees are already in place. Mandela’s attack on the press at worst indicates impatience and disappointment over the role and direction that the press has taken in post-apartheid South Africa. He sees need for a different approach to the way news is covered, especially as it pertains to the government. Similarly, this thesis explores the need for change.

**Summary**

This chapter has considered a variety of media models that will go some way to facilitate a workable solution and new directions for the press in post-apartheid South Africa. The challenge is not so much to find the workable solution but to speed up structural and attitudinal transformation in what is perceived to be a slow-to-change profession. Media theories and directions or options for change abound with many offerings coming from academic theorists, newspaper editors and journalists who fear for the future of the industry as well as the major commissions of inquiry.

It is a desire for change both at the managerial and proprietorial levels that needs to be established. For as long as there remains a perception at the upper levels of the industry that change is unnecessary or undesirable, the implementation of any new media policy will struggle for acceptance. It is unnecessary for media owners to offer direction and guidance to the editors of their publications. All they need do is select like-minded personnel who need no encouragement to maintain the status quo.

The choice then remains whether to proceed along the libertarian course that has not been without its failings or to find some common ground in the developmental model with its risk of a guided democracy, or in a combination of “public journalism” and aspects of the developmental model. At issue is whether the emerging democratic South Africa, with its economic, social and developmental problems akin to many Third World countries, can continue to cope with what remains essentially a sophisticated and developed Western
libertarian press system or whether there is some justification to incorporate developmental media options into a struggling media system.

The implementation of any new media system is not without risks and would require cooperation from all the major participants, ie. media institutions, journalists and government. The manner in which the system would impact on how information is treated and the reactions of both the media and the political leaders would, by definition, be fraught with dangers and difficulties. It is worthy of research as a topic on its own. This chapter has canvassed some avenues that lend themselves as candidates for consideration.

Chapter Five also reviewed the strident criticism from senior members of the government members who accused the national press of orchestrating a hidden agenda aimed at destabilising the efforts of the government. While tension between government and press is not unusual, in post-apartheid South Africa racial tension still run deep and the criticisms take on an added dimension. With the press largely the preserve of whites, there is a perception within the black government that all is not well with the way the press has coped with the transformation. Old racial tensions and prejudices lurk just below the surface on both sides.

The next chapter will examine the significant difference between the ways black and white journalists perceive the emerging post-apartheid press. It is seen in the context of the South African Human Rights Commission's inquiry into racism in the media as well as two commissioned reports that emerged from the inquiry, the MMP monitoring project’s investigation into racial stereotyping in the media, The News In Black and White, and Claudia Braude's report set against methodological concerns from several academics.
Notes for Chapter Five


9. Ibid, p. 20

10. Ibid.


20. Ibid.


22. Ibid, p. 76.

23. Ibid, p. 84.


25. Ibid.


27. Ibid, p. 217.


29. Ibid, p. 222.

30. Ibid, p 221-234.

31. Ibid


39. Ibid

40. Ibid; also Rosen, J. and Merritt, D; *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice*, Kettering Foundation, paper.

41. Steele, Robert; *The ethics of civic journalism: Independence as the guide*, The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, paper.


43. Steele, Robert, op.cit. conference paper quoting Downie.


48. Chaskalson, Justice Arthur, President of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, address to the Commonwealth Press Union biennial conference in Cape Town, October 15, 1996.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid, p. 4.
52. Ibid.

53. Ibid, p. 4


56. Ibid, p. 4.

57. Ibid, p. 6.

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61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Mandela, Nelson, untitled address to the Foreign Correspondents Association meeting, November 19, 1996, Cape Town South Africa.

64. Ibid., untitled speech to Foreign Correspondents Association, Cape Town, 1996.


67. Ibid.
CHAPTER SIX

RACISM AND THE MEDIA

Introduction

The South African political landscape is scarred with torrid examples of institutionalised racism but it does not necessarily mean that the South African press has a mortgage on racism in the national media. During the apartheid years, many white journalists supported the system directly; others tolerated it as a normal way of life and benefited from the privileges that it afforded. The worst of them spied on their newsroom colleagues and told lies about the political situation. Many were willing volunteers who spread disinformation, government propaganda and intolerance while others knowingly or even unwittingly sowed the seeds of prejudice and practised selective censorship by remaining silent or refusing to report on police brutality and government excesses. It was these sinister practices that attracted the attention of the Truth and Reconciliation Council to consider the role of the press during the apartheid era, and the South African Human Rights Commission to the commissioning of the Braude report. Chapter Six reviews the Braude report and its recommendations as well as its shortcomings. It also considers racism in the media and its impact on the South African press.

Opposing discrimination

Anywhere in the world where there is ethnic conflict, racial hostility, and terrorism linked to extreme nationalism and where these issues feature strongly on the news agenda, there will be some journalists who will perpetuate the political propaganda for racist groups so that the media becomes a weapon of intolerance. The United States has failed to come to grips with the problem since the early 1800s. Europe has battled the same problem for nearly as long and in India, sections of the media are still accused of stirring racial intolerance and hatred that has led to deadly riots in Gujarat.\(^1\) De Beer [2000] puts the South African struggle in context:

Racism is not a gestational condition; hatred is learned and reinforced by example. The United States has struggled with the issue of racism for centuries. In the last 50 years most specifically, the country has dealt with a history similar to that of South Africa’s. If, in the course of over half a century, racism has not been overcome in the US, how can it be expected of a country whose own emancipation is barely six years old? The final vote, the ultimate ballot, is the one that is cast when we observe other people and act or react according to conscience.\(^2\)
The International Federation of Journalists in 1996 launched the International Media Working Group Against Racism and Xenophobia. It was a modest effort to foster better understanding among journalists and other media professionals about intolerance and racism issues and the aim was to raise awareness and promote changes to strengthen quality in journalism. Aidan White [2002], the general secretary of the IFJ, warns that universal notions of press freedom are compromised anytime journalism is subject to political manipulation.  

White points to the outbreak of conflict in 1992 in the Balkans, genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and simmering conflicts based on religious rivalry and ethnic differences in the Middle East, Indonesia and the Indian subcontinent “as a reminder that human rights law, journalistic codes and international goodwill appear to count for little when politicians make violence and hatred the benchmark of community relations by fuelling public ignorance and insecurity through compliant media”:

The problem of intolerance is a constant threat to good journalism anywhere in the world. Racial violence in urban communities in North America and Europe often characterised by incidents of terrorism the rise in influence in the West of extremist right-wing political parties, the re-emergence of anti-Semitism in many countries of Eastern and Central Europe, widespread religious intolerance in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and widespread prejudice and discrimination against national minorities on the basis of language and social status, are all part of the global landscape of daily news reporting. In this complex news environment journalists are sometimes casual victims of prejudice and political manipulation. Too often, ignorance and a lack of appreciation of different cultures, traditions and beliefs lead to media stereotypes that reinforce racist attitudes and strengthen the appeal of political extremists.  

During the mid-1980s, Teun van Dijk investigated how the British and Dutch media portrayed minorities in the press and tried to explain exactly how the press was involved in the continuity of the system of racism by analysing content in many thousands of newspaper articles. Van Dijk [1991] draws on earlier research from the United States where racism in the press mirrors the South African experiences and by association the European press which in many instances resembles the press in North America. And from more than two decades of research on the relations between the press and ethnic minority groups or immigrants, the findings from earlier research are unambiguous. Van Dijk concludes:

Most blatantly in the past, and usually more subtly today, the press has indeed been the “foe” of black and other minorities. As a representative of
the white power structure, it has consistently limited the access, both to hiring, promotion, or points of view, of ethnic minority groups. Until today, its dominant definition of ethnic affairs has consistently been a negative and stereotypical one; minorities or immigrants are seen as a problem or a threat and are portrayed preferably in association with crime, violence, conflict, unacceptable cultural differences, or other forms of deviance.\(^5\)

Decades later, these same criticisms remain largely unanswered by the South African press. During the apartheid years, racism in the press was hardly unexpected but following the transformation post-1994 complaints of racism continue to surface despite efforts by media managements to slowly change the composition and structure of the newsrooms. Black and coloured journalists face a difficult task convincing a sceptical audience that the negative way in which black people are often portrayed by the media and the constant critical focus on government failings and mistakes is not a sinister motive to undermine the efforts of black people but simply the media doing its job of scrutinising and keeping the government honest.

Berger [1997] says one of the challenges in dealing with racism in South Africa today, from a media point, “is to get beyond the all-too-obvious” and he warns that there are important challenges to overcome as South Africa continues to wrestle with issues of intolerance. This includes growing hostility to the influx of illegal migrants from other African states coming in search of political asylum or economic survival and competing for jobs in a decreasing market, the importance of free speech and the need to guard against hate speech towards the unwelcome migrants:

We are still some way from sorting out our own racial tolerance and reconciliation, and the role of journalists therein, and we now face this new issue of a majority, as opposed to a minority, practising a kind of racism against a group of “outsiders”. There are important challenges to overcome. But there is reason for optimism: Racism exists in South Africa but it no longer rules.\(^6\)

Berger’s optimism holds well, and it was against this background that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998 included the national media in its scrutiny of racism. (See below.)

It is not only in the newsrooms of South Africa where black journalists face up to the old demons of discrimination. In March, 2001, Tyrone Seale, a coloured reporter for the Afrikaans newspaper Die Beeld was refused access to the congress of the extreme right-wing Herstigte Nationale Party (HNP) because of the colour of his skin. The party secretary
explained that “only Afrikaners are welcome […]. In our definition of Afrikaner you have to be white”.7

Van Dijk’s research of racism in the UK and Dutch press in the mid-1980s that the press has become “less blatantly racist, but that stereotypes and the definition of minorities as a ‘problem’ or even as a ‘threat’ was still prevalent, in particular in the popular newspapers, while minority journalists, especially in Europe, continue to be discriminated against in hiring, promotions and news assignments.”8 Van Dijk cautions that from the conclusions and interpretations reached, it became clear that the theoretical framework in which his results are to be interpreted is vastly complex. It is this complexity in defining what constitutes racism that led several South African academics to criticise the efforts of the TRC investigation and Claudia Braude’s report dealing with racism in the South African press. (See below).

**Defining racism**

In discussing the concept of racism, Michael Banton [1970] turns to a useful definition by Ruth Benedict, one of the earlier writers on the subject in her book *Race and Racism* (1940) in which she concludes that “racism is the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority”.9 It is a definition that no longer suffices and remains a vastly complex issue that continues to intrigue mass communication researchers as much as sociologists.

Earlier attempts by Pierre van den Berghe (1967) similarly struggled for a workable theory and he points to conflicting research dating back several decades.10 Van Dijk [1991] concedes that research of racism in the press is complex and difficult and in 2000, Arnold de Beer raises the problems inherent in properly assessing the nature and content of racism in his criticism of the Braude report (see below). Though, De Beer notes:

> Racism in South Africa, as a social condition and reminder of apartheid, is in the hearts and minds of many citizens. Whether race, sex, class, or religion is the defining factor of hate-based relations, the ultimate responsibility is in the hands of the citizens.11

This is a view widely echoed among South African media commentators and academics. South African author and researcher H.C. Marais [2002] says the nature and history of South Africa virtually guarantees that racism will remain a sensitive issue for many decades to come and he sees a need for the term racism to be defined “in a way that would make it clearly identifiable and thus offering means to combat it more readily”.12 As a means towards a definition, Marais finds it necessary to revisit social scientific theories and research on the origins and dynamics of racism:
What exactly is meant by the term race (and racism) is, however, not very clear. It seems to be used interchangeably with concepts such as prejudice, discrimination, racialism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. Apart from its signalling function, such an undifferentiated use blunts the concept and makes its consequences potentially more harmful. Alternatively, the meaning of the concept is primarily found in its political connotations and functions, rather than in its interpersonal and social dynamics. In this way, the term racism has become a powerful emotive weapon that can be used against opponents – hardly any defence against it is possible.13

A similar search for answers in social anthropology theory comes from Jansen van Rensburg who believes South Africans have been inundated with information on racism over the years but are struggling to cope with a definition:

Since most participants to the racism discourse assume an understanding of the concept of racism or are very vague when they refer to the concept at all, some clarity is called for.14

The clamour for a definitive analysis of what constitutes racism and the argument that a definitive analysis is needed before racism can properly be addressed comes mainly from white middle-class South African academics. For black South African journalists making allegations of racism and bias in the media, there are no calls for academic definitions of what constitutes their grievances. They see it in their pay packets; it is evident from the lack of career advancement, poor job opportunities and the way in which mainly white agenda setters continue to determine the focus of what constitutes news. For black journalists, this need for a definition of racism before the problem can be addressed can be compared to a poison victim foaming at the mouth being denied any first aid until paramedics can decide what poison was administered. The need is for immediate action against perceived wrongs and the details can be worked out later.

For Steven Friedman, a South African author and white journalist on the Mail & Guardian, the issue is clear and the aims of the Human Rights Commission (see below) to discuss racism in the media with journalist is a step in the right direction:

That there is racism in the media is blindingly obvious. The task is to get people to talk honestly about it so that we can find ways to end it. In this and other fields, we need a discussion which can prompt willingness to look inward and acknowledge both the problem and the need to address it.15
This thesis defines racism from the black South African perspective that Friedman notes is blindingly obvious and not from the pedantic academic theorisation. The concept of racism for black South Africans is a life experience and it is manifested in their pay packets, lack of career opportunities, homes without electricity and running water, a policeman in blue uniform with a vicious dog ejecting you from the beach because it is an area designated for the use of white people only, even having to sit upstairs on a public bus because downstairs is reserved for whites only.

The concept of racism for black people [and this term is used inclusively for all non-white people including coloureds, Asiatics and Malays] is manifested in being refused entry to schools or universities exclusively on the basis of skin colour and being forced to live in poverty, fear, and degradation – not in the subtle nuances of academic sociological definitions

**A Human Rights perspective**

The South African Human Rights Commission in November 1998 announced a major inquiry to investigate allegations of racism in the South African media and called for submissions. The inquiry was initiated after the Black Lawyers’ Association and the Association of Black Accountants requested an investigation in terms of the Human Rights Commission Act. The two organisations claimed two newspapers – the *Mail & Guardian* and *The Sunday Times* – had violated the fundamental rights of black people.

As a precursor to the inquiry, media industry representatives were asked to comment and an independent consultant, Claudia Braude, was appointed to compile a report. A non-government organisation, The Media Monitoring Project, was also mandated to analyse language, idiom, and images portrayed in the media.

A selection of media was monitored for a six-week period from Monday, July 12, 1999 to Friday, August 20, 1999. Overall 1430 items were monitored during the period. Overall results analysed and major trends that emerged in the analysis were discussed.

The monitors were all post-graduate students and first-language speakers monitored all the languages of the publications. The conclusions were published in its final document *The News in Black and White: an investigation into racial stereotyping in the media*. The findings were that racial stereotyping was still common in the media.

The monitoring and analysis have suggested that the conventional notion of news of Africa and the legacy of the apartheid era ideologies and discourses all functioned to produce harmful portrayals of both black and white people.16
In general, the MMP found that there was a tendency for racism and racial stereotypes to occur as “bad” news stories and that crime was the most reported item. Of 14 categories monitored, MMP found seven categories supported racial stereotypes. These included: blacks are criminals; blacks are irrational; people act according to their ethnic identity; black lives are unimportant; all whites are racist; black foreigners threaten South African society; blacks are incompetent and incapable. The MMP also found that the dignity of black people was not always respected in news stories. Also, the use of graphic images of violence and dead bodies was more common in cases that involved black people.

Reports of coloured people were characterised by gangsterism, rape and violent crime. In its findings, MMP said:

It is doubtful whether any of the major media are intent on any form of racist brainwashing. However, the values and attitudes common in our society are no stranger to those who staff the news media and it is often only when stereotyping and prejudicial reporting is pointed out that the media become aware of the patterns which they have established. The media need to recognize their power, their freedom, and their responsibility and to explore ways in which they can challenge the damaging effects of racism and fight against the narrow perceptions which are an unfortunate inheritance of colonialism and apartheid.17

However, media attention on the rampant crime rate was not an unrealistic expectation. Close scrutiny of such a sensitive post-apartheid issue, however, was uncomfortable for the government of national unity. The diversion of opinion was sharp. Newspapers argued they were simply doing their job. The government view of the press simply doing its job differed. It was a “hatchet” job aimed at destabilising the efforts of the black government, giving the impression of incompetence. However, excerpts from official police crime statistics for the period dating from 1994–200 show an alarming trend (see table next page).
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Murder | 19672 | 19131 | 18639 | 17709 | 17878 | 17371 | 15456 | 15054
Attempted murder | 20100 | 19257 | 20906 | 20516 | 21380 | 20671 | 20134 | 21207
Robbery with aggravated circumstances | 62877 | 60354 | 50414 | 50406 | 63432 | 70810 | 79561 | 87610
Other robbery | 23380 | 27367 | 38088 | 37841 | 44001 | 50878 | 61468 | 65766
Rape and attempted rape | 29399 | 33139 | 36137 | 37905 | 35105 | 36022 | 37556 | 37711
Grievous assault | 147551 | 155576 | 162758 | 166775 | 164510 | 177162 | 192750 | 188961
Common assault | 137303 | 147500 | 149126 | 146174 | 142763 | 155410 | 181056 | 182110
Malicious damage to property | 89314 | 92602 | 95379 | 93088 | 92375 | 96307 | 100681 | 103495
All fraud, forgeries | 47308 | 46482 | 47346 | 48402 | 46442 | 48845 | 51828 | 46600
Carjacking | No data | No data | 9790 | 9869 | 11181 | 11609 | 11191 | 11186

Source: Crime Information Analysis Centre SA Police Service

While the statistics for serious crimes such as murder, rape, robbery with aggravating circumstance and carjacking show serious social problems and a police force under pressure, the figures are not further reduced under racial categories but it is an issue that is hardly defended. Gangsterism and crime is rife in the black and coloured townships. In mitigation, however, that was always the case during apartheid as well as post-apartheid.

The national media’s intense scrutiny of crime post-apartheid was bringing the reality of the criminality out of the townships and on to the agenda of middle-class white South Africa that was previously insulated from these excesses by among other things a resolute police force and the effects of the Group Areas Act. The reporting of township crime was largely neglected and ignored by the mainstream press and was taken up selectively by
newspapers such as *The Cape Herald, Post, Sunday Times Extra, Rapport Extra, World* and *Sunday World* the township papers aimed at blacks and coloureds.

Braude’s report, *Cultural Bloodstains* also criticised sections of the media for racial intolerance, bias, publishing stories which depersonalises black lives, promoting the stereotype that Africa was about violence, disaster and poverty. In doing so, Braude elicited scathing criticism from both media and academic interests. The findings of both reports were pilloried and widely disputed. *The Star* described the Braude report as a load of psychobabble.\(^{18}\)

Arrie De Beer [2000] head of the communications school at Potchefstroom University, Pretoria, says Braude’s report reads “more like an essay than an objective report”, its findings are narrow and difficult to follow, not because of its contents, but its lack of coherence.\(^{19}\) Further, De Beer argues that racism in the new South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, cannot sufficiently and functionally be addressed (let alone eradicated) without objective, scientific definitions, analyses, distinctions and approaches.

Serious credibility issues arise, on the part of both Claudia Braude and the SAHRC itself, as to whether the question of racism in the South African media has been addressed at all.\(^{20}\)

Guy Berger, Lynette Steeneveldt, and Keyan Tomaselli advanced academic argument that criticised the South African Human Rights Commission’s terms of reference and methodology. Tomaselli found the terms of reference vague and “resulting in research approaches which failed to entirely understand the nature of the media, how news is made or how theory is applied”.\(^{21}\) Berger argued similarly that the reports by Media Monitors and Claudia Braude were fundamentally flawed and failed to understand fully the operations of the media. Berger was critical of the methodology used in both reports and raised the issue of lack of audience involvement and the subjectivity of the reports although he conceded the core finding of both would have been the same even with different methods.

The methodological criticism of Tomaselli and Berger questions the way in which the SAHRC arrives at its findings that the media is racist. But they concede that even if the methodology were different the results would be the same. Berger described both the Braude report and the MMP report as deeply flawed and very weak on the conceptual understanding of what constituted racism, what racism-free media was and what was required to get there.

This is not, of course, to say there is no racism in the SA media only to say that the SAHRC studies cannot be trusted to have found it.\(^{22}\)

Berger presented a critique of both the Braude report and the MMP report to SAHRC commissioner Jodie Kollapen in Johannesburg and described the Braude report as over-
zealous and subjective. Berger saw the MMP report as too selective and found it ignored genres such as advertising and sport. He also criticised the propositions and manner in which a particular article was used to support or negate a proposition, saying it would impact on the conclusions ultimately drawn. Berger saw as the way forward the need to develop a paradigm where race was not the single or the most important defining factor. He mentioned the philosophy of the Black Consciousness Movement in arguing for the creation of a new South African identity.23

In a separate paper titled Seeing past race. The politics of the Human Rights Commission into racial representation in post-apartheid South Africa, Berger reinforces his argument of “seeing past race”. Berger states:

Yet, despite heightened racial divisions... the [South African] society retains the avowed aim of becoming non-racial. What is needed is some sense of its progress towards the objective, and indeed what is meant by this objective whether it is a race-free goal, or one that remains but without the racialism. In post-apartheid South Africa, a study of race and the media serves as a barometer to assess these issues, and to try and understand the complexity of moving from racism to “mere” racial differentiation, and to race-free status. The “seeing past race” reference in the title of this paper is intended to highlight whether contemporary South Africa continues to be visited by the ghosts of its past, or whether the current players can see their way past and beyond race issues towards achieving a non-racial society.24

Berger follows up his argument with a critical analysis of the conceptual assumptions in the final report of the SAHRC inquiry into racism in the media. In the abstract, he states:

The flawed conceptualisations plus the generalised character of the findings are of little help in assisting the momentum of eradicating racism in South African media, and for linking race transformation to issues of class, gender, sexual orientation, and xenophobia. This article identifies the problems as a race essentialism and a racism relativism, and argues instead that journalists need the concept of racialisation in order to change their reporting. The argument upholds the desired role of the South African media as one that contributes to a non-racial, as opposed to a multi-racial society.25

Berger introduces admirable arguments for a non-racial society and for a media that looks past race; however, it is a pedantic argument. Ten years after the collapse of apartheid
there still remains serious divisions in South African society and the ghosts of the past are still haunting many of the previously disadvantaged. Many journalists would argue the same problems still exist in the nation’s newsrooms.

For black journalists, the argument does not revolve around methodology. It does not hinge on the findings of racism in the media. The complaints from the black journalists encompass more than racism. It is about job satisfaction, career paths, education and training facilities and it is about equitable wages as much as it is about opening up the national media to reflect a more diversified agenda from a different set of information gatekeepers.26

It includes reservations that despite changes to almost every fabric of post-apartheid South African society, change in the face of the national press has been too slow and too limited in its scope. Black journalists are demanding a bigger slice of the media action. This is also largely the view favoured in the joint submission from the five black editors:

We believe that the fundamental problem with the media in our country is that they are largely controlled by white people. For instance, the majority of top editors are white, which results in a predominance, by sheer force of numbers, of the white viewpoint in our national public debate. This in turn leads to the anomaly where the views of the white minority predominate over those of a black majority. It is no secret that even in the corridors of political power, the views of white editors do tend to receive inordinate attention.27

Notwithstanding, the Human Rights Commission used these two reports as a basis for issuing an interim report, and issued 36 newspaper and broadcast editors and reporters with subpoenas requiring them to testify in response to the findings of the Braude report. It was an action that was fiercely opposed and it sent shockwaves through national newsrooms where freedom of the press had only recently been enshrined in the Constitution. It raised fears of government interference, with the editor of the Mail & Guardian Phil van Niekerk contesting the subpoenas as a violation of the press’s right to operate free of government intervention.

After some negotiations the subpoenas were eventually dropped and several journalists agreed to assist the commission by giving evidence at the hearings.

It was against this background that the SAHRC moved to instigate a formal inquiry into racism in the South African media. Since its inception, the SAHRC investigation was embroiled in controversy, hampered by reluctant participants and became bogged down in criticism from both white and black journalists, editors and foreign correspondents who had been summoned to give evidence. Noble in intent, the mandate of the SAHRC was to consider aspects of the South African media, to investigate and report on the observance of
human rights, and to take steps to secure appropriate redress where human rights have been violated.28

The Commission’s interest in the media was not new. Earlier efforts, in 1996, involved hosting seminars and workshops for journalists on the role of the media in human rights. Workshops were held in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town with limited success. Plans were also under way to sponsor an annual award for the most enterprising journalist in human rights. The chairman of the SAHRC explained the interest in the media:

We have consistently recognised that the media were an important ally in the execution of our mandate.29

In explaining its objectives, Human Rights Commission chief Barney Pityana said the commission was mindful of the implications of this exercise for press freedoms but the SAHRC was hopeful that a study of racism in the media “would heighten the sensitivity of all South Africans to the issue of racism and will ensure a greater respect for freedom of expression”.

The commission hoped to achieve five basic aims with this inquiry: (a) to generate debate and dialogue among South Africans about the meaning and incidence of racism in South Africa; (b) South Africans need to be informed about racism if they are to be able to address it; (c) that the media will benefit from closer scrutiny so that they can understand how their work is viewed by South Africans so they can sharpen their capacity to be responsive to the needs of the people and reflect the true nature of South African society; (d) that through dialogue, South Africans will learn, understand and have the facility to use race theory and analysis; (e) the nature of the inquiry will engage all South Africans in seeking common solutions to racism and to constructing a society free of racism.

Interest in the inquiry was high and five media institutions responded after the draft terms of reference for the inquiry was published. The Institute for Media Studies in South Africa, Print Media South Africa, Daily Dispatch, Times Media Ltd and Naspers responded with concerns over the terms of reference.

Submissions to the inquiry
A wide spectrum of views across South Africa’s troubled racial divide were entertained at the inquiry which heard from 80 people – journalists, academics, human rights groups, and media watch groups – over eight days of testimony that touched on various concerns about mainstream news coverage of black people, Jews, Muslims, and Indians, as well as the way in which major media corporations have moved to integrate and diversify their newsrooms. The testimony from black journalists and white journalists was often contradictory and dissimilar,
reflecting largely the historical racial divide between whites and blacks dating back to the apartheid era. In short, black journalists maintained that the pace of change was slow or almost non-existent.

It would be useful to compare some of the concerns to the submissions from black journalists and white journalists to show the wide gulf in the way racism or the lack of it in the South African media is perceived. It would also be helpful here to review some of the submissions to the inquiry, especially to compare this major disparity between how black journalists and white journalists assessed what is a major national problem.

**Submissions from black journalists**

A significant response came from a group of five black editors who submitted a joint statement that highlighted three basic areas where they determined a need for action within the media industry affirmative action, media diversity and training. The group included Mike Siluma, editor of the *Sowetan*, Charles Mogale, editor of the *Sowetan Sunday World*, Phil Molefe, editor-in-chief of SABC News, Kaizer Nyatsumba, then editor of the *Daily News*, and Cyril Madladla, editor of the *Independent on Saturday*. The group was also concerned at the slow pace of change within the media industry and complained that the power structures remained largely unchanged from the days of apartheid. White editors continued to have most of the control and it led the group to the opinion that there remained a predominance of a white viewpoint in the national debate.

The group expressed “deep concern about the generally slow pace of transformation in the media” and complained that six years after the country’s inaugural democratic elections, the media have remained largely unchanged” with black Africans constituting a minority in key decision making positions.

At the heart of that transformation agenda, which we presume every reasonable and fair-minded South African supports, was the need to level the playing fields so that none of us could, on the basis of skin colour, our gender or station in life, have the exclusive power to dictate the fortunes of others. Specifically, the establishment of a new, non-racial South Africa implied the dismantling of the exclusive control of our white compatriots over the levers of power at every level of society, including the media.30

And breaking from their white counterparts, the joint submission of the black editors supported the work of the inquiry, opposed the submissions from a number of white editors who suggested that while there were shortcomings in the transition from an apartheid era media to full participation much was being done to eradicate this disparity. It was a view rejected by the black editors.
Yes, there is racism in the media, much of that racism is in a subliminal nature, which would explain why some of those who have protested too much have been so bold as to say they do not believe it is an issue deserving of this public scrutiny which will result from the HRC hearings. Quite often one has to be black and African with all the hurt and indignity of the past uppermost in one’s mind to recognise racism. In a separate submission Nyatumba and Mdladla covered similar ground and highlighted shortcomings and difficulties they experienced as newly appointed black editors trying to broaden the target of a newspaper that was catering only to a specific audience. Both expressed a desire to use their newspapers “as vehicles for freedom of expression” particularly in the Letters to the Editor pages, tackle staff changes and to make changes in the news content of the Daily News and the Independent on Saturday. Khulu Sibiya, editor of City Press, also aligned himself with the statement of the five black editors and argued for more “black run newspapers to tell the black story”. In a radical departure from the mainly negative comments from black journalists, Cyril Ramaphosa, the chairman of Times Media Ltd, focused mainly on their flagship newspaper the Sunday Times. Explaining that in the few years since the demise of apartheid, the Sunday Times increased circulation by one third and the bulk of its readers were now black Africans and there was a growing trend of attracting black readers. Ramaphosa concluded that the Sunday Times would not be attracting such a growing number of new black readers if it was propagating racism. Not only were sales up, the Sunday Times had also increased its coverage of black people and has recruited senior black staff from whom it would be inconceivable to see the advancement of racist material. Ramaphosa said:

For our part, we are quite content to stand by our record of exposing corruption and criminality in all sectors of the society; of assisting with the growth of a culture of tolerance and debate; of respect for the constitution; of investment in literacy and education … of portrayal of role models in our society. We are particularly proud of not being beholden to any political or social party but only to the interests of our readers, the citizens and the constitution.

Nomavenda Mathiane, of Business Day, and Lakela Kaunda, editor of the Evening Post, drew attention to the hardships experienced by black women in the media, the difficulties of initiating change in the newsroom that was not at all democratic. Mathiane states that the newsroom remains a lonely place for a black woman. Kaunda urged newspapers
to develop a more patriotic journalism while combating racism at every level in the newsroom, saying of the *Evening Post*:

> We are a paper that sees itself not only as a watchdog but also as an instrument of social development.34

Phil Molefe, executive editor at the SABC, said the national broadcaster was conscious of its role of reflecting South African society in all its complexities and was meeting the challenges by introducing training programs for staff and establishing a database of black commentators with skills in political and economic commentary.

There is a similarity of views expressed by the black journalists that reflects similar concerns tabled to the Truth Commission. Dennis Cruywagen and Willie De Klerk accused senior executives of the *Argus* of shaping the news agenda to appease the government struggling to contain growing anti-apartheid protests and rioting on the Cape Flats.35 In a particular episode of violence where these two “coloured” journalists were at the scene where police shot dead three children in an incident later to become infamous as the Trojan Horse Affair, and the newspaper preferred to publish the sanitised police version of events rather than the graphic photographs of Willie de Klerk and the report of escalating police brutality and detentions without trial written by staffer Dennis Cruywagen.

> We thought too that our newspapers would not doubt our integrity and publish our accounts of what was really happening in our country. After all, or so we thought, the English newspapers with their liberal traditions and opposition to the National Party and apartheid, would be just as shocked as we were and even pained and angered. We thought, too, that these newspapers would support us. I am afraid to say we were terribly wrong.36

**Submissions from white journalists**

*Arrie Roussouw,* editor of *Die Beeld,* told the commission he could understand the concerns expressed by the group of black editors but stressed that despite its history as an Afrikaner newspaper there was now a firm policy on racism which was reflected in their editorial comment. Roussouw said *Die Beeld* had welcomed the historic political changes of the 90s and was no longer aligned to any political party or ideology.

> We only associate ourselves with the truth and the interests of our readers and we would endeavour to ensure freedom of the press, a multi-party democracy and human rights as well as economic freedom and a peaceful and prosperous South Africa.37
Roussouw's comments were echoed by other executives of the Afrikaans publishing giant Naspers including Johann de Wet, of Rapport who said the Afrikaans newspaper was mindful of its racial mindset and sensitive to the pain and hurt caused by racial insensitivity. For this reason, De Wet said Rapport welcomed scrutiny and was striving to present the news “comprehensively, objectively, accurately, and reliably”. Editorial comment and opinions were expressed in a “fair and balanced way”.

Eben Domisse, editor of Die Burger, cautioned against political control of the press and warned of the pitfalls of “the tyranny of the majority”. Domisse said Die Burger was committed to “the values of a multiparty democracy; a market orientated economy with social conscience, press freedom, and the advancement of Afrikaans and minority rights”.38

From representatives of the English press, John Scott, editor of the Cape Times, said the newspaper was undertaking a number of initiatives to highlight the political and social changes in South Africa. Scott said the Cape Times had “only recently” become more conscious of racism and has had to deal with racial tension within its own newsroom. Scott said the Cape Times “had for many years considered itself anti-apartheid and a bastion for liberal values but for many years the Cape Times never had a policy of employing black journalists in any great numbers until the 1990s.39

Tim du Plessis, of the Citizen, told the commission that the newspaper which was established to prop up the apartheid system was now also committed to change. Peter Davies, of the Sunday Tribune, said his newspaper was made aware that it was not catering to its African readers in its news coverage. The newspaper devised a five-year plan to remedy the problems as well as developing policies to improve the content of the newspaper so that it reaches its target.

In a corporate submission, the Independent Group told the commission its editors are all issued with a Mission Statement on appointment. It requires them to “further the cause of racial cooperation and to pursue a balanced policy calculated to enhance the progress and welfare of all sections of the population in your region”. The Independent Group has an affirmative action policy and has developed an employment equity plan as required by law.40

**Human rights inquiry: findings and recommendations**

The South African press was not immune to the climate of racism that enveloped South Africa as a result of apartheid and to this end, the SAHRC report into racism in the media found that the media reflected a persistent pattern of racist expressions and concluded that the South African media “can be characterised as racist institutions”.

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As a means to overcome this, the commission suggested that the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and the South African National Editors’ Forum develop and offer racism awareness training course for journalists at all levels of the industry and media schools and technikons offering journalism courses were urged to include course modules on racism in the media. Both the IAJ and SANEF took up the challenge and since publication of the report have introduced several training courses at various levels to improve the quality of journalism.

As an added incentive to quality journalism, a number of national awards and scholarships were introduced. Independent Newspapers and Johnnic also introduced training courses and internships for young black sub-editors. The lack of black sub-editors and the controlling role of sub-editors as important gatekeepers of information in national newsrooms was a major cause for concern.

Independent Newspapers went a step further and appointed executive journalist Elizabeth Mary Barrat, as group editorial trainer. Barrat’s brief was to train a new generation of young people as sub-editors. In March 2004, 22 trainee sub-editors started the 12-month course. They were selected from a total of 900 applicants.

In all, the report made 11 findings with corresponding recommendations. As agreed at the commencement of the hearings, there were no findings in respect of individual journalists, publications or titles.

Sloppy and bad journalism, it found, should not be confused with racist reporting. It found that self-regulating mechanisms in the media industry were not effective and that the press ombudsman did not believe racism was a concern in the press and suggested that the Code of Conduct of the press ombudsman needed to be tightened.

For those who expressed fears that the outcome of the inquiry posed a threat to press freedom, the commission moved to allay those fears by encouraging ongoing public debate about the role and responsibility of the media in a democracy.

We believe that all who have interest in human rights would recognise that a totally unregulated system, with weak self-regulation, would ultimately undermine the integrity of the media. Public scrutiny is good for the health of the media in a democracy.41

Among others, the commission urged more diverse media, called for a review of current codes of conduct in various news organisations, focused on language diversity in the print media and expressed concern about the small number of black sub-editors and women in senior management positions.
It recommended both formal and non-formal training institutions and called on media management to address the issue of training and recruitment of black staff, especially the training of black sub-editors.

The media should strive to ensure greater representivity in the newsrooms through recruitment and training in accordance with the letter and spirit of the Employment Equity Act. The South African Human Rights Commission will monitor this by examining the equity plans of the media industry.\(^\text{42}\)

From the start, the SAHRC stressed that the objective of its report was to raise awareness among media professionals and the public as a whole about the role and responsibility of the media to develop a non-racial human rights culture.\(^\text{43}\)

The report is not intended to label the media or portions of it as racist and thereby to discredit it, but rather to challenge it to be aware both of their power and their responsibility. The aims of this report, however, is to provide an opportunity for the media to evaluate itself … The media should, both individually and through their collective bodies, actively seek ways of ridding their pages, bulletins, and programs of harmful racist stereotypes.\(^\text{44}\)

**Summary**

The focus of this chapter was on racism in the South African press, the need for a definitive analysis and efforts towards eliminating discrimination and prejudice in the national newsrooms despite the complexities of finding common ground. Against this background of racism, the South African Human Rights Commission turned its attention to the press. A chronology of the main developments leading up to the hearings conducted by the Commission shows it was a lengthy exercise in opening up the media to scrutiny and public debate. Some historic milestones include:

**1997:** SAHRC chairman Barney Pityana co-writes opinion piece in South Africa's largest selling daily newspaper, accusing the media of practising “subliminal racism by creating a negative image of Africans”.

**1998:** Black Lawyers Association and Association of Black Accountants of South Africa requests SAHRC to investigate the *Mail and Guardian* and the *Sunday Times* newspapers “for alleged violations of fundamental rights of black people”. SAHRC later formally resolves to “conduct an investigation into racism in the media in general”.

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1999: July-August: Researchers hired by SAHRC monitor more than 1,430 news articles over a six-week period and concludes that there are incidents of racism and stereotypical reporting. Braude says research “sought to go deeper than the manifest, literal message and the content to consider the overall symbolic coded meaning at play”.

November: SAHRC, using research work, issues its interim report. Pityana says that media has been known to play a “negative role in race relations by being used as a vehicle for hate speech … and for hostile and racist messages”.

2000: January: SAHRC writes to editors on specific allegations made in the interim report. SAHRC says the response from the media by January 10 was not satisfactory.

February 11: SAHRC issues the first of its subpoenas, compelling news organisations and institutions to attend hearings into allegations of racism in the media. More than 30 subpoenas were issued in following days. Subpoenas demanded attendance at hearings and “to testify on your product's policies and guidelines on the reporting of, and commenting on, national and international events, which impact on racism and possible incidents of racism”.

February 14: The ruling African National Congress government supports the SAHRC decision to issue the subpoenas. Opposition parties criticise the decision, saying South Africa's international image was under threat.

February 18: The editor of Business Day says subpoenas “could be interpreted abroad as South Africa's version of the McCarthy-era witch hunt in the United States” and could threaten foreign investment.

February 21: SAHRC meets South African National Editors Forum to reconsider the subpoenas and other issues relating to the commission’s inquiry.

February 23: The Financial Times, in London, reports that the SAHRC has withdrawn a subpoena against the newspaper for its 1996 article headlined “South Africa moves on Moslem militants”.

February 25: SAHRC meets group of influential national newspaper proprietors.

February 28: SAHRC announces it will withdraw subpoenas but reserves right to reissue them during hearings if warranted.

March 6: SAHRC hearings begin.

Chapter Six highlighted from an analysis of the submissions to the South African Human Rights Commission inquiry and responses to the reports and findings, how sharply divergent views are challenging the redevelopment of the South African press. The questions
at stake remain: Where is the starting point for change? Are the criticisms of continued white control and domination of the press valid?

However flawed the Braude report, it makes fundamental and valid observations about the discrepancies that continue in the South African press and the need for new directions. Braude also offers a number of useful options to implement the process of change.

De Beer also makes useful contributions to the argument and is joined by Berger and others who are of the opinion that the question has moved on from whether racism really exists in the newsrooms to what can be done to assess and address it. As De Beer [2000] points out, nowhere in the Braude report is there a definition of racism or an underlying standard by which racism is determined. Braude found that the South African media “reflected a persistent pattern of racist expressions and content of writing that could have been avoided” although the report made clear it found “no evidence of the mainstream media indulging in blatant advocacy of racial hatred or incitement to racial violence”. De Beer, for his part insists that reparations, if needed, in the national press, can only be concluded with a proper definition of what constitutes racism and how best to limit its influence.

The SAHRC inquiry was useful in that it exposed the national press to painful scrutiny and afforded the widest spectrum of views on the press to be put. Black editors told about subtle forms of racism; news reports and editorials that subconsciously portray blacks as corrupt and incompetent, a general suspicion by whites of black incompetence, and an unwillingness to listen to their opinions.

The editors also questioned whether previous affirmative action efforts had relegated blacks to the role of mere tokens and they urged stronger efforts to advance the careers of blacks in the industry. Several white editors acknowledged at the SAHRC hearings the existence of these racial stereotypes in the national press.

In outlining the aims of the Human Rights Commission, chairman Barney Pityana outlines five basic aims that can provide the framework for change in the press in post-apartheid South Africa. But, there is no shortage of theories, plans or conceptual frameworks for the future of the South African media. Chapter Seven will focus on new directions and options for change from the political, media and academic spheres.
Notes for Chapter Six

1. The topic of racism in the media is extensively examined in the literature of journalism. Research studies by Teun Van Dijk in the Netherlands and Charles Husband in England contribute substantially to the understanding of racism in the media. The following is a list of useful contributions on the subject:


2. De Beer, Arnold, School of Communication Studies, Potchefstroom University, Agenda Setting Conference 2000, Media management and mixed monitoring: The value of collaboration to influence change, conference material.


4. Ibid., conference material.


12. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p.57.


20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

28. The inquiry was formally undertaken in terms of Section 184 (2) (a) of the Constitution 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996).


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


34. Submission to the SAHRC hearings, (Day 4), March 9, 2000.

35. Cruywagen Dennis and De Klerk, Willie, submission to the TRC inquiry into the media during the apartheid era, Human Rights violations, Athlone, May 20, 1997.
36. Ibid.
37. SAHRC report, Section II, p.23.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid, p.27.
41. SAHRC Report into Racism in the media, Section 5, p.90.
42. Ibid, p.92.
44. Ibid.
CHAPTER SEVEN

NEW DIRECTIONS AND OPTIONS FOR CHANGE

Introduction

This chapter considers a new role for the press in the democratic new South Africa by evaluating contributions towards the transformation of the press from a variety of sources including the Reconstruction and Development Program, journalists, academics and political enterprises.

A role for the press

In the Western world, the role of the press is not only to inform the public and represent the public interest but also to scrutinise government policies and to act as public watchdog. The press takes on an adversarial role with an emphasis on discussing matters of controversy rather than fulfilling the goals or wishes of the government.

A Third World approach to the role of the press however, takes a different tack. It is directed towards issues of national development, nation building and public education. Some would argue that this developmental journalism concept is fraught with danger and a short step away from an authoritarian system of media control despite its good intentions. Chief among the complaints against a developmental media policy is that it can continue indefinitely as long as the government is assured of control of the levels of political discussion. Sussman describes this aspect of developmental journalism as “concentration by objective journalists on the news, the newness of developments in education, agriculture, industry, communications, and applied science, developments that leaders hope will eventually produce economic success and secure a sense of national unity”.

Media use for developmental purposes may not yield the expected results and depends to a large extent on Third World journalists who are sympathetic to the concept of developmental journalism. Lent expands on the concept with further inter-related concepts and the growing swing in most of Asia to a “guided press” and developmental support communication. Asian governments continually state that because most of their societies are emerging democracies, they need time to develop their institutions. During this initial period of growth, stability and unity must be sought, criticism must be minimised and the public faith in governmental institutions and policies must be encouraged. Media must cooperate, according to the guided press notion, by stressing positive, development-inspired news, by
ignoring negative societal or oppositionist characteristics and by supporting governmental ideologies and plans.³

What constitutes news in the Third World can be radically different from what constitutes news in the libertarian Western model. In the developing nations, there is a need for the national media to operate within stipulated state laws. The national press cannot be allowed to be the “enemy” of the state. In the developing nations there are nation-building or slanted news values and concepts that guide the gatekeepers of information in their selection and evaluation of news. Nasser suggests that to understand how Third World news concepts differ from or are similar to those in the West, it is advisable to first consider the Western news model, which he describes as “the concepts of objectivity and speedy dissemination in a free marketplace of ideas where journalists act as ‘watchdogs’ over the government and are essential to an open and democratic society in the West”.⁴

The theoretical foundation of developmental journalism is traced to the United Nations’ efforts to facilitate a New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) and was enthusiastically embraced by Third World and notably south-east Asian countries (see Chapter Five).

Eric Loo, who heads the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of Wollongong, agrees that in recent times development journalism has been used to muzzle the press:

The principles guiding journalistic practice is national unity and social cohesion, nation building. I mean to outsiders these terms are just glib terms but in the context of Malaysian society those are real issues. So, to observers these principles have been abused by the state. So it is not the question of whether development journalism is supportive of government policies or whether it is another form of uncritical journalism. I think the question is whether that concept has been abused, misunderstood and used to intimidate the press to compel the press to write according to what government leaders or the state will define to be the proper way to report on national issues. ⁵

Loo’s comments mirror the writings of Merril [1970], Gunaratne [1980], Hachten [1987] and expand on earlier pioneering work by Siebert [1953]. The function then of development journalism was not merely to keep watch on government actions but to promote the development of the country. See Appendix E for the philosophy of ASEAN national press systems.
Hemant Shah [1996] suggests that because of the negative connotations suggested by the term developmental journalism, a preferable descriptive term could be *emancipatory journalism* to facilitate recognising a role for journalists as participants in a process of progressive social change. Emancipatory journalism then “encourages journalists to abandon the role of neutral observer while reporting in a manner that is thorough, deeply researched and historically and culturally grounded, and that promotes social change in favour of the dispossessed”.

Johan Galtung and Richard Vincent [1992] offer a 10-point proposal for a development-orientated news media:

1. Whenever there is a reference to development, try to make it concrete in terms of concrete human beings. Thus they urge journalists to relate development to people they should report people as subjects, rather than objects or victims of need (pages 151-152).

2. A development-oriented mass media should focus not only on the economics of development but also on military political and cultural aspects. The reasoning is that developmental journalism has to focus on more than economics because all these factors – military power, political power, cultural power etc. – have to do with development in one way or another and journalists should try to get people to reveal their inner agendas. (pages 154-155).

3. Mere economic growth data will never do without accompanying dispersion data. Journalists must look at the income of the bottom 50 per cent or 10 per cent as well as the top 10 per cent or one per cent when making analysis (page 156).

4. Focus on relations, not only difference; and do so not only within countries but between countries (page 156).

5. A development-oriented press would do well to focus on the totality of concrete life situations (page 159).

6. A development-oriented press would never forget the dimension of democracy. Democracy can only function when there is a free flow of information between people, the system and the media (page 162).

7. There is always the possibility of reporting about development, not critically in terms of problems, but constructively in terms of positive programs.
Success stories may contribute to a general sense of optimism that can generate more momentum for democracy and development (page 162).

8. Allow the “people” to talk. To some extent community cable channels in the United States allows this to happen. It means giving a voice to the people to generate “an enormous amount of visions”. Thus people get a voice as experts in line with the seven preceding ideas (page 163-164).

9. Go one step further and let the people, to some extent, run the media. It means giving people some media control. Letters to the editor and op-ed pieces have space constraints. The next stage is to let people write and produce much of the material of the newspaper, thus enabling them to provide their own knowledge, experience and expertise. The extent to which this happens can become a criterion of mass media quality in a country (page 164).

10. Let people run more of society, and then report on what happens. Developmental media should report more on what popular movements are doing not only their successes but their failures too (pages 164-165).

Gunaratne finds it hard to disagree with Galtung and Vincent’s 10-point proposal and together with Shah’s thinking on emancipatory journalism, agrees it “provides a reasonable framework to understand the essentials of the concept of developmental journalism”. It is also a framework, according to Gunaratne, “that will enable us to compare developmental journalism with its new-born cousin that calls itself broadly public journalism”.

Somewhere between the developmental media theory and the concept of a socially responsible media lies the future direction of the South African print media as it emerges from the apartheid era. The emphasis firstly should be to reorganise the editorial structure of the national newsrooms. This incorporates managerial structures that include the widest spectrum of society and more importantly, the agenda setters – copy tasters, sub-editors, and sectional heads from news editors to fashion editors, literary editors, foreign editors and others who have the role of copy selection that remains still mainly in white hands – need to accommodate a wider spectrum and a diversity of views. And it is likely the government will have to offer directions in the national interest that will allow a meaningful editorial reshuffle of the gatekeepers of information if the national press is reluctant to speed up the transformation process.

In what previously was marked by a curious mix of libertarian approach to the print media, especially by the English language press, there is now a need for an overhaul as the focus of the news is directed to a growing new audience. But it is a complex dilemma.
Managerial and editorial direction must incorporate the needs of this new and rapidly expanding middle class as well as shifting the balance of editorial content that appeals to a much broader market in a non-racial society.

Mainstream newspapers are trapped in a vicious cycle of balancing the needs of advertisers who target the financially secure readership of old and the need to provide editorial content that appeals to the broader non-racial audience the bulk of which is not so well off. This shift in editorial content runs the risk of alienating both advertisers and old readers, adversely affecting circulation and loss of revenue in a tight newspaper market where profit margins are already slim and falling. In the beginning, this shift in editorial policy could prove to be a financially costly exercise for newspapers. But it comes with the promise of long-term benefits as the press becomes more inclusive as opposed to the legacy of the past where the focus of the newspapers was slanted towards white readership.

The previous traditional conservative British approach to news content and form is not the direction for the future. The role and future directions of the press, both the English and Afrikaans language press, remains firmly on the national agenda since the historic all-race elections of 1994, and a wide variety of different views have emerged.

Some are examined here in terms of the guarantees under the new South African Constitution and in light of the aspirations of the Government of National Unity’s Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP).

**Directions under the RDP**

Some of the lofty and sometimes vague and loosely defined aspirations for the media under the initiatives of the RDP in the new dispensation are:

- An information policy that guarantees active exchange of information and opinion among members of society, a new information policy that aims to facilitate exchange of information within and among communities, and between Government and society as a two-way process.

- New voices at national, regional and local levels and genuine competition rather than a monopoly of ideas must be encouraged.

The RDP is a government initiative to level the playing field and improve social and economic conditions for the millions of underprivileged and disadvantaged people in South Africa. Without the free flow of accurate and comprehensive information, the RDP concedes it will lack the mass input necessary for success. There are 11 official languages in South Africa, including English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Sotho, Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa, Venda, Tsonga, Swazi, and Pedi. The problem is further exacerbated by high rates of illiteracy. In 2003, South
Africa estimated its literacy rate (those aged 15 and over who can read and write) at 87 per cent for males and 86.4 per cent for females. The figures appear to be high and many would dispute its accuracy and argue that it is unrealistically high.

Open debate and transparency in government and society are seen as crucial elements of the Reconstruction and Development Program and for this to occur, the government needs an information policy that guarantees active exchange of information and opinion among all members of society.

The RDP wants the government to “encourage and develop all three tiers of the media – public, community and private. New voices at national, regional and local levels, and genuine competition rather than a monopoly of ideas must be encouraged”. However, the infrastructure to facilitate these plans can best be described as at the planning stages at this time of writing.

Measures must also be introduced to curb monopoly control of the South African media, cross-media ownership of print and broadcast media must be reviewed and must be subject to strict limitations “determined in a public and transparent manner”. Unbundling of existing media monopolies must be encouraged both in the areas of publishing and distribution and for the implementation of these wide-ranging measures.

The RDP suggests the implementation of an affirmative action program to “empower communities and individuals from previously disadvantaged sectors of South African society”. Among the initiatives suggested are mechanisms to make available resources needed to set up broadcasting and printing enterprises at a range of levels; training and upgrading, and education to ensure that communities and individuals recognise and exercise their media rights. The RDP suggests government funds should be set aside for the training and education of journalists and community-based media and further, that media institutions should be encouraged to do the same. To ensure the free flow of information, the RDP seeks that the Freedom of Information Act be broadened within the parameters of the new Constitution.

The RDP also states that the South African Communication Service (SACS) must be restructured in order to undertake two important tasks; the provision of objective information about the activities of the State and other role players, and the facilitation of the new information policy. Towards this aim, the information arms of various ministries also have to be strengthened, especially those dealing with reconstruction and development.

As part of a democratic information program, the RDP also sees a role for various institutional mechanisms, among them the establishment of an Information Development Trust made up of a variety of representatives including government, journalists, media owners, and political parties to work out detailed criteria and methods for aiding relevant
media enterprises. The important plank of the RDP’s new information policy: the effective two-way communication process between Government and citizens is in need of repair because it is ineffective and understaffed.

The national government is having difficulty getting its message out, and there is a belief in certain quarters that the national media is if not unsympathetic to the new government then certainly adversarial and critical to the point of causing damage to the needs and aspirations of the African National Congress and majority leaders in the new Government of National Unity. Much has been done to improve government communications since the RDP was first launched in 1994, and by 2000, the SACS has developed into a comprehensive government information agency with offices in Pretoria and Cape Town, online links, international and national staff as well as offering media support to government missions abroad.

At a Conference of Communicators at Arniston, Western Cape, Allister Sparks [1995] suggested that effective two-way communication in South Africa does not exist. Citizens must be informed, he says, if they are to make rational choices. And citizens must be informed if they are to hold their public representatives accountable.

For Sparks, these two factors constitute democracy’s bottom line and he says that the government, for its part, must also be aware of and responsive to public opinion if it is to govern effectively and in accordance with the will of the people. He says:

At the moment that effective two-way communication does not exist, at least not adequately. I believe the will to have it is there. Hence the clause guaranteeing freedom of speech, including freedom of the media that is entrenched in our Interim Constitution. Hence, too, the government’s commitment to the Open Democracy Bill, which if enacted, will make South Africa one of only 14 countries in the world with such legislation empowering the ordinary citizen to access information about the functioning of all governmental bodies.11

Sparks was directing his comments in response to suggestions by the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, to introduce a “Government Hour” on national television as a means of getting the government’s message across to the nation. Sparks says it highlights a deficiency in the state of communications between the government and the citizens of South Africa and this in turn “has serious implications for the new democracy we are trying to build, for an effective flow of information about the activities of government is an organic necessity for the proper functioning of a modern democracy”.12
He blames deteriorating journalistic standards, understaffed newsrooms, inexperience and a downturn in economic viability of the print industry as prime factors contributing to the inability of the government to get its message across.

This is compounded by the fact that the government does not have a media mouthpiece of its own and must communicate through existing media channels, and this means that the messages are “filtered through privately-owned newspapers and independent broadcasting stations over which it has no control – and which may ignore those messages, or get them wrong, or put their own spin on them to suit their own agendas”.

Sparks offers no suggestion that the black government may be facing a hostile and unresponsive media that is adopting a critical and damaging approach and that this unwelcome direction is coming from media gatekeepers that are still a legacy of the apartheid era. However, the question of understaffed and inexperienced newsrooms is not without foundation. Mathatha Tsedu [1995] the political editor of the Sowetan, conceded at a Freedom of Information seminar in Grahamstown that reporters in his newsroom were “a greenhorn squad” and that 70 per cent of them had less than two years’ experience, two staffers in Parliament had to cover six Constitutional Assembly theme committees, one of which had six sub-committees every day and furthermore, the media was being used as a recruiting ground for communications experts for the new civil service.

Sparks offers two options available to the Government short of developing its own newspapers to improve or facilitate two-way communication between the citizens and the Government: (a.) Develop a highly organised, highly skilled government media liaison structure and (b.) develop a dedicated public affairs television channel that can convey information of national importance directly from the source to the public, along the lines of the United States model C-Span or Cable Satellite Public Affairs network.

It is a television network that operates two 24-hour channels of coverage in the US House of Representatives and all its congressional committee hearings and the Senate. It also provides interviews with key political figures involved in the debates, political analysts and visiting or overseas experts, authors of books on national and international affairs as well as reporting major speeches both inside and outside of government.

Guy Berger, professor of journalism and media studies at Rhodes University, finds common ground with Sparks in a need for improved government communications by improving the Government’s press liaison capacity. For Berger, though, the government should aim for “interactive communication with (and between) citizens rather than a purely ‘push’ model of communication”.

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This requires, firstly, that the government does not “mess with the mass media (public or private), but rather boosts its public liaison capacity; secondly, that it improves direct communications with citizens via existing public servants and activities. (Both these strategies necessitate improved internal communications within government and state). Thirdly, and most importantly, government should create an enabling environment for many more citizens to become communicators in their own right. This entails limited media subsidies for community-based communication, as well as the rapid development of telecommunications”. 15

Berger says that in developing a national communications policy, there is no need to reinvent the wheel because suitable proven models exist internationally and can be adapted to suit the particular needs of the South African situation. He says:

To assess what exactly we draw from overseas has to be firmly grounded in our knowledge of what is happening here (in South Africa), what we want to do about it, and why. The starting point in the here and now is — crudely — that the government is trying to upgrade the quality of life of black South Africans, that it believes communication has an important role to play in this, and that it has serious problems with the country’s present communication set up. 16

Against a background of cultural, education and economic diversity, Berger suggests it would be “a mistake to see communications simply as a means to changing South Africa” and he points out there are limits to what the government can achieve in working towards a Reconstruction and Development Program as he puts it “that is both by communications and for communications”. While drawing on the Libertarian theory for the development of the media, as well as the theory of social responsibility, Berger finds favour in the model developed in Sweden where the philosophy is that there is a governmental responsibility to help realise the right to communicate, suggesting some type of subsidy to promote the expansion and development of communication at different levels of society.

In South Africa this would entail the Government going further than simply using communication (inter alia) to champion the existing Bill of Rights; to facilitating the growth of citizens as communicators ... it moves into a different dimension, and indeed one that squares with the Reconstruction and Development Program’s philosophy of democratisation and civil empowerment. 17 But Berger points out the difficulties for the South African Government are many.

Firstly, he says, there is a coalition Cabinet and a commitment to national reconciliation, which restricts government ability to effect a radical reorientation of public or
private media. Secondly, the regulation of broadcasting is independent of government, even if the power of the purse is still there to be wielded.

Thirdly, there is the government’s commitment to a mixed economy, which limits the extent of government involvement in private sector communications. Fourth, there is a Bill of Rights which also prohibits the government from interfering in freedom of expression in that sphere.

So, the government could not, even if it wanted to, simply take over the existing communications apparatuses and point them in different directions. Nor, fifthly, can the government seriously set up a rival parallel system: there are scarce resources, and with the maxim of maximum impact at minimum cost, there is no way the government can (or should) afford to take on the challenge of getting into the mass media business.

Berger concedes the South African media is vulnerable to criticism of the quality of its coverage, there are frustrations with the media and this has increased as frustrations with the slow pace of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa has increased as well as the slow pace of implementing major planks of the RDP. Government complaints about the mass media that government affairs are ignored, downplayed or inadequately reported has some validity and substance. Sparks takes this aspect even further by claiming that reporting standards on South African newspapers were at the lowest he had seen in his 44 years of journalism. South Africa’s press was demanding access to information it did not have the resources or skills to deal with.

Sparks blamed low standards, understaffed newsrooms and an exodus of senior journalistic talent to more lucrative jobs for what he perceives as a demise in South African journalism and warns there are vast areas of the country, especially the former homelands that are not even covered by the press. As an example, he said, court reporting had fallen out of favour in newsrooms. And he warned that reporting that was inadequate, superficial or simply wrong would test the patience of the regime and its commitment to press freedom. The press, said Sparks, was the custodian of its own freedom. He warns:

If the Government moves against the press and the public applauds, we’re done for, is the ominous warning.

The criticism of the exodus of skilled journalists for higher paid jobs and improved prospects overseas was echoed by the editor of the Sunday Times, Ken Owen, who said that people who had not worked on South African newspapers in the past decade [1985-1995] could not realise how difficult, brutal, and bruising an environment it had been. He recalled that when he was appointed editor of Business Day, he started out with a staff of 73
journalists and within days there were 14 resignations on his desk, all lost to Australian media organisations.  

It is against this background then that Berger proposed several developments to improve both the role of the media and the supply of information by the government so that the media can operate more efficiently in keeping the public informed. In the short term, for the media to play its role properly requires an investment in training to improve the standard of reporting generally and more attractive staff conditions, criteria which he says the media have been slow to recognise.

The government, for its part, can improve inefficient and slow press liaison to get its message across quickly, accurately and in this way secure better coverage.

Government and state can also gain better coverage in the media by increasing access to officials. Government communication needs a policy definition about the level at which information can be released.... Maximum access may be the more advantage policy for the interests of both the government and the media.  

And as an option for future direction, although on a modest scale, Berger points the South African Government in the direction of the Swedish model while conceding that money in the form of grants and loans, and management training would be crucial for this strategy to succeed.  

The observations of Berger and Sparks highlighting understaffed newsrooms, a lack of skilled journalists and poor editorial standards are not in dispute. These problems have been similarly acknowledged by the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF), at the Truth Commission hearings, and editors of major national newspapers. Efforts to improve editorial standards with increased training facilities have been implemented by Independent Newspapers as well as all the other major newspaper groups.

The effects of these training facilities have been negligible in the 10 years since the fall of apartheid and the focus is usually at the junior or introductory level of journalism. Training needs to be offered across the board, more importantly at the senior levels where changes are seldom seen and is urgently required.

The focus needs to shift to middle management where the national press is dominated by white journalists from the apartheid era. This is not to say that every white journalist operating at the mid-managerial level has tendencies towards racism, however it does block the career options of promising black and coloured journalists who then turn to newly created public service communications jobs. This exodus of black and coloured talent from an already shallow pool further erodes the efforts to restructure the national press.
What is needed is an honest commitment towards change by the national publishers. It must include opportunities for black and coloured journalists to rise above the junior levels where most of them languish. It requires further commitment from publishers to eliminate the difficulties faced by black and coloured journalists who feel undermined by the incumbents when they accept management offers. In practical terms, a black or coloured journalist who is offered a middle management or managerial position usually replaces a senior white journalist with many years’ experience. The displaced white executive is shunted sideways in the editorial reshuffle and resents this. The result is an unpleasant and hostile work environment that places unreasonable expectations on the replacement.

Coupled with a lack of managerial training and experience, black and coloured journalists who have been selected for such positions have faltered because they fall victim to an editorial office culture that resents change at the senior levels. Retrenchment of displaced senior white executives might be the solution to achieve the sort of non-racial mix in senior editorial ranks that is desirable. This could be a costly as well as a reluctant exercise but as matters now stand, black and coloured journalists drawn into the inner sanctum of national papers face a hostile reception when disgruntled, displaced white executives remain on staff to snipe from the sidelines. Inevitably, some of the newly anointed fail in their calling while others give up and quit for more lucrative jobs. And when that happens, publishers will be reluctant to introduce changes and it reinforces current practices to maintain the status quo.

Berger’s suggestion that the South African Government look in the direction of the Swedish model of media subsidies holds little promise. In a country where the focus is on improving basic human necessities like running water, electricity and community health services there is very little chance that the government could be persuaded to move in that direction. Instead, the government has opted to establish the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) to foster a more positive communication environment mainly via its daily online news service Bua News.

The GCIS is headed by Joel Netshitenzhe with the aim of ensuring that the government’s voice is heard. As a communications platform, the GCIS provides support and advice to the government, the media, the public and the international community. As a news agency delivering government spin to the media, its services are viewed with suspicion at worst and as unobjective at best with the result that the GCIS struggles to get the government’s message across to newspapers that are independently owned and operated. This in itself does not augur well for a developmental style of journalism in South Africa.
Winds of change

In an effort to meet the challenges facing the media in post-apartheid South Africa, *The Cape Times* was one of the first major metropolitan newspapers to appoint a “coloured” person as editor. Moegsien Williams saw his role as redefining the news for a newspaper that was considered primarily a “white newspaper” but the majority of its readers were coloureds and only 38 per cent of its readers were white.

Williams suggested *The Cape Times* was now a newspaper for all South Africans but there were serious misgivings about the direction of the newspaper. Further, some serious hurdles needed to be overcome before this claim could be justified because the staff composition did not reflect this change in direction and there were fears that significant editorial changes could alienate the 38 per cent of white readers.

For Williams, this was the challenge of the emerging role of the print media:

There are two challenges really. The one is internal because the reality is that our staff do not also reflect the readership. I have a situation here where I am only the sixth or seventh person of colour on the staff and we have, genetically speaking, a 62 per cent black readership so it is totally out of kilter, we need to begin to reflect the demographic realities on our staff. The other problem we are dealing with internally is our approach to news. I’m speaking of drawing up an entirely new news agenda to move away from the pre-apartheid news coverage to a post-apartheid news coverage and it requires a re-education in your staff. Externally we are thinking of beginning to engage our different communities, I call it redefining the news, you know, asking people to help us to shape a newspaper that will serve them best.23

The program is in its infancy and indications are it could work. The circulation of *The Cape Times* has shown slight improvement to May 1996, over a nine-month period since the start of the new direction and Williams conceded that while change was needed, newspapers as well as South African society generally, were still in a state of transition. While there were many changes taking place there were also many things that have remained the same. As for an assessment of the current role of the print media in South Africa, Williams remained optimistic.

But the changing face of South African society, politics and the new dispensation has been slow in filtering down the media, which is still regarded as an oppositionist press. Williams admits:
We are not doing a great job. As print media specifically ... we have woken up very late to the changes that have taken place and I am speaking of the initial reforms announced by (former President F.W.) De Klerk six years ago. We are pretty much grappling with issues which the politicians dealt with four, five years ago when they wrote the interim constitution, so we are way behind in a way the rest of society in transforming ourselves and that is really the challenge. I must say the fact that in my company there has been a change of ownership. It has resulted in a new ethos in the company. A new kind of mission statement has emerged and right at the top of this mission statement is the need for us to transform our newspapers to fit in with the new society and form an integral part of this new democracy ... My editorship of The Cape Times is an indication of the changes that are taking place. It would have been unheard of for a coloured person to become editor of The Cape Times or a major metropolitan daily. So changes are taking place and I’m pretty hopeful.24

[Williams was later to take up the editorship of Independent Newspapers’ afternoon daily in Cape Town, The Argus. The Cape Times is the morning daily. Ryland Fisher replaced Williams as editor at The Cape Times. Fisher’s appointment was part of the transformation process within Independent Newspapers.]

At the Sowetan, South Africa’s largest circulation daily newspaper [around 218,000 a day] which serves a predominantly black readership in the Johannesburg-Soweto region, the editor Mike Siluma defines the role of his newspaper as primarily to inform people and to educate them about the transformation that is occurring in South Africa. “I think the big thing that has changed,” Siluma says, “is that where previously the (main role) of black journalists was to oppose government. That was what we lived for because that was the reality then. Apartheid was a life and death issue and that put us in opposition to the government by definition. Now there is not that situation where black people are opposed and the government is not oppressing anybody, society is freer and therefore there is no reason for us to take an oppositionist position to government. Our rule is to inform people and to educate them about the transformation that is happening in the country.”25

As for the current position of the print media in South Africa, Siluma believes it is still torn between old loyalties on both sides of politics. He felt that there was much confusion about the role of the press with some people believing that the media should be oppositionist. Siluma said there were, for example, many black journalists who held strong political views and who did not agree with the ANC for instance and who felt “that the whole transformation thing is a sell-out basically”. Siluma says:
Then you have the white editors who are still rooted in the old system, who want to take the view that the media have to distrust everything and anything the government does. And then you have other people who believe you have to support the ANC in the interest of the transformation. There is no universal position that the media has taken.

Old foes show their hands

In the lead up to the first multiracial elections in South Africa, national attention focused on the need for a revised media policy. Political parties jostling for a piece of history joined a wide forum of opinion-makers and agenda-setters in offering diverse options on the role and direction of the media to guide the emerging new South Africa along the democratic path.

While the African National Congress started work in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1988 on constitutional guidelines and a blueprint for the transition to a post-apartheid South Africa, the focus was mainly on politics and economic matters including the more high profile policies on housing, education social reforms and welfare, a coherent media policy was not afforded a high priority. It was not until 1991 that the Department of Information and Publicity of the African National Congress convened a meeting of more than 300 delegates to draft a media policy.

The National Party steered clear of launching a media policy statement but responded with a series of answers outlining future directions to ensure freedom of the press within free market parameters, and indicated opposition to state intervention or “sponsorship” of sections of the media to provide a more equitable degree of access to the media by all sections of the community. In March, 1992, the Pan African Congress of Azania released its media policy statement. After the South African political reforms announced in February 1991, the Democratic Party was the first to formulate and present its media policy, which their media spokesman Peter Soal developed further at a seminar at the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies on July 30, 1991.

The ANC media policy

The need for a Media Charter which sets out the principles of press freedom and one based on the free flow of information that promotes a culture of open debate was one of the ideals of the African National Congress defined in a policy statement in 1992, ahead of the historic all-party elections in 1994.

The ANC viewed as important the need to transform the national media – which by and large is a commercial media except for the national radio and television broadcaster – so that it may perform its necessary role in the democratic process of an emerging new nation. In
a preface to its proposed Media Charter, the ANC expressed the view that “elements of such a Charter would find expression in a Constitution and Bill of Rights; while others would be realised through relevant legislation. Yet others would serve as social guidelines”.

By way of explaining a Media Charter, the ANC regarded it as “erroneous to advocate the setting up of bodies which determine what society should or should not read, hear or watch. Rather judicial procedures should be effected if and when otherwise ordinary laws of the land are violated. On the other hand media freedoms should be understood in the context of other citizens’ rights such as the right to privacy”.

**ANC draft media charter**

At the heart of the ANC’s media charter is the fundamental belief that democracy cannot emerge and flourish without a democratic media. But there are some qualifications to this broad-brush approach and an admission that freedom of the press on its own is not enough.

There is a need for affirmative action to redress the imbalance and injustices of the apartheid years. There is a need for an equitable distribution of media resources, development programs and “a deliberate effort to engender the culture of open debate”.

The proposed charter considers it the right of all citizens to participate in the decision-making process and to be able to do so adequately, the citizens need to be properly informed by a responsible media and must have access to different options so that an informed choice can be made. The legacy of apartheid and South Africa’s formerly closed society and restrictions on the free flow of information under the National Party government plus the structure and ownership of the national media resources, the skills, language policy and social deprivation has meant that access to information for the bulk of South Africa’s citizens has been undermined and in its preamble to the Draft Media Charter, the ANC indicates a new direction to overcome these difficulties.

The draft media charter is comprised of six categories including democratisation of the media; public media, media-workers and society, education and training, promotional mechanisms. The thrust of the Charter is contained in the first category which deals with basic rights and freedoms. It states:

1. All the people shall have the right to freely publish, broadcast and otherwise disseminate information and opinion, and shall have the right of free access to information and opinion.

2. All institutional and legislative measures which restrict the free flow of information or which impose censorship over the media and other information agencies shall be restricted.
3. All people shall have the right of access to information held or collected by the State or other social institutions subject to any limitations provided for in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights.

In addition, the Draft Charter makes the following provisions:

- diversity of media ownership and publishing and distribution facilities,
- affirmative action programs,
- guarantees of media access to all communities and at all levels of society,
- state media resources to be used to promote and strengthen democracy,
- provisions for a state broadcasting service independent of the ruling party and serving all sectors of society,
- guarantees on the right of reply and a guarantee of a citizen’s right to privacy,
- media workers to be protected from threats of intimidation and other forms of pressure that may inhibit their work,
- journalists to be protected by the law from revealing their sources,
- journalists will be free to form and join trade unions political parties and other organisations of their choice,
- a promise to provide facilities for the training and upgrading of media workers,
- training programs for disadvantaged sectors of the community to foster, develop and implement broadcasting and print media facilities and as part of a civic education program,
- the state and media institutions shall strive to inform citizens about their media rights and those of media workers.

The ANC’s draft media charter is an ambitious document that encompasses a vast range of issues that affect the functions of a dynamic and free press and it sets impressive goals which in practice would be difficult, if not impossible to implement. Thus, the Charter runs the risk of being described as little more than an idealistic wish list. In conclusion, the ANC resolved to amend and review government information services formerly used and controlled as party political information services by the previous National Party government and included, amongst others, the state information services such as the South African Communications Service, the Human Sciences Research Council, the police and defence force media liaison services.30
The ANC also sees a need for a national daily newspaper “published from a democratic perspective” and the establishment of a media development program to “increase the party’s ability to use the media to inform, educate, mobilise, and organise”, as well as conceding a need to “restructure and democratise the broadcast, film and print media and to develop these areas through a democratic process”.

PAC and the media

In a short statement released in March 1992, the Pan African Congress questioned the role and independence of the mainstream South African print media, declaring that with the media in control of white monopolies, freedom of expression did not exist in South Africa because no debate was free of the control of “white capital” and the picture was one of absolute control over the right of free speech, freedom of the press, and guaranteed free debate.

The run-up to the first multiracial general elections in South Africa in 1994 appeared to find the Pan African Congress without a considered media policy. In a policy statement released in March, 1992, the PAC offers what appears no more than an ad hoc media policy which reflects the party’s rhetoric on a variety of matters.

Among its objectives, it pledges a guarantee of freedom of the press and the electronic media and commits itself to a Bill of Rights to enshrine freedom of expression.

It finds fault with the concentration of media ownership currently under white control, and states that this gross imbalance in ownership must first be changed before democratic debate can flourish. Democratic debate, the PAC states, “can only flourish where the gross imbalance that presently exists in the media is drastically altered in favour of the ordinary Azanian (the PAC’s name for South Africa is Azania) – the worker, the unemployed, youth and students, the rural peasant and the landless labourer”.

It states that informed debate and consequent informed political action is the essence of democracy and it cannot flourish “with false propaganda to serve class interest”. In an effort to reshape the media, the PAC offered the following suggestions to guarantee freedom of the press and electronic media:

- Freedom of expression must be enshrined in a Bill of Rights;
- The control of the media must be wrested from the absolute control of the “big four” (the four major national press groups). The PAC believes that there should be a limit on the number of newspapers owned by a single company;
- The Constitution must make provision for the right of minority (alternative) newspapers to exist and to ensure its right, the State
must afford these newspapers subsidies to ensure its survival. These subsidies should be awarded as a right and with agreed audited circulation figures. The political party in power would not be allowed to interfere with such subsidies and it would ensure the right of dissent;

- A Press Council must be established to ensure proper standards are maintained in the dissemination of the news; it would also safeguard the privacy of individuals against unwarranted interference, the council should also have the right to take action against any person responsible for inciting the harassment of journalists performing their duties.

**Press subsidies to foster diversity**

The Pan African Congress’ notion of government subsidies for certain types of newspapers as a means of ensuring diversity of opinion is not new. It has been tried with a degree of success by some developed nations of Europe and elsewhere.

The democratic socialist media system option proposed by Louw [1994] included a media subsidy system that he suggested could be designed “to overcome the skewing that a capitalist media system creates”. It would work with a view to ensuring that all constituencies were guaranteed access to the media of their choice and it would be administered by a statutory Media Council.32

Louw’s subsidy option had its foundations in similar subsidy systems that have been tried in Sweden, Holland and Belgium. While this theory has operated with some success in Europe, it is fraught with danger in South Africa where proper administration and misuse cannot be excluded. That is before the difficulties of sorting out the ratios of editorial material that will be published, the tone and content of the messages, and the practical administration of the project. Louw suggested the State should create a fund to pay for this media diversity and that the fund be created from taxes on the commercial media and advertising sectors.

If insufficient funds are raised from these two industries, the state should make up the shortfall to ensure the success of the project. Louw describes this as his Democratic Socialist Media System, it is an option consistent with the aims of the African National Congress’ Freedom Charter. Louw argues further that the incoming black government, serving as it has to “the present have-nots’ (the working class, peasants and unemployed) the government will be under considerable pressure from its constituency to change the present media system because the present network only articulates the position of a white middle-class) minority.33
Louw offered this theory in 1993, before the Government of National Unity took over from the National Party and his assessment of the role and direction of the media cannot be argued with. He is correct in his projection that the “have nots” — meaning largely the former oppressed blacks — will put pressure on the ANC-led government to change the present media system. However, six years later, it has become clear that the national media, both the English and Afrikaans press, do not share the confidence of the larger section of the community.

This is both true in terms of content and agenda setting in the national press. It is also true as far as the revelations at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission show a national media that are reluctant to accept blame for their role during the apartheid years and seeking rather to grab praise for its role in the demise of apartheid. In the twisted dynamics of South African politics and media, it is true that the press at some stages pursued a defiant and critical role against government excesses and intolerance but certainly, from the perspective of the oppressed and from the perspective of black journalists, it was quite different and the efforts amounted to doing too little and usually too late.

This dichotomy still exists. It is found in the complaints of government officials and leaders who still argue that the national press was continuing to operate in a way that was harmful and detrimental to the aspirations of the government — or even further, that the national press was actively working to the detriment of the new government by focusing on government inefficiencies and failures in a country that was struggling with economic and social reforms and hampered by a police force that was losing the fight against crime and violence. The underlying suggestion being that the white-dominated press still cannot come to terms with the overwhelming changes that resulted in the fall of apartheid and the installation a black majority government.

And to further complicate matters, the South African President, Nelson Mandela, sounded the warning bells in his opening address at the ANC national conference in Mafeking on December 16, 1997 when he warned that there were still a large number of whites in South Africa who were dissatisfied with the changes from white rule and in a blistering attack Mandela accused white South Africans of still wanting to profit from the apartheid era.

He accused sections of the white community of actively fomenting counter-revolutionary measures to overthrow the black government. Mandela warned the party delegates that there was a Third Force operating to destabilise the country. The rising crime rate was just one of their methods to make the country ungovernable and chaotic.

The national press has on many occasions been accused of constant criticism of these problems and the president’s blistering speech was yet another indication that the national press and the government were on a collision course.
The ingredients are certainly there and so are the signals from a number of speeches and statements on the media in the past four years of post-apartheid South Africa. Despite the provisions of freedom of speech in the Bill of Rights, an ANC led Government under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki, the national press faces serious challenges.

Louw argues that instead of nationalising the commercial media, the government might be better off creating a parallel system for the purpose of its constituency. This parallel system would consist of a media subsidy system. In theory, Louw’s suggestion makes good sense but the provisions of the subsidy system would, in a practical sense, be difficult to implement. There would be too many interest groups, too little finance, as well as the potential for mismanagement.

On a practical level, any subsidy system has potential for abuse and fraud. Besides, the difficulty of collating and dividing the financial incentives and the editorial ratios, it is the financial management of such a scheme that can place it at risk. A lack of properly trained journalists is an added problem. The establishment of proper, functional newsrooms would be costly and outweigh the benefits in a country where subsidies may be better spent in more practical ways such as improving public health schemes, alleviating extreme poverty, extending electricity supplies or improving community housing. The need for a subsidised media lags far behind some extremely rugged social problems.

A Media Council could be established by statute to monitor and control the subsidy system, in addition the Media Council would be composed of persons with a diversity of opinion. Louw argues:

The Media Council could also assist the State in ascertaining levels of taxation on the commercial media infrastructures (newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, advertising and PR agencies, film and video distributors, cinema industry etc.) Taxation of these media is one way of redistributing wealth away from, say the liberal commercial press sector towards other constituencies. Such a subsidy system would enable an ANC government, for example, to serve its own constituency’s needs. However, it would simultaneously guarantee other constituencies their own independent media. Under such a media system there would be no need to nationalise the existing English-liberal or Afrikaner-nationalist press in order to redress the skewing of information resources.

The rationale behind Louw’s democratic socialist media system is his argument that the South African media needs “a position that attempts to marry the positive aspects of both the libertarian and the Marxist approaches, and yet one that attempts to avoid the pitfalls of
both ie. a position between the options of (1) nationalising the media, and (2) leaving the current structures unchanged”.

Jackson also considers the prospects of a media subsidy system as he grapples with what he describes as the single most compelling question about the future of the South African press: What are its prospects for operating freely in post-apartheid South Africa? In 1993, the quick and simple consensus among academics, journalists and editors was that freedom of the press would go as well as the fortunes of the country. A more considered view, Jackson suggests, is that “the press in South Africa is likely to end the 1990s with more freedom than it began the decade.”36 However, he warns that under a new political order, it is harder to project. Considering what happened in Rhodesia under Ian Smith and with the transition to Zimbabwe and the incoming government of Robert Mugabe, the Argus Group has had first-hand experience of a liberation black government nationalising the press.

It is an argument that has sparked much debate especially among editors of the Argus Group (now Independent Newspapers) but after three years, the ANC-led government has pledged a commitment to free speech and backed this up with legislation, despite some serious clashes with the press. According to Jackson:

The worst case, from the perspective of the mainstream press’s management, would be nationalisation of the media. All papers would then serve as government voices. However, there is little indication that the ANC and other groups that may be part of the future government would choose this course – or find it politically wise to do even if they wanted to. Far more likely is some kind of affirmative action program to address the economic imbalance reflected in the present ownership patterns.37

His suggestion is pertinent and particularly accurate and there has been no talk or suggestion of nationalising the press. However, black ownership, as in the case of the Times Media Group acquisitions, is accelerating. Yet, undoubtedly, those who were once in opposition and who had serious doubts about the neutrality and other aspects of the press are now in power. The monopolistic nature of the South African press remains a major issue, the editorial staff ratios and the controlling hands of mainly white editors causes further concern. And the ANC has repeatedly suggested there must be a mechanism for change in the media. The mechanism could still be nationalisation of the press, although it is an unlikely prospect at this stage of the transition to a full democracy. A more likely option would be the firm hand of government shaping the role of the press – a policy of freedom with commitment. Jackson says:
In reality, the option of nationalisation seems slim. Actions against the mainstream press would draw a firestorm of criticism, both at home from many whites and internationally. A politically safer and generally more defensible option would be to exercise the ‘affirmative action’ approach. The most likely way of doing this would be to devise some formula for arranging subsidies to papers that were less secure financially. In a concerted effort to increase press diversity, the government might follow the example of Sweden, whose subsidy system has generated considerable interest in South Africa. With good reason, the ANC argues that because blacks have for generations been deprived of credible media outlets, a compelling need exists for the state to help level the playing field in tomorrow’s press environment.38

It is a scenario that horrifies the traditional white editors and causes ripples of discontent especially in the Afrikaans press. The role of the media has constantly been on the national agenda in the “transitional” post-apartheid period and while there have always been absolute guarantees of freedom of the press from the ANC, there has also been constant and harsh criticism of the way in which the media is going about its business.

It is not too hard to read into this constant battle between press and state that the ingredients for some sort of action on the part of the government do not seem far away.

**Market mechanisms, monopoly control**

Louw warns that the libertarian (or free press) model in South Africa has had severe limitations and that this free market place of ideas was not borne out by the facts. In fact, Louw suggests it does not work:

> Those in the mainstream press have traditionally blamed government censorship for their failure to fully cover events. It is true that the state has placed enormous restrictions upon the media. However, a significant part of the problem lies in the market mechanism itself when applied to the media organisation.39

Louw points to the failure of the largely anti-government *Rand Daily Mail* that became a victim of its own success as it opposed the authoritarian controls of the National Party. In the complexities of the South African politics, whites regarded the *Mail* as radical and to the left while to the majority of the oppressed people, even that which the *Mail* offered was not enough. But it is in the commercially-orientated media where the advertisers play such a pivotal role. For many of the white papers, their failure was not so much government
censorship as advertising censorship. Using the demise of the Rand Daily Mail as an example, Louw puts it this way:

It means a media de facto controlled by advertisers, and the middle-class interests to which they pander. Advertisers are interested to win those with disposable incomes; and that means the middle class. And if advertisers are interested in the middle class, then it is this middle class that editors of the commercially-driven media must attract if they are to survive. Non middle-class audiences are not profitable, and hence the media serving, for example, working-class opinion in a capitalist society will face enormous financial difficulties because they will have comparatively less success in attracting advertisers.40

Louw’s fears for monopoly control of the South African media and he proposes an alternate media subsidy system based on the “Western” Dutch model. He argues that in the transition to a democratic South Africa there is need for a diversity of print media voices because South Africa’s market-driven commercial press does not provide for such diversity.

It attracted serious dissent from senior executives of both the Argus Group and Times Media Ltd in the form of Peter Sullivan, at the time the editor of The Star, and Steve Mulholland, at the time the chief executive at TML. Sullivan challenged Louw’s assumption of a monopolistic media as a superficial argument that was easy to refute.

Sullivan pointed to the four major press groups operating in South Africa as well as the diversity of newspapers in the Johannesburg region where there are six major metropolitan daily newspapers to choose from every day. They are The Star, Business Day, Sowetan, Beeld, Transvaler, and The Citizen and on Fridays Johannesburg also produces Vrye Weekblad, Weekly Mail and City Press. In addition, Johannesburg citizens can also buy New Nation, and the Lenasia Indicator, Die Afrikaner becomes available sporadically as well as Die Patriot. On Sundays, Johannesburg citizens have a further choice of three newspapers, the Sunday Times, Rapport and the Sunday Star. In addition there are also more than 15 community newspapers operating in the suburbs surrounding Johannesburg.41

Compared to the rest of the world, Sullivan says, Johannesburg has a huge luxury of diversity in its newspapers and he rejects outright the suggestion of Louw and questions the suggestion “that newspapers were editorially exclusively in favour of capitalism”. The assertion by Louw that the Argus opposed apartheid, primarily because of the negative economic implications for capitalism, rather than due to its racism, is also rejected by Sullivan. As a loyal Argus company executive Sullivan defended the role of the group:
Throughout the history of Argus newspapers, Argus editors have challenged capitalism, have challenged mining interests, and have clashed with capitalists on a huge range of issues, including apartheid, corruption, exploitation, workers’ interests, mining rights, conservation, and virtually every subject affecting their readers.42

And in defence of the company’s policy on racial discrimination, Sullivan offers this assessment of the Argus Group:

It may have had some validity in the early 1950s, but from 1960 until the present day, any reader of The Star, The Argus or any other Argus-owned daily would have read, almost ad nauseum, of the evils of apartheid, the evils of all forms of racism, and often the evils of the labour practices of the mining houses. Apartheid was vigorously opposed through conviction by editors and journalists within the Argus Group far more effectively than through any other medium.43

If Sullivan’s observations, written in 1991, can be interpreted even vaguely as a fair reflection of Argus Company policy during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, then it does far more to indicate the curious dynamics and complexities of the South African press. Comparing Sullivan’s description of Argus company policy against the submissions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the apology from Independent Newspapers (the new owners of the Argus group) for omissions during the apartheid years, then Sullivan’s observations are seriously at odds with the versions of those who felt the brunt of the company’s discriminatory practices, the black journalists.

It would, in fact, be fair to suggest that Sullivan’s view of Argus company policy is the white man’s view while those at the other end of the colour spectrum working on Argus company publications have a seriously different opinion. It is this difference that leads to the theory that serious and far-reaching changes are undoubtedly needed in the South African media for it to function effectively.

While Sullivan offers little in the way of constructive change for new direction in the South African print media, he suggests that it is “the integrity of Argus newspapers and their commitment to absolute standards of ethics in journalism is what made them great. Seeking conspiracy is futile. Seeking to emulate them would be a far more profitable exercise – not in capitalist terms but in an intellectual profit to all people who value truth, and the attempts of journalists to provide that truth to readers”.

These are noble sentiments with little to complain about but when considered in perspective it is nonsense to suggest that the Argus Group did not actively practise racial
discrimination. Black and coloured journalists were only employed on the newspapers directly pitched at blacks and coloureds – newspapers including the *World, Sunday World, Post,* and *Cape Herald, The Argus,* one of the major newspapers in the group, only employed two coloured journalists out of a staff of more than 100 during the 1970s and mid-1980s and this was also the case at the company’s flagship newspaper, the *Star* in Johannesburg. These issues were comprehensively dealt with during the TRC inquiry into the media as well as the South African Human Rights Commission’s inquiry into the media and John Patten’s submission on behalf of Independent Newspapers.

In reply to Sullivan’s attack, Louw defends his view of an economic-driven media, discounting Sullivan’s view of a conspiracy theory. Louw suggests:

Further, ‘editorial independence’ within a market media system is prescribed because the market automatically imposes limitations upon the editors. No conspiracy is implied. In simple terms no editor running a profit-driven medium can afford to alienate those with disposable income ... To alienate this minority would be to lose the advertising life-line. This inherently skews the world-view presented by the market-driven media. The bottom line is profit, and the ‘integrity and truth’ Peter Sullivan talks of (I am tempted to ask whose truth?) has to fit this mould.44

Louw defends the allegation of media monopoly as a pedantic argument over the definition of “monopoly” but stresses the fact that “we no longer have a free-market libertarian press in South Africa. Further, our press industry has clearly not escaped the impact of expanding monopoly capitalistic relations of production ... what is clear to me are that we have an unhealthy concentration of ownership of the country’s important newspaper titles, and especially in the newspaper distribution centre.”

Louw further rejects Sullivan’s example of healthy media diversity and proof of a healthy press by pointing to six major metropolitan daily newspapers operating in the Johannesburg region as a spurious argument, the level of diversity which resembles the operations of the South African Parliament – a place where the like-minded get together to thrash out similarities. Louw says:

Just as our existing Parliament has not served democracy well, neither has the Argus ... In both cases the full range of interests in our society has not been represented ... Similarly, the argument that we have a free press because there is competition between the Argus and Times Media Ltd is ludicrous. This is a competition over who gets the profits, not over editorial content. Both the Argus and Times Media Ltd represent the same
narrow sectional interests in society. Furthermore, the news practices of both these organisations reduce information to profit and both promote the liberal free-enterprise which so neatly services the needs of mining-finance capital. Consequently, from the point of view of news content, it is irrelevant who wins this battle. Whoever wins, we as readers will get much more of the same. If we are to reform our press (or media) system so that it caters for all interests in our society then let us start by abandoning the absurd assumption that a liberal press can speak for everyone in society.45

Options from the National Party

Following a long and close association with the Afrikaans press, the National Party in 1990 offered an overview of future media policy in South Africa but also maintained that, strictly, the Party did not have a specific media policy.

Media affairs were left to government decisions. However, the National Party’s director of information, Sheila Camerer, offered some insights into National Party thinking in an interview with Professor Arrie de Beer in January, 1992 at the Free, Fair and Open Media conference at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town.

Insisting that the National Party does not have a media policy but rather a basic approach to the media, Ms Camerer says the National Party was committed to ensuring the free flow of information, a free press and also a free, independent and impartial national broadcaster. She concedes that previously the National Party had been in a position where it could leave it to the government to have a policy on the media and over the years that has been reflected in various laws and statements on the media. In the “new South Africa”, the National Party’s view is clear:

We would ideally like to see the media, like the elections, free, fair and open. And we are prepared to admit that our attitude has changed from a more restrictive approach to a much more open attitude.46

On the question of equal access to the media, the National Party feels that the print media should be left to its own free-enterprise devices and that market forces should operate. While agreeing that the media should be open and accessible to all South Africans, the National Party baulks at state intervention and clearly opposes any plans which the government may have to subsidise various publications to facilitate a more open access. Camerer states:

People should be free to invest in a newspaper because they feel they want to be a part of that newspaper and that they would reach a certain
readership or constituency for whatever reason. In the end that would be
the best leveller. Put in a different way – the state should not supply
centralised access to the media with state funded newspapers. Newspapers
should be sold for what they are worth on the open market, and people will
buy them and read them if they are viable. It is up to the market forces to
determine that.\footnote{47}

Roelf Meyer, the National Party’s Minister of Constitutional Development and
Communications in 1992 had the job of advising the government on its relationship with the
media. Meyer says: “We must ensure that in the new South Africa more than lip service is
paid to the freedom of the media. This might sound ironic coming from a representative of a
government which does not have the happiest of records in this regard. I believe, however,
that this places us in a particularly strong position to warn of the dangers – and counter-
productivity – of any media restrictions.\footnote{48} He warns that the maintenance of a vigorous and
unrestricted media will be a key success factor for the “new” South Africa and suggests that
in the years ahead the media in South Africa will have to play a particularly important role in
the following areas:

(a) They must inform the public openly and effectively on the issues of the
day. They must present their audiences with information on the
constitutional processes which are underway and on the constitutional
and economic options that are available to them.

(b) They must continue to act as a watchdog. They must expose
unacceptable behaviour, whatever the source from which it emanates.

(c) They must encourage open and vigorous debate.\footnote{49}

Under this set of guidelines, Roelf Meyer believes it is unreasonable to expect
newspapers to be objective and his reasoning is that “certain newspapers should forthrightly
espouse differing positions and set up their respective stalls in the marketplace of ideas. The
important thing is that the marketplace should be open to the purveyors of all ideas and that
the public should have the right to browse and buy as they please”.

There is a proviso, though, that while newspapers need not conform to basic rules of
objectivity, Meyer argues that it should be demanded of newspapers that they apply their own
codes of journalistic ethics strictly. In the end, Meyer states that the freedom of the press
depends on whether or not the media has the support of the public. In order to retain that
support, Meyer says newspapers have to be worthy of it and he concludes media is a
protection, not a panacea to security because without it no truly democratic dispensation is
Meyer concludes that the best guarantee of media freedom in South Africa may be to ensure that the media are as decentralised as possible.

Group political editor for Independent Newspapers, Zubeida Jaffer made a different appeal for change in the media when she delivered the World Press Freedom Day public lecture at Rhodes University’s journalism and media studies department in May 1997. Jaffer paid tribute the small number of women who made inroads in to the South African media and urged a transformation in the media “which for so long has been a male preserve”. Jaffer says:

Our newspapers and media institutions have been shaped during a dark period of authoritarianism. Now that we have won the constitutional guarantees of a free press, the challenge is how to make the institution representative of the entire South African population so that the sensitivities of different perspectives can be captured. Women constitute more than half the population. The press is less than free if their voices are not heard.

But she adds that “as journalists we have to find a way to look and listen beyond colour and political party. Only then will we be serving the public as we should be”.

While the political institutions have been transformed to represent all South Africans, Jaffer says the press as an institution lags far behind and there are no simple solutions to this problem.

The difficulty facing the profession is how to move beyond bombarding the public with just short snippets of spicy negative news. We are great at raising people’s anxieties but we do not leave them with much sense of hope or remedy ... There has to be a return to high standards of journalism which could provide the public with all the information needed to make educated decisions. The public must know that the journalists will ensure that society is open and not shrouded in secrecy.

As for future options for the media, Jaffer points out that the time has now come when journalists can be journalists with a proper role to play in order to make the country a better place.

We in the media have now to build our profession as a vibrant and meaningful part of the young democracy we struggled for. To do this we must acknowledge that we as professionals in the industry at this point come from completely different backgrounds with the most diverse life experiences. The media was polarised as the country was. And if we begin to talk about freedom of the press, we need first to understand where we come from, to acknowledge the divide so that an appropriate bridge can be
constructed. Let us not sweep differences under the table and pretend they do not exist. If we are honest with one another, we will be able to heal the wounds of the past.54

Summary
The legacy of discrimination in the South African press parallels the legacy of apartheid in South African politics. Discrimination was a part of South African life even before the separate development legislations were passed after the National Party came to power in 1949. This legacy of discrimination left its mark on the press. Later authoritarian controls, banning orders and censorship further complicated the role of the press. So it comes as no real surprise that the transformation to a democratic new South Africa signalled the opportunity to reshape the role and future directions of the press. Reshaping the national press remains the focus of constant speculation and debate. Chapter Seven has reviewed some of the post-apartheid proposed models.

This chapter shows that there are no shortage of opinions, with many observers offering extremely insightful and workable models about the way the South African media should transform to play a meaningful role in the country’s future – whether that be a combative effort that scrutinises and criticises government or whether it will be a media that pursues a socially responsible role in nation building or even whether the government will adopt a benevolent authoritarian approach.

But one thing is clear. There remains universal agreement that the national media needs serious overhaul and that the national press can adapt to the consequences. It is clear that if newspapers do not respond quickly enough to the challenges set by the government, it becomes increasingly more obvious that the government could feel obliged to step in and force a speedy transformation of the press. But there lies the danger not only for the press but also for the government. It is an option not ignored by senior government members and with a Constitution in place that guarantees a free press, the chances of an authoritarian clampdown on the media is remote but there is a troubled road ahead.

Chapter Eight will conclude with signposts on a troubled road for the South African press. Already, the need for integration in the newsroom has been recognised and guidelines for the national press have been resisted.
Notes for Chapter Seven


8. Ibid, Gunaratne.


13. Ibid, p.3. The South African Communications Service puts out its own publication and aims to get the Government’s message to as wide an audience as possible but it is an expensive and not very successful operation that has been under review.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid, section 4.1.


19. Ibid; also reported by South African Press Association (SAPA) February 8, 1995.


22. Ibid


28. Resolutions adopted at the ANC’s department of information and publicity national media seminar, November 23-24, 1991. The ANC proposed this draft Charter with the aim of encouraging debate as well as public campaigns regarding the media’s rights and role in society. In article 3 of the preface, the ANC suggests the basic principle around
which the Media Charter should resolve is maximum openness within the context of a national Constitution and a Bill of Rights.


33. Ibid, page 104.

34. Ibid, Page 105.


37. Ibid, page 196.


40. Ibid


42. Ibid

43. Ibid.


45. Ibid, p.188

46. Camerer, S., National Party policy on the Media, Speech delivered at the “Free, Fair and Open Media” conference, University of the Western Cape, January, 1992.

47. Ibid.

49. Ibid

50. Ibid.


52. Ibid

53. Ibid

54. Ibid, Press Freedom Address
CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Main findings

My examination of the South African press finds that transformation in the post-apartheid era has undergone dramatic positive developments but remains hindered by deep mistrust as documented in earlier observations and media representative submissions to the South African Human Rights Commission, the Independent Newspapers submission, and the Braude Report. The legacy of apartheid and discrimination still cuts deep in South African media culture despite several black and coloured journalists being appointed as editors on major metropolitan newspapers. It is at the middle to senior levels where transformation has become bogged down by hollow promises.

My examination, which includes interviews with working journalists and editors, indicates that journalism remains a difficult career option for blacks and coloureds with the majority of senior decision-making and gate-keeping roles still in the hands of whites who held the reins during the apartheid years. This remains a destabilising, unresolved aspect that gives rise to public perceptions of bias, control, and covert racism in the media.

The race card still cuts deep into South African journalism. It remains a black and white, us-and-them issue. However, to relegate this dilemma simply to a legacy of the apartheid era would be incorrect. South African journalism is struggling for credibility and respect. Its image is further eroded by the lack of career prospects and low wages. Senior journalists earning from R90,000-150,000 a year are being lured by the private sector and government to work as public relations or media spokespersons for double this amount. By way of example, a ministerial media spokesperson with journalism training and experience can expect up to R475,000 a year plus a housing subsidy.

Unattractive work conditions fail to attract the brightest candidates who are drawn to more lucrative career options in commerce, law or medicine and in government and industry after receiving their initial training and experience from the major publishers.

The friction between the government and the press that developed shortly after the transition to a new South Africa and intensified in the ensuing years to the point where fears were held for press freedom have dissipated.
The English-language press has moved cautiously to promote black people to senior staff positions and increased training facilities for staff from a disadvantaged background. The complaint from black journalists remain that these efforts are too slow. As a way of speeding up the process of integration in the newsrooms and to facilitate a speedier transformation, it seems reasonable that employment hiring guidelines for the national press be posted.

National newspapers must reflect the diversity of the new democracy from within before they can start to do the job properly. That is not to say that because newspapers in South Africa are staffed mainly by the former ruling class, that every white person working on a newspaper is racist or antagonistic towards the new black government. Editorial change will not be brought about by simply changing the racial balance of editorial staff. Research in the United States has shown that while newsroom diversity is necessary, it will not be sufficient to bring about changes in the way blacks are represented in the news.

It goes beyond structural change. It needs to embrace changes in attitudes and professional culture. Primarily, the dominant news values operate, and journalists (whether they are black or white) tend to define news according to this framework. In time, journalists will recognise/appreciate their functions in post-apartheid South Africa, that they have a significant role in moving the country through the transition where blacks, whites, and coloureds are treated equally in the eyes of the law.

However, a more racially balanced newspaper is an important pre-requisite for meaningful change. A more racially mixed newspaper in South Africa will be better prepared to reflect the life experiences and diversity of the society that they will serve. It must be remembered that during the apartheid years, racial groups were kept firmly apart and it will be a learning experience for all concerned as well as bringing a wider perspective to the debate.

As matters now stand, the media still remains under the control and direction of whites who have little knowledge of the diverse new target audience. In South Africa, with a population of around 40 million people and fewer than four million whites, it is obvious where the new target audience will be and it makes not only economic sense, it is also shrewd political judgment for the media to move in a different direction, considering growing criticism from the government that the media appears chained to the ways of the past. The government is eager to see transformation at every level of society. The national press stands accused of stalling efforts to change. This accusation by the government remains a serious threat to the press and whether the perception of bias is fair or not, it is expedient for the press to move quickly to redress the situation.

A more racially balanced newsroom will go some way to correcting claims of bias. Otherwise the implications for curbs on freedom of the press loom ominously large. The
argument from the government remains that the national press has, by default, threatened the freedom of the press and so has compromised its right to it; the press did not subscribe to the constitutional provisions because the press is not free to all sectors of the nation.

Limitations of analysis and further research

In an environment clouded by extreme differences of opinion and accusations of racism, it is imperative to state where you are aligned because it could be seen to influence your objectivity. Black journalists have a decidedly different view to white journalists on the role of the press during the apartheid years.

Significantly, the status quo remains. Both sides remain distrustful of each other. Black journalists are still struggling to gain a place in the national mainstream press other than at the lowest levels. As a black journalist working in South Africa in the mid 1970s at the height of the apartheid era, the future was ominous for black and coloured journalists. It was a hazardous profession offering few prospects. I fit into this category and share many of the views held by black South African journalists. In 1980, I left South Africa to pursue a journalism career in Australia because of the constant harassment, racism and lack of career opportunities. In this thesis, I have at all times tried to be objective and fair in my analysis.

This thesis has taken an historical perspective of the development of the South African press. The methodology is largely descriptive and empirical. It relies on interviews with working journalists. While it does not delve into a theoretical analysis of what could comprise a new media system in South Africa, it highlights the complex problems within the press that needs to be resolved to reflect the social and cultural diversity of South Africa. This is a challenge that not only faces the South African media but in many other countries and forms a major platform of the International Federation of Journalists’ Bilbao Declaration at the IFJ World Conference in 1997.

My thesis has built on previous examinations of the South African press and provides a framework for further research into a new media order for South Africa, the career development prospects and educational opportunities for black journalists, the impact of staff poaching by related industries and the low esteem in which journalism is held as a career option in South Africa.

This study has also gained from my experiences as a coloured journalist at the height of the apartheid era, a first-hand account of harassment and discrimination at the hands of over-zealous police and timid publishers.

This study incorporated the work of leading media scholars and academics who set the agenda with calls for media transformation. However, debate has been dominated by white
academics. Academic input by blacks and coloureds is lacking. This is a legacy of apartheid, Bantu education, and the lack of journalism education opportunities for blacks and coloureds.

Towards a new era

Ten years after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, the political transformation has gone full circle. Major social transformation has occurred but transformation in the national press remains elusive. Much has been done to integrate the national press but expectations remain that so much more needs to be done by the media to reflect the society which it serves and in which it operates.

Many of the criticisms of the media’s racist inclinations in 1994 and shortly thereafter have been resolved. For instance, there is a determined approach by the major media corporations towards a more racially balanced staff although the lack of senior black journalists remains a hindrance. Some news organisations have moved towards correcting the imbalance by offering opportunities to new graduates to train as sub-editors in the field of economics journalism. For instance, Johnnic Publishing whose operations include the Financial Mail, Business Day, Sunday Times, Eastern Province Herald, and the Daily Dispatch, launched the Johnnic Pearson Graduate Training Program in February 2003, which lasted six months. Independent Newspapers launched a similar training program for sub-editors.

Press ombudsman Ed Linington has been appointed to monitor complaints in the media. Justice Mervyn King was appointed chairman of the Ombudsman Appeal Board.

Two-way communication between the government and the press has been improved with the revamp of the old South African Communications Service (SACS) and the formation of the Government Communication and Information Service (GCIS) with Joel Netshitenzhe as chief executive officer and chief information officer. The objective of the GCIS is to promote access to information. GCIS describes its objectives as: ensuring that the voice of government is heard; fostering a more positive communications environment; having a clear understanding of the public information needs and government’s information needs; and setting a high standard for government communication.¹

The development and prosperity of the national press in South Africa is hindered by distrust and hostility at many levels. The press is suspicious of the government harbouring plans that could regulate the media and curb its investigative role. The government remains deeply mistrustful of sections of the national media and accuses it of undermining government initiatives and pursuing a hidden agenda. Some senior black journalists are also
accused of being manipulated by their editors and encouraged to pursue a malicious confrontation with the government.

The general public appears split between concerns for the future of the national press, mistrustful of its role in a non-racial society, while others sympathise with a press regarded as being under siege from government threats. This potentially damaging state of affairs was influenced by two main factors:

Firstly, the legacy of apartheid and authoritarian controls imposed on the press to help prop up the political system and a willingness on the part of many newspapers to comply.

Against a background of authoritarian government controls and extremely hazardous conditions for journalists during the apartheid era, it was always a difficult task for the South African print media to operate effectively as the ruling National Party continually assaulted the free flow of information from 1949 until the Party’s stagnation and fall in 1993.

The national press can take some comfort and deserves commendation for its role, especially the English-language press, for taking on the mantle of de facto opposition against the apartheid policies of the National Party. But it would be an exaggeration to suggest that the press played a major role in the eventual downfall of apartheid. This was always a white owned and controlled press aimed at whites. They were the supporters of the controversial rebel sports tours, campaigns against the “terrorists”, and in their own way, practised a form of jobs reservation, and petty discrimination. It was a press hostile to black and coloured people, benefiting from the spoils of apartheid and reluctant to give up those benefits.

Pippa Green [1998] states that during apartheid, black journalists at many mainstream newspapers felt humiliated and saw themselves as being at the mercy of white editors, many of whom unwittingly collaborated with the regime. She recalls an insight into the workings of the Argus news desk:

As a labour reporter in 1982 on a Cape Town English-language daily, the Argus, my first story made the front page. It was about striking milk delivery workers, African migrants in the then hostile Western Cape. The next story about a steel strike was placed inside, heavily edited. “Ah,” explained the news editor, “when white readers don’t get their milk delivered, that’s a big story, but they aren’t interested in other strikes.” This brought home to me the realisation that the reference point for most English newspapers was how whites were affected by what we were reporting; black reporters understood this too, but for them, it was an even more bitter reality to endure.2
In the new dispensation, it is this same national press – both English and Afrikaans language newspapers – that find themselves the target of community and government backlash. The people that they ignored are now in a position to dictate terms. With the press being reluctant to change, the government is growing restless and accusing the media of working towards its demise. The signs are clear. If the media refuse to move in keeping with the national post-apartheid transformation process, there is every chance that the government will step in to redefine the role and responsibility of the press.

As my thesis argues, there are signs to suggest that it is the view of some influential elements within the government that this white-controlled press needs to be brought into line as calls grow for a socially responsible press. But what is meant by a socially responsible press? Indeed, the South African press is a highly developed Western libertarian model. It is driven by libertarian ideals and friction between government and press in this case is not unusual.

Terje Skjerdal [2001] suggests the government is more likely than the press to favour a social responsibility model but warns that the government views social responsibility more as a euphemism for a nationalistic model that censures critical reporting. His study indicates that the distinction between “critical” reporting and “negative” reporting is blurred.³

However, there is no suggestion that the press should move from being a public watchdog to a government lapdog. Provisions in the Constitution guarantee freedom of the press. From the government there are calls to implement a new media order to level the playing field and to foster a newspaper industry that is more in keeping with the politico-economic imperatives of a developing nation. It stems from a long history of oppression and persecution by the mainstream white press exemplified in Arrie De Beer’s statements to the Truth Commission during its special hearings on the media – “our history was not only one of pain, but also of ignorance” and what Green [1998] recalls:

Generally, the rule during the state of emergency imposed by the government in the 1980s and internalised by many newspapers was that “if the police didn’t confirm it, it didn’t really happen.” In part, this rule worked because enforcers of it had embedded themselves in various media outlets.⁴

Black and coloured journalists still recall how their news stories that were critical of the government were heavily censored, cut or simply ignored. I can recall how Security Police would visit the Argus building and were handed photographs taken by white staff photographers during the race riots in the late 1970s. In this way, the police could identify community leaders from the newspaper photographs and then arrest these people. In
exchange, white reporters and photographers from both the Argus group and the Afrikaans press were allowed to travel with the military and police into areas of unrest and photograph the activities without risk. On one occasion in 1977, as a reporter on *The Cape Herald* newspaper, I was arrested by police while covering a riot in the coloured suburb of Athlone where several people had been killed and many injured. As I was led into the back of this military van, among the heavily armed troops were several white photographers photographing me unaware that I was a fellow journalist – including two who worked for the same organisation where I was employed. It was in incidents like these, where the distrust between black and white journalists originated. It has not faded with time and it is against this background of treachery and mistrust that the government complains it does not and cannot receive fair treatment from a national press that remains basically white. The complaints extend beyond the expected parameters of friction when a Western libertarian press working outside of governmental controls strives to keep governments accountable. This prompts calls for a media that more broadly reflects the complex South African society in which it operates.

Ryland Fisher [2000] takes issue with the increasing demands for transformation of the press. As one of a few high-profile coloured editors of a mainstream English-language newspaper, Fisher struggled to lead *The Cape Times* from being the white liberal Cape Town morning daily and during his brief tenure at the helm tried to increase the number of senior black journalists on staff. He says of his efforts:

I believe that we have all become so concerned about getting the demographics right that we have overlooked the need for real transformation in the media industry. And that need is reflected in the way our newspapers continue to report from mainly a white, privileged paradigm. Most South African newspapers, even those with black editors, continue to perpetuate this white paradigm of the news and news values.5

Simply restructuring or changing the make-up of national newsrooms is hardly a guarantee of a more equitable distribution of news resources nor does it guarantee that the government would receive favoured or sympathetic treatment from sycophantic black journalists. It would be demeaning to suggest that black journalists would be uncritical of government excess. So what would a transformation of the national press ultimately mean other than achieving some semblance of social balance, equal work opportunities and the results of an affirmative action program? Fisher favours a “a mindset change that involves a new approach to journalism, a new approach to covering our very diverse society”.6

I do not think that transformation simply means the replacement of white staff with black staff. However, it is important for newspapers to roughly
represent the demographics of the province or the country that they serve. This is important for the Western Cape, for instance, where the majority of the population can be classified coloureds. In this province, would it be advisable to have the majority of a newspaper’s staff being [black] African?7

This rather simplistic approach fails to recognise that South African newspapers, as newspapers anywhere in the world, are driven by economic constraints and newspapers are in the business of being profitable. This further complicates the road to transformation. The Western Cape may well have a larger coloured population, but this does not necessarily translate into newspaper sales. However, transformation is a major component of change. It will never be the panacea to fix the hurdles faced by the South African press but it will lay the foundations of equity in the media that will ultimately lead to major newspapers reflecting the diversity of the communities in which they operate. Broad acceptance of the need for transformation signals an important commitment to reshaping the media.

The South African press profited under the apartheid system which it tacitly supported for a long period. It was a colonial type of media rather than the libertarian press that it pretended to be. While operating under free market principles of a Western libertarian press, it failed by omission in that it was always a segmented press that served the interests of the ruling classes ie. the Afrikaners and the English-speaking whites. At times it was more of a disobedient child, at all times it was part of the family. Legislation kept the wayward newspapers in check while others knew their place in the apartheid machinery.

The threat to freedom of the press in the new South Africa now comes from the press itself, from the way it has evolved in the post-apartheid era and the reluctance of its major players to embrace change. The new black government maintains that the national press has yet to shake off the shackles of the apartheid era, and, under the guise of freedom of the press, was working against the national interest. There is a growing rift, not in the traditional way that the Western press and government has an uneasy and often troubled relationship, but in a way which leads to suggestions that the national press, which remains dominated mainly by white conservatives, cannot accept that a black government can be competent.

On the other hand, the press maintains that the new government is intolerant of criticism and unable to make the transition from leaders of the liberation to leaders of the government. After a cosy period of induction, it is the government that has to come to terms with the role of a vibrant and critical press.

There are government fears that the very fabric of society in the emerging democracy in South Africa is being threatened by a combination of extreme social, economic and political
problems. There are fears that the socio-economic problems facing the Government of National Unity could ultimately undermine the fragile democracy as the ruling African National Congress fails to deliver on its promises of a better life for the millions of its supporters. There are also fears expressed by Nelson Mandela, who established a commission of inquiry in March, 1998, to investigate media leaks that the African National Congress-led government faces possible revolt and that unnamed sources are plotting to destabilise and eventually overthrow the government. This, however, was later proved to be untrue.

Apart from the lack of proper housing around the country, millions of people living in squalid squatter camps without any electricity and sanitation services, in extreme poverty and with poor health facilities, a very high national unemployment rate that is suggested to be around 40 per cent and impossible to determine because of the influx of illegal citizens from other African countries, and a variety of basic problems such as illiteracy and a growing impatience with the Reconstruction and Development Program, it further complicates the transition to a country that offers a better future for all its citizens. Above all else, the national crime rate is a major problem. It is a problem that threatens the future of democracy in South Africa. And it impacts directly on the role of the media.8

There are serious fears that the socio-economic problems that grip South Africa are exacerbated by the way in which the national press reports on these events, and in a more sinister way, there are suggestions that the national press is embarking on a campaign to actively undermine the work of the government by its constant negative and harmful focus, ultimately giving the impression of a government unable to cope and in disarray.

At a news conference in Johannesburg in July, 1997, Mbeki said it was “quite clear that if corruption in the police, the judicial system, the prisons services, and the Department of Home Affairs is not stopped, you could have a collapse of the entire democratic system”.9 He warned that crime was halting investor confidence and damaging the economy. Arrests that take place within the police service were indicative of the extent of corruption within the criminal justice system and he suggests it is not a problem that arises from mere greed but from a lack of commitment to a democratic South Africa and that major crime syndicates included security force members from the apartheid era.

Mbeki paints a chilling picture of a struggling democracy in crisis and almost on its knees. This is a major problem not only for the Government, but it also has serious ramifications for the role of the national media in a time of crisis. The media is independently owned, guards its independence jealously and pursues a vigorous watch on government. For the new black government, it is an approach that is too vigorous. Under normal circumstances, there would be nothing wrong with this approach. Indeed, it is the traditional
approach of the Western media in developed democracies, but in the prevailing circumstances it certainly can be argued that it may not be the correct approach in the short term. In major democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and a number of European countries with a healthy tradition and history of freedom of the press, it works well.

These countries are a long way down the road of democracy, social-economic problems are not on the scale and intensity as is the case in the developing South Africa, and the bonds of society are not threatened by complicated problems that will take many years to resolve.

**Barriers to change**

The South African Government accused the national media of pursuing a hidden agenda and conducting a campaign which aims at undermining the new government. President Mandela accused the media of being run by conservative whites living in the past and who are not prepared to embrace the far-reaching transformation that is occurring across South Africa since the National Party conceded apartheid was a failure. The plea is obviously for some sort of developmental media system but without the onerous burden of censorship or government restraint, perhaps something along the lines of the Indonesian *pancasila* press of President Suharto that was expected to pursue an agenda that upholds the national interests.

But it is not hard to find fault with the Indonesian model that has now completely fallen from favour. Under the *pancasila* philosophy and the notion of a new order, guided democracy, political and economic turmoil continued unabated. Cronyism and corruption flourished, government indiscretions and excesses went unreported because it was deemed harmful to the national interests and racism flourished. The predominantly Muslim country overwhelmed its Christian minority in the provinces in much the same way that Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese business people were the victims of vicious racial assaults by indigenous Indonesians, especially in Java. There were many important issues that the Indonesian press was either reluctant or unable to pursue with vigour because of the developmental media policy and the restrictions imposed by the terms of the Press Act of Indonesia. [See Appendix E for an ASEAN model of the press.]

In the end, the developmental media became more of an uncritical extension of government than the watchdog it ought to be. In short, there are as many problems with adopting a developmental media framework that aims to work towards some loosely defined national interest as there is pursuing a vigorous Western libertarian media approach.

There is also another subtle yet sinister hurdle that erodes the functionality of the national press. It stems from hypocritical, influential members of the ANC government who pay lip service to press freedom and do not desire the close scrutiny of the press for fear of what might be uncovered. The war against apartheid is marked with atrocities by both whites
and blacks. These crimes against humanity included acts of terrorism, kidnappings, poisoning, torture and even murder. Innocent people were caught in the crossfire as the South African army battled the “terrorists” and it is not an unrealistic suggestion that there are senior government officials concealing misdeeds from a gruesome past. The black liberation fighters of Umkonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) the armed wing of the ANC, have been well rewarded for their efforts and now occupy senior roles in public office. Some of these office bearers publicly declare a commitment to press freedom, but privately they have no enthusiasm for the close scrutiny brought on by a vigorous, investigative free press.

The controversial ANC Women's League president, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, is one example of a freedom fighter with a chequered history. To millions of the poor black masses from Soweto, Madikizela-Mandela remains a respected leader of the fight against apartheid. To these mostly semi-literate blacks she remains the Mother of the Nation. There are others who simply see her as a villain tainted by scandal, corruption, township violence and linked to the murder of Stompie Sepei.10

Madikizela-Mandela accuses the South African print press of needing “urgent introspection and a radical surgical transformation" to enhance democracy. She has endured a mauling at the hands of the press for her excesses but espouses the same tired complaints that the old media order must change, yielding place to new. However, Madikizela-Mandela does not really want a vigorous press because she resents the close scrutiny that her affairs have attracted. In much the same way, there are others who are now senior public office holders and in government who also have much to hide from their days as freedom fighters. To them, media criticism of the government is regarded as an attack on the black government, and criticism of the government by black journalists is viewed as a betrayal of the sacrifices made in the cause of the liberation struggle.

Addressing the Johannesburg Press Club in Braamfontein, Madikizela-Mandela accused the media of being wedded to the old order of “Western racist supremacy, and out of kilter with the new social order”.11 And she argued that the dilemma was to strike a balance between two major cultures: a “dying fossilised European conservative liberalism and an assertive emerging African renaissance”.

They [the media] use the conventions and values of a small section of our society to define what constitutes a standard free press. They use their freedom to push an agenda that is totally out of touch with African society.12
Madikizela-Mandela said politicians were being accused of wanting to manipulate the press when they complained of sensational and partisan reporting, yet they were merely asking for a free, fair and responsible press that understood the sensitivities of the majority.

By remaining wedded to Eurocentricism, the media has become a major obstacle to the inception of our African renaissance.13

The media, according to Madikizela-Mandela, would continue to be perceived to be loaded with the agenda of “racism and white superiority as long as editors remain loyal to parties' political ideologies and are controlled by a business sector that is aligned to (those parties') paradigms”.

Madikizela-Mandela has an unlikely ally in Gwen Ansell, the executive director of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism based in Johannesburg. Ansell laments the deplorable standards of journalism in South Africa.

Writing propaganda infected all the parties to struggle. Its legacy is still with us. Alongside this was Eurocentrism, which took not only the style but also, quite uncritically, the news values of the West as the news values of South Africa. The opportunity to develop an appropriate voice and set of values for a developing, culturally rich African nation was ignored.14

Madikizela-Mandela’s reputation was forever sullied in the nine days that she attended the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Johannesburg in December 1997. The deputy chairperson of the TRC Alex Boraine [2000] was scathing in his criticism of Madikizela-Mandela who denied involvement in all of her alleged crimes despite the evidence and blaming it on lies and exaggeration by the media. Boraine states:

For me, as someone who sat through the entire hearing, who read carefully the account of the in-camera hearing, and who has now read over 3,000 pages of the transcript of the hearing, I can only conclude that anyone who participated in that hearing, who listened to the many witnesses and Madikizela-Mandela’s responses, would have to be naïve or blindly committed to the point of worship if they believed that she (Madikizela-Mandela) had not been aware of what was going on in her own home and had not been party to what took place.15

In its final report tabled in 1998, the TRC was particularly harsh on Madikizela-Mandela and the Mandela United Football Club, a group of gangsters who spread their reign of terror in suburbs of Soweto at the command of Madikizela-Mandela. The Commission said she was “central to the establishment and formation of the gang which later developed into a private vigilante unit” that operated from her homes in Diepkloof and Orlando West.16
The Commission also found that the football club was involved in a number of criminal activities including killings, torture, assaults and arson. It states further:

The Commission finds that those who opposed Ms Madikizela-Mandela and the Mandela United Football Club, or dissented from them, were branded as informers and killed … The Commission finds that Ms Madikizela-Mandela failed to account to community and political structures. Further, she is accountable, politically and morally, for the gross human rights violations of the Mandela United Football Club. The Commission finds further that Ms Madikizela-Mandela herself was responsible for committing such gross violations of human rights.17

On that same day, The Star’s internet edition also reported Deputy President Thabo Mbeki raised similar complaints. Although Mbeki has a decidedly different agenda to that of Madikizela-Mandela, the basic principle remains to be domination and control of the message.18 Addressing a meeting in Johannesburg of the International Advisory Board of Independent Newspapers, Mbeki said the South African media was doing a bad job of covering the positive aspects of South Africa's changing society. As an example, he said one of the stories the media had until recently not reported was the fact that crime had been dropping steadily since 1994.

Mbeki said the reason this development was ignored for so long was that there was a “pessimistic mindset” that said crime was out of control. He added that this same mindset contributed to a belief that good doctors came only out of places like the University of the Witwatersrand and not the University of Transkei. He said positive aspects such as the fact that the amount of steel sold in the first half of 1997 had equalled two-thirds of the steel sold in the whole of 1996 was not fully understood or reported by the South African media. And he pointed out that coverage of President Mandela's speech at the ANC's Mafikeng conference in December, 1997 had demonstrated the deficiencies in South African journalism.

He said 83 per cent of the information in Mandela's speech was not passed on to readers. “How do we change the society if we don't even know about it?” he asked and he also called for more transformation of the press so that different types of voices could be heard.

Former Cape Herald news editor and Argus company employee for more than 16 years, Warren Ludski suggests the reluctance of the South African media to embrace change is largely to maintain the status quo for as long as possible and to maintain the profitability of
the newspapers for as long as possible. Ludski, a “coloured” journalist now working in Australia, says change in the service provided by the media is inevitable but that change could see a sharp fall in advertising revenue as the market changes and as the newspapers have to adapt and make themselves accessible to a wider audience, indeed a poorer audience, a less sophisticated audience, an audience that is less attractive to advertisers.

The results may be that editorial standards will shift and could even decline as the focus of the news would shift to accommodate this changing readership which is both financially and educationally disadvantaged and which is unlikely to share the political dimensions and aspirations of the conservative white owners and operators. This shift, in turn, will have a dramatic effect on advertisers and in turn this will have a deteriorating effect on the profitability of the media.

Ultimately, newspaper editors are responsible to both the publishers and the shareholders and profitability is crucial to the survival of the business. Ludski suggests that for this reason, Independent Newspapers and the majority of the South African media are reluctant to introduce sweeping changes to shift the policy of their newspapers to accommodate a wider audience that better reflects the multiracially diverse South African society and why they are slow to reshape the composition of editorial staffing which remains conservatively white.

The editor at The Argus, in Cape Town, Moegsien Williams rejects the assumption that his newspaper was reluctant to embrace widespread changes both at editorial policy level and in staffing because it feared alienation or a backlash from advertisers. Williams points out that The Argus has shifted to accommodate the variety of news, especially the rising crime on the Cape Flats, while the group’s morning paper, The Cape Times, has shifted to become more analytical.

In this way, the two Independent Newspapers publications can share the load and so dominate the English-language newspaper market in the Western Cape. Williams also rejects the calls from both Mbeki and Madikizela-Mandela that the media should be more compliant or more supportive, preferring instead a vigorous exchange between the media and the Government as a way of keeping both the government honest and fulfilling his obligations to his readers by keeping them informed.

The confrontation between government and the press in South Africa is not an unusual situation. Newspapers the world over are always facing government pressure. In practice, the national press is accused of hijacking the guarantees of free speech and exercising the guarantees to freedom of the press to undermine government inadequacies and failures. There is a conflict which has ominous implications with the Government suggesting
it is the victim of some collaborative plot from a delinquent media bent on its demise. It is a charge fiercely denied on all sides by the national media. On both sides of the argument there is urgent need for rationalisation to find some middle ground.

It is a volatile combination of clashing ideologies in which there can be no winners and little space to move between the extremity of authoritarian controls on the one hand and leaving matters as they stand and wait, as Milton would have, for the matter to resolve itself in the free marketplace of ideas. Whether a defiant government will wait for this long-term transition or pursue the food-before-freedom argument remains to be seen. Whether the government decides to change course and follow what is now the familiar and much despised interventionist model typical in African countries where authoritarian governments control the press is a more frightening although remote prospect.

For the South African government to move down this interventionist path will be detrimental. To artificially correct this perceived imbalance or bias in media coverage by the national press will be to resort no less to government interference and censorship. That is the basic issue – whether to intervene or not. In many ways, the argument represents a microcosm of the difficulties faced by developing Third World nations.

In the case of South Africa, the need to level the playing field to represent the diversity of the new society in the national media could be used as a poor excuse to impose some temporary restraint on the press. But it is fraught with danger. What will be the time span of such an intrusive system? Who will decide and what will be the sanctions for the transgressors? There are too many obstacles in such a retrogressive move. And there is an immediate paradox within the provisions of the Bill of Rights and the constitutional guarantees of a free press.

Perhaps what is needed is an appeal to the conscience. Just as the South African Constitution guarantees freedom of the press under a Bill of Rights and just as the government commits itself strenuously to a guarantee of freedom of information and a desire for a vigorous and independent press, so too it needs a socially responsible press that will not sink the ship during a stormy period.

The predominantly white-controlled media is perceived to be conservative and historically biased against black majority rule and at the very least, to be unsupportive of the new Government. There are constant calls from diverse quarters that the face of the media should change to reflect the diversity of South African society. It is easier said than done for a variety of reasons, the main one being economic.

Just as strong as the temptation by sections of the government to tamper with the guarantees of Freedom of the Press should be resisted, there is a corresponding need for
Western societies to realise that expectations of a true libertarian press, a Western model of the press, at the present stage of South Africa’s national development would be premature.

On the one hand, authoritarian controls on the exchange and free flow of information, or the method of press control so familiar in Africa, the developmental media theory so popular with military and authoritarian governments, both have serious limitations. Authoritarian media policies, and by extension developmental journalism, brings with it the problems of self-censorship and inefficient government hiding behind a cloak of developmental media secrecy – it is not in the national interest to criticise government failings and excesses.

The future of the media’s role in post-apartheid South Africa represents a challenge to liberal conscience. A delicate balance of freedom and control that will guarantee that the press is free to criticise the government and to maintain the important social role of keeping society suitably informed about the work of government is required. At the same time there is need for a socially responsible media that will not threaten nor harm the national good. That is not to suggest a media that is subservient and weak, dictated to by government policy and driven by government ideology or controlled by some Minister in a far off office. The media needs to take up the challenge of keeping the government honest and it needs to participate in the transition from apartheid to democracy.

The national media cannot be expected to be a mouthpiece for government propaganda and it is not the expectation of government that it should be so. At the heart of the problem is whether a vigorous and independently owned national press can be an adversarial press and simultaneously a developmental press working towards what is commonly determined as being in the national interest.

In the final analysis, freedom of the press is a political decision. The type of press which will develop in post-apartheid South Africa depends as much on political directive as well as how the national press meets its challenge and its obligations to reflect the needs of society. There is no denying the need for a socially responsible press but the issue at stake is who is to determine this responsibility: Will it be self-determined, socially-determined or politically determined?

While newspapers stand with one foot in the till, they have another important function and that is to grease the wheels of democracy. Newspapers are not disinterested observers offering comment, advice and reports on the political spectrum. They are active participants, role players and shapers or destroyers of government policy while simultaneously acting as the public watchdog and maintaining the free flow of information and ideas.
We cannot seek a purely developmental model for the South African media for what is already a technologically advanced and libertarian functioning media. That will mean turning back the clock. The difficulty facing the Government is that it does not control nor own its own newspaper as is the case in many developing countries. The South African media is independently owned, spans a narrow base of concentrated ownership and generates a confrontational approach between the government and the press.

This is no different to the way the media operates for example in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand or many developed nations of Europe where there is a strong history of democracy. Any tampering with the freedom of the press would be a devastating blow to a country that already is in the process of dismantling authoritarian controls and a free press is the lifeblood of a free society. But if freedom of the press means freedom from supervision and freedom from controls, then there is also a corresponding obligation of social responsibility on the part of the press.

If it is then the case that newspapers should not only keep their readers informed but also reflect the views of its readers, then it would be logical to ask who are these readers whose views are reflected in an agenda that apparently seeks to undermine the efforts of the government or at the very least appear negative towards the efforts of nation building and reconstruction. The ruling African National Congress holds 62 per cent of the national vote and a merger with the Inkatha Freedom Party will lift the total to nearly 75 per cent of the national vote. In these very broad terms, it would appear that on this assumption, it is curious that the newspapers are claiming to be reflecting the views of its readers.

However, under the authoritarian controls of the Nationalists during the apartheid era, the South African press has suffered so much oppression and harassment and it would be wrong to replace one sort of oppression with a different version no matter how noble the aims or intentions. Albie Sachs [1990] sees the problem as one that provides to reconcile the need for openness and the right to speak one’s mind with the necessity for healing the wounds created by racism. Conceding that huge obstacles exist to temper the free flow of information in South Africa, Sachs says:

We must remember that the objective is to open doors that are at present closed, not to create more blockages to the free circulation of ideas and information. We would have gained little if we were to replace the present media controls with new ones that simply switch the propaganda and biases around if one realm of banality takes over from another. Truth has always favoured the democratic cause, and our people are tired of forever being protected in the name of what others think is good for them.
In the emerging democracy, there are enormous expectations on the government to deliver on a variety of matters that restricted the lives of oppressed people, not least among them the need for improved access to the media. Addressing the issue before the adoption of the new Constitution, Sachs says there are many questions which bear indirectly but significantly on the question of free speech and in turn a free press.

At present, the press in South Africa is anything but open and anything but non-racial. *The Rand Daily Mail*, the most informative and widely respected daily newspaper of the 1960s and 70s, was closed not on journalistic grounds, but because its circulation was too high among blacks who had no money and too low among whites who had money. In absolute market terms, nothing should be free, not even speech. English-language and Afrikaans-language monopolies control virtually the whole of the commercial press, and not only the press itself but most of printing and distribution. Similarly, broadcasting is almost entirely in the hands of the state. What the commercial and state monopolies have in common is that they are completely white-dominated, locked into the apartheid structures. This affects not only the appointment of journalists, but the very determination of what is front-page news.22

As an equitable resolution, Sachs offers two possible options: firstly the new government can either shut people up and decide on their behalf what to do with the limited resources, or else involve people themselves in making informed choices.

Clearly the latter requires the maximum circulation of information and ideas. Freedom of expression and accountability thus become inseparable ... We look to our articulate, technically experienced, and battle-scarred media people to lead the way in proposing solutions.23

To facilitate change in the South African press, it is my view that it would be prudent as well as pragmatic at this stage of national development for the government to implement an uncomplicated policy to foster a new media order that can clearly spell out obligations and expectations for all parties concerned, the levels of freedom of the press within the legislative boundaries and a media mission statement.

The role and aim for the media must be clearly spelled out and the limitations or direction of the national press must be clearly signposted. It is not a desirable situation but it is a simple way of levelling the playing field and speeding up the changes that are sought of the press. This basic philosophy of the relationship between media and government must be simply described to include what is expected and what is determined by the national and the
public interest. It must be a statement that can be readily understood by the bulk of the population and if newspapers contravene it, it must be clear to the bulk of the population that there was a determined breach of the policy. There must be sanctions in place to dissuade the offenders and to ensure that the policy is workable. Not by the traditional methods of the National Party such as banning orders or closures, harassment, or a variety of complicated laws, but by imposing punitive measures on the offending newspapers. The offenders could be fined an amount that will indicate the seriousness of the transgression. Newspapers must always be free to publish, but that freedom will then come at a price, with the risk of a fine. However, the option for imposing a fine must be imposed by an independent party such as a press tribunal.

Options for the implementation of the new media order can include an instalment plan which can be reviewed and amended after a set number of years. The framework of the new media order must remain within the provisions of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It can operate much in the way that South African law still restricts detailed reporting of divorce cases in court.24

**Reshaping the landscape to facilitate a New Media Order**

The route of authoritarian controls holds little promise because it will reflect the methods of the past. It will be more pragmatic to seek these changes with the cooperation of the press rather than to charge ahead in a confrontational way and force changes upon a reluctant target.

If ever there was a window of opportunity to initiate a new media system, then it would have been in 1993 or the months earlier when the Constitutional talks were underway. It was a period of immense optimism in South Africa. There is no chance of a systematic change in the way that the media operates in South Africa.

What is urgently needed is an attitudinal change that will speed up the process of integration in the national newsrooms. Instead of looking to artificial mechanisms, the South African press must refocus its efforts and concentrate on improving the quality of journalism. There is ample opportunity to improve newspaper standards. Some of the areas that need attention include top-quality investigative journalism, gender issues, health and social welfare, the effects of AIDS-related deaths, poverty and the effects of high unemployment. Finance journalism is also neglected in most of the major newspapers and there is a need to boost the standard of analytical reporting in business and finance.

Elements of a developmental media model with aspects of the public journalism concept also hold promise. Implementation of a uniquely South African media system needs further research.
Berger [1995] says that in developing a national communications policy, there is no need to reinvent the wheel because suitable proven models exist internationally and can be adapted to suit the particular needs of the South African situation. Jackson [1993] also signals the need for change and considers a liberal democratic model although he concedes that it might be an ideal that is unattainable and out of favour with many Afrikaans or alternative journalists.

Yet, even if this were so, the press ought to set its sights on no less a target because of the protection that a liberal democratic view of the press provides… Although the benefits of liberal democracy will not soon be realized, if ever, in South Africa its journalists ought to demand nothing less than the generous protections that such an approach assures them. Nor should the press settle for less than offering its society the high quality of journalism needed for liberal democratic societies to function optimally.

The development of the South African press has moved on steadily since 1993 and while Jackson’s suggestion is but one of several that has validity and merit, some additional options could include:

1. The development of a national media charter and time-frame development plan to assist the speedy transformation of the national press. As outlined above, this option will only flow from a positive decision by the national press to reorganise towards a type of media more in keeping with the transformation that has occurred since the demise of the apartheid system.

This will be an undeniably difficult adjustment for the media to make because there is already in place the press of a developed nation. However, the reason why this is so is because it catered almost exclusively to the white middle-class markets and was driven by white middle-class advertising, political agendas aside. The emerging market is decidedly different and less attractive, and whether the decision to meet the transformation demands is political or not, the economics of the situation make it an unattractive proposition.

So, it seems logical then, that to push for the changes that are so desperately required of the press to have a hand in nation building, there will have to be either some incentive or some directive from the government. Gavin Stewart [1990] also raises the options for a national press charter within the framework of a Bill of Rights, a Freedom of Information Act and “above all a sincere conviction in the hearts of our citizens that open government and free speech are the lifeblood of democracy this will be the most difficult condition to put in place”.27
At the same conference, Alison Gillwald warned that a vibrant and dynamic press run by ethical journalists will not simply rise out of the embers of apartheid, nor through a media framework imposed from above whoever is above.

One of the major sources of media power in free societies is normative. It is the norms and values of society that determine the acceptance or rejection of media practices and content far more than state legislation or media councils. The media in South Africa are particularly vulnerable because they cannot find refuge in the public’s indignation or rage when their freedom is curbed.28

2. Incentives such as subsidies to protect struggling newspapers and to provide a wider cross-section of views to the community is one option but in a country where money is better directed towards alleviating poverty and sickness, it would seem clear that some sort of limited directive could be feasible. Instead of the subsidised newspapers being confrontational, it could be skewed to focus more on matters of national interest and development. It is to be anticipated that this suggestion would find extreme distaste among libertarians and it is expected that the press will put up obstinate protests and fight against any suggestion that they be told in which way to act.

But were one to focus more specifically on how most newsrooms operate then it will become clear that individual journalists on just about any newspaper, while delivering whatever reports they do, have very limited input into the news selection process, the direction and agenda of the newspaper, even the placement of individual reports. Newspapers operate on a pyramid structure and the vast number of journalists that combine to produce the product are by and large unaware most times of what others are doing unless it impacts upon their tasks. It is inevitably left to the editors and their trusted assistants to select copy, formulate policy and direction – to set the agenda that is ultimately the cause for so much concern by the government. The power is concentrated in the hands of a trusted few faceless media executives.

The suggestion of subsidies is not unique, and media commentators Eric Louw and Gavin Stewart amongst many have supported the subsidy plan. It is a concept that in South Africa, no less than anywhere else, has serious organisational disadvantages as well as being susceptible to abuse and mismanagement.

3. Options for a vernacular media pose some challenges for the national media. With such large numbers of semi-literate and illiterate people in South Africa who are
deprived of any aspect of the media to keep them informed, or those people in many parts of the country who speak a vernacular language, usually poorly educated people who speak a mixture of English and Afrikaans, there is a need to provide some basic form of news medium in keeping with the reconstruction and development plan. However, it is a task that could be too expensive for the media groups to consider, and with very little prospect of any sort of returns.

This could be an option for some statutory bodies such as local councils to step in to produce some form of basic information sheets that will keep the poor equally informed on matters of importance and perhaps even include government plans such as community health schemes, sewerage improvements in the squatter camps, plans for electricity supplies or even extra taps, and so on.

If these sorts of publications are taken on by local councils or even community groups, it is an area where perhaps the government could offset the costs by providing printing and other associated facilities and subsidising these sorts of basic information sheets on a small scale rather than moving into the costly business of newspaper subsidies.

4. Increased commitment to journalism training and education. There is a strong need to educate the public in the role and their expectations of the media in an effort to prevent the type of harassment of journalists that leads to censorship through fear. High school pupils should be introduced to media studies from the first year of high school – as is the case in Australia and many other countries, with major strands offered in the final two years of high school. In the same way, there is a serious need to improve training facilities for South African journalists. Some media organisations have already developed strategies for staff improvement but much more needs to be done to improve both content and quality of the press. A skills audit by the South African Newspaper Editors’ Forum in 2000 found major shortfalls among journalists including: poor reporting skills, a lack of concern with accuracy, poor writing skills, a lack of life skills, low levels of commitment, weak interviewing skills, weak legal knowledge, lack of sensitivity, weak knowledge of ethics, poor historical and contextual knowledge of journalism and a low level of training.29

Steven Wrottesley [2002] the editorial chief of staff at Independent Newspapers Cape, traces this basic lack of journalism skills to around 1977, a high point of the apartheid era when many senior journalists either quit the profession or left the country to work elsewhere and again in the late 1980s when many editorial
production journalists were lured away to join overseas corporations introducing the new computerised printing systems. South African newsrooms were the pioneers of “cold type” digital setting with most metro newspapers adopting the Atex computer editing and reporting system in the 1970s and trained computer production journalists were snapped up by news organisations in Australia, Canada and the UK as they came online.

Eight years after the first democratic election in South Africa, journalism is no longer seen as “sexy”. Many who would have gone into the media now seek the greater rewards of other professions or in top government jobs. It is accepted that these reasons, and probably a plethora of other ones, have led to serious skills shortages for South African journalism.30

5. Pay, conditions and lack of career options need to be improved dramatically, especially in the case of black and coloured journalists who work at the lower levels of the profession. By raising the standards and conditions for younger journalists, the profession will be much better positioned to keep their staff. And by lifting the rewards and conditions, incrementally they will hopefully also raise the profile of journalism as a desirable and worthy vocation.

6. Changing the gatekeepers of information: more black and coloured sub-editors must be trained as an urgent measure. Some news corporations have fast tracked this initiative but much more needs to be done. Already, the South African Newspaper Editors’ Forum and media executives have committed themselves to increased training facilities at the major media publishers, more cooperation between publishers on the provision of journalism training, and increased interaction with journalism training institutions such as universities and technikons.

Among the plans agreed to by editors, senior journalists and educators were:

a. To have trained coaches in newsrooms to work with reporters. Training institutions will develop and run courses to train coaches.

b. To put punitive measures in place in news rooms and training institutions to combat inaccuracies in reporting.

c. To train journalism experts in media houses as content assessors and to ensure media houses take part in the consultation process on journalism unit standards (part of South Africa’s outcomes-based education). Both measures would establish the levels of expertise expected of journalists.
d. To develop a closer relationship between tertiary and other training institutions and the media throughout the country by holding regional and national meetings to establish the highest standards of journalism.

e. The group will also put in place methods to improve historical, contextual and legal knowledge of journalists and to promote a reading culture.31

In the final analysis, even if nothing is done to facilitate structural change in the South African media, and the preferred option is to await a metamorphosis, the press can swiftly benefit by:

- Improving the credibility of newspapers by improving the quality of the product and lifting the image of journalism as a worthy profession and desirable career option;

- Improving career structures and staff training options for reporters, sub-editors and managers;

- Improving conditions and pay structures for journalists, particularly at the lower levels where promising talent is being lured away by the public service as well as the private sector.

This thesis has considered the inherent difficulties associated with the transformation of the South African press and identified options for change in the emerging democracy. Further research can build on this body of work by considering the effects of racial bias in the newsroom, media bias and discrimination in the post-apartheid press. There is also opportunity for further research into the merits of a uniquely South African media model that incorporates aspects of public journalism, the developmental model, and the Western libertarian model to achieve that delicate balance between the role of the press and what the government expects of the national press in terms of the national interest.

The bulk of the research for this thesis is limited to the 1990s when Nelson Mandela was still president. There are signs that the rift between the government and the press is no longer an unbridged chasm and indications are that a metamorphosis is underway that will lead to even greater transformation of the press.
Notes for Chapter Eight


2. Green, Pippa, *Struggling for Memory Against Forgetting: the English-language newspapers may have been too timid, even collaborated*, Nieman Reports, The Nieman Foundation for Journalism, Harvard University, Volume 52, No 4 Winter 1998, page 3.


10. Stompie Sepei was a 14-year-old Soweto activist who was abducted by members of the Mandela United soccer club linked to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Sepei was later murdered by the gangsters and gang leader Jerry Richardson was jailed for life.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


19. Ludski, Warren, news editor of the defunct Argus publication *The Cape Herald*, personal interview. *The Cape Herald* was one of the Argus newspapers aimed at the “Coloured” market in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.


22. Ibid, Chapter 4, Free Speech -unlimited or qualified.


24. A case in point here is the injunction that was taken out by Earl Spencer to gag the press from reporting proceedings in his divorce hearing in the Cape Town Supreme Court. Lawyers for Earl Spencer sought and received a gagging order from the court that restricted South African newspapers from reporting details about his divorce proceedings − especially the two Cape Town metropolitan newspapers *The Argus* and *The Cape Times* who were ordered not to publish further details of the proceedings. Judge Siraj Desai found for the earl but the newspapers’ lawyer, Milton Seligson, argued that the case was about fundamental rights as it relates to the function of the press and it should be seen as a clear breach of the provisions of free speech. The earl’s lawyers argued that the case should be seen as a clear breach of the current law as it relates to reporting divorce proceedings, no matter what the Constitution says. The newspapers readily admit they acted illegally but within the parameters of the guarantees of freedom of the press. In this instance the laws as it affects reporting of divorce proceedings were upheld despite the constitutional provisions. In this way the new media order must also operate within the parameters of the Constitution. See Associated Press, wire service reports, November 22-27, 1997, Diana’s brother seeks to gag media in divorce case, also *The Argus* and *Cape Times* same dates.


27. Stewart, Gavin, *Traditions of Control: Can our media escape its past*, paper delivered at the conference *The Shape and Role of the Media in a New South Africa*, hosted jointly by Idasa and the campaign for an Open Media, Johannesburg, November 23-25.


31. Ibid.
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GOGGA, the South African press: [http://www.gogga.ru.ac.za/](http://www.gogga.ru.ac.za/)

Government Communications Information System


Independent Online News: [http://www.iol.co.za/](http://www.iol.co.za/)


Mail & Guardian: [http://www.mg.co.za/mg/](http://www.mg.co.za/mg/)


Poynter Online: [http://www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)

South African Government of National Unity:

Appendix A

Main Newspapers of South Africa: their approximate circulations and base cities

**National**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Times</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>505 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>390 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Press</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>267 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sowetan</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>208 250</td>
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**Bloemfontein**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volksblad</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>27 750</td>
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**Cape Town**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argus</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>89 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Times</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>55 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Burger</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>95 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend Argus</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>120 000</td>
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**Durban**

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<th>Newspaper</th>
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<tr>
<td>Daily News</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natal Mercury</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>50 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Tribune</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>115 000</td>
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**East London**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Despatch</td>
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<td>37 750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Circulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indaba</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>37 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imvo</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>19 350</td>
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**Johannesburg**

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<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
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<td>182 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>145 000</td>
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<td>Beeld</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>116 500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Day</td>
<td>daily</td>
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**Port Elizabeth**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EP Herald</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>31 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening Post</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>17 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Burger</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>15 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend Post</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>36 250</td>
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**Pietermaritzburg**

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<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natal Witness</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>27 500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Pretoria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretoria News</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>24 000</td>
</tr>
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</table>

(Note: Figures from AMPS and SARAD, as at December 1997.)
Appendix B


A. Preamble.

We, South Africa’s most senior print and broadcast editors and journalism educators and trainers, gathered at the Breakwater Lodge in Cape Town for the history unity conference of the Black Editors’ Forum and the Conference of Editors from October 18 to 20, 1996, to launch the South African National Editors’ Forum.

Recognising past injustices in the media, we commit ourselves to a program of action to overcome these injustices and to defend and promote media freedom and independence.

Belief. It is our belief and understanding that:

1. Public and media scrutiny of the exercise of political and economic power is essential;

2. The law related to the operation of media should be consistent with South Africa’s Bill of Rights in its protection of freedom of expression;

3. Journalists and media owners have a duty to work to the highest professional standards and ethics;

4. Journalists and journalism teachers should embrace a learning culture by committing themselves to on-going education and training.

Declaration of Intent:
1. To nurture and deepen media freedom as a democratic value in all our communities and at all levels of our society;
2. To foster solidarity among journalists and to promote co-operation in all matters of common concern;
3. To address and redress inappropriate racial and gender imbalances prevalent in journalism and news organisations and encourage corrective action and a transformation of culture within the industry;
4. To promote media diversity in the interests of fostering maximum expression of opinion;
5. To promote the process of media education and to help aspirant and practising journalists acquire or develop skills;
6. To promote professional freedom and independence in broadcast media and all media funded by public authorities;
7. To encourage government to ensure transparency and openness in administration and to pass laws ensuring maximum freedom of information;
8. To use all available institutions to defend media freedom.

Organisation: To give effect to the above intent, we commit ourselves to establishing an organisation with the following structure:

1. **Structure**

   1.1 The organisation is called the South African National Editors’ Forum.

   1.2 The executive body is called the Editors’ Council. It is made up of 20 members. The interim agreement for one year is that the 20 members consist of five BEF, five COE, five broadcast editors and five representatives of magazines, interest groups and journalism educators. After the interim period, the Council would be elected from the general membership. The Editors’ Council shall have a chairperson and a deputy chairperson. They shall be voted into position by the Editors’ Council. This Council should endeavour to meet at least four times a year.

**Programme of Action**

This conference instructs the Editors’ Council to:

1. Draft a constitution so as to accurately reflect the spirit and intent of this founding conference.
2. Prepare an annual report on corrective action in the industry and actively lobby media employers for the implementation thereof.

3. Draft a charter to protect editorial independence and seek the endorsement of stakeholders including Government, political parties and media owners. Such charter will include a code of journalistic ethics and conduct.

4. Promote and defend media freedom by: establishing channels of communication with Government, judiciary and relevant statutory bodies using all available institutions to defend media freedom including the Constitutional Court, parliamentary bodies and the Public Protector. This should include the repeal of all restrictive legislation, promoting a culture of a freedom of expression in the community by means of a public education programme.

5. Together with other bodies such as the Print Media Association, Independent Media Diversity Trust and major media owners investigate means of promoting media diversity to further the free flow of information and give support to news organisations owned and controlled by people from disadvantaged communities.

6. Together with other relevant training bodies, investigate the promotion of media education and training.

October 20, 1996, Cape Town
Appendix C

[Additional aspects of the Independent Newspapers submission the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.]

Spies in the newsrooms

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, investigating abuses of the apartheid era, invited all the major news organisations to participate in a week-long special hearing into the role of the media during the apartheid era. It started September 17, 1997.
Independent Newspapers and the Times Media group accepted the invitation to appear at the hearings but the Afrikaner press proprietors refused to attend. Nationale Pers rejected outright the efforts of the TRC to investigate the actions of the Press and the Afrikaans newspaper Beeld threatened its editorial staff with dismissal if they chose to give submissions to the TRC. Truth commissioner Dumisa Ntsebeza told the hearing that if the threats were correct, then it was a great pity.

Arri de Beer, a former Afrikaner journalist and now media lecturer and researcher at Potchefstroom University, testified in his personal capacity. He said few things had made such a dramatic impact on his life and consciousness as testimony to the Truth Commission about atrocities at Vlakplaas, headquarters of the security police “death squads” and he had been sickened and horrified by revelations of human-rights abuses by Vlakplaas operatives, which had made clear the evils of apartheid. Professor De Beer told the Truth Commission that in his work as a journalist he had at times kept quiet when he should have spoken out volubly. He said the absence of the Afrikaans media from the hearings would be seen as a violation of history.

Afrikaans media and their intellectuals had operated inside a “mielie driehoek” (maize triangle) mentality which was only found between Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein and Pretoria, and the Afrikaans media had played an important part in building and maintaining the evil which was apartheid. He did not believe it was possible for former National Party cabinet ministers to claim they did not know about human-rights abuses. Now the chance was being offered via the commission to heal past transgressions, but it was not being taken up by Afrikaners. “If you look at this particular commission and its work, and one has to write about it in years to come, one of the main issues which will come to the fore is that Afrikaans people like myself did not know.” This was one of the main failings of the Afrikaans media that it did not properly inform its readers about the evils being perpetrated in the country.

At the hearings, the South African newspaper industry also came under fierce criticism from black journalists who accused the national press of largely colluding with the apartheid government and for practising petty apartheid in newsrooms. The journalists also accused the mainstream newspaper companies of denying them the same training and promotional opportunities as their white counterparts, and some charged that discriminatory practices were continuing in spite of recent changes in newspaper ownership. Members of the Forum of Black Journalists, a media pressure group with the main aim of enhancing training and professional advancement for black journalists, said in its official submission, by Mondli Makhanya and Abbey Makoe, that the forum accused the English and Afrikaans press, and the South African Broadcasting Corporation of colluding with successive National Party governments to perpetuate apartheid.
This they did by actively enforcing discriminatory laws in their own institutions, using terminology and language that was ideologically in keeping with the National Party governments, and in conflict with the forces fighting for the eradication of apartheid. “They failed to inform the populace about the evil that was going on around them and victimised those in their employ who were actively opposing apartheid,” the Forum delegates told the TRC.

_Sowetan_ night editor Mike Tissong, who started work in newspapers in the 80s, outlined the cost of ignoring the voice of black journalists at that time. He started his career as a cadet reporter at the _Star_, in Johannesburg. Tissong described how a young white journalist who was given the opportunity to sit on the newsdesk to check copy “acted as she felt against staff who were not white”. Tissong said although his stories were used as he had written them, his byline was removed. “And there was no recourse for the black staffer who was subjected to this offensive treatment,” Tissong said. He said there was also a tendency among senior white journalists to disbelieve stories filed by black staff. He cited as an example the incident in Duduza, on the East Rand, when a number of young activists blew themselves up after trying to use hand-grenades that were booby-trapped. “Rich Mkhondo (a reporter on the _Star_) and I received calls one morning that several youngsters in Duduza township had died in explosions. Rich set off for the township while I stayed in the office to pull the story together. Our contacts were adamant that a security policeman had infiltrated the group and given them grenades which were set to explode as soon as the pins were pulled. He convinced the group that he was a trained _Umkhonto we Sizwe_ [the ANC’s armed wing] guerrilla who needed them to carry out a mission.”

Tissong said some of the youths were killed and others maimed when they tried to attack homes of councillors. Tissong told the Truth Commission that when he filed the story for The Star, he was met with disbelief at the angle he had taken, and a white reporter was asked to get the official police version of what had happened. “The whole story was made into a watered down version of what happened that night,” he said. Despite this, Tissong said, police laid charges over the report. “I went to court alone to face charges in terms of an Act in which it was an offence to tell lies about the police. After several trips to court, my attorney and I were informed that the police were dropping the case.” About 10 years later Vlakplaas police operative Joe Mamasela boasted on television that he had set up the operation to have youngsters killed and maimed.

In separate hearings, Jon Qwelane, who is now editor-in-chief of Mafube Publishing, and Thami Mazwai, a director at the same company, said the mainstream media in the country were well placed to challenge the injustices of apartheid. Instead they chose to do otherwise. They accused the country’s main newspapers, including the _Star_, the _Sunday Times_ and the
now-defunct Rand Daily Mail, of using apartheid legislation against black journalists who fought the system. Qwelane lambasted the editors for concluding a pact with former state president P. W. Botha in agreeing that the country was in danger of a total communist onslaught in the 1980s. Shortly afterwards P.W. Botha declared a state of emergency which resulted in gross violations of human rights. Qwelane told the TRC:

I want to charge all the mainstream newspapers English and Afrikaans with collusion with apartheid and having a hand, directly or indirectly, in the subsequent murder of tens of thousands of black people by the apartheid army and police. I’m not off my rocker.

He told the commission that by deciding not to publish stories that highlighted the political problem and black people’s struggle against apartheid, the mainstream newspapers denied the public a basic human right, the right to be informed.

Qwelane said the editors “often waxed eloquent in stinging editorials, condemning the apartheid system” but failed to match their words with action. The newspapers, he said, also practised apartheid in the workplace. “Black journalists were not given any training at all. Indeed everything that I know about journalism has been learned by trial and error,” Qwelane said. “In very many cases the lack of training was often used as a convenient excuse to deny black journalists promotion on the newspapers on which they worked. It often depended on the goodwill of the particular editor to correct what was evidently wrong in denying blacks promotion.” Qwelane said black journalists were also paid less than their white counterparts.

Both Qwelane and Thami Mazwai cited cases in which editors hid behind the state apparatus to punish black journalists for defying apartheid. Mazwai said that while working at the Rand Daily Mail, he was once made to forfeit his leave for the two days he had spent in police detention after taking part in a march in 1978. Qwelane said the Star refused to pay him for three months after he had refused to register at the pass office, as required of black workers. The collusion with apartheid went even further because facilities at these newspapers were also separated along racial lines, Qwelane said. Blacks could not share canteens and toilets with their white colleagues. Black facilities left much to be desired, Qwelane said. “Were these not human-rights violations?” he asked. He acknowledged, however, that there were “periodic flashes of courage and brilliance [by mainstream newspapers] by exposing the gross injustices under which we lived, to the rest of the world”.

Qwelane related another incident to the Commission which he said still remained with him. On a Friday on the beat, he remembered, a black man had committed suicide, leaving seven children destitute. On the same day, a truck with sheep had overturned on the highway. The sheep made it on to the first page of the Sunday Star. The seven children and a destitute
mother just squeezed on to the news pages of the Africa edition, the edition that was directed at black readers.

**John Horak, journalist and spy**

A former journalist at the *Rand Daily Mail*, John Horak described his life as a professional police agent caught between the murderous intentions of his handlers and the media establishment. He told the Truth Commission hearings that his former handlers tried to assassinate him after he was finally forced out in 1985. His life was also threatened several times by his handlers while he was working for them. This had forced him to flee the country with the assistance of the ANC after he was driven out of the security forces. He was subsequently instrumental in drawing up guidelines for the new South Africa’s intelligence community.

Horak said journalists who acted as informers under apartheid were “two-a-penny” in those days. He said half the newspapers’ newsrooms were made up of journalists who were sympathetic to the apartheid state and others who were lumped together as communists. He claimed many senior editors knew of his work, but they did not take any action against him at the time. He singled out the former *Sunday Times* editor Tertius Myburgh as one of the editors who had knowingly co-operated with him. He said former *Sunday Express* editor Ken Owen had also allowed police spy Craig Williamson to write a column under an assumed name in his newspaper. Horak said he was also often approached by journalists seeking favours from him because they knew he was a police spy. Many, including an assistant *Sunday Times* editor, whom he did not name, had approached him, seeking his assistance in getting into contact with the security forces so that they could work for them.

He said informers were divided into three main categories: agents who were professional policemen doing a job; informers who gave information freely or for money on a regular basis; and “sleepers”, who would give information when it suited them. He expressed sympathy for journalists who believed in what they were doing because the small pool of newspapers in South Africa meant there were few alternative employment opportunities.

Horak’s testimony contained many gaps because TRC regulations prevented him from naming individuals who were still alive and working in the media, but he revealed that he had spent more than 30 hours being “debriefed” by the commission.

**Don Mattera, victim of a spy campaign**

Don Mattera worked as a journalist for many years at the *Star’s* Johannesburg offices and he was also a member of the Forum of Black Journalists. Mattera told the Truth Commission’s inquiry into the media that he, too, accused white South Africans of thriving under apartheid
and he said the state of journalism cannot be divorced from the rotten state of South Africa as it pertained.

Mattera, who was banned and subjected to repeated raids on his home by security police, was particularly scathing about his former news room colleague John Horak, who testified about his role as a police spy on newspapers. Accusing Horak of “whispering campaigns” against several journalists, including himself, Mr Mattera said that had it not been for President Mandela and his campaign for reconciliation, “John Horak would have been dead by my hand”. There had to be a “total catharsis and purge” of South African society and the media had to be “reformed” until it represented the country’s demography, he said.

**Independent Newspapers and the TRC**

Independent Newspapers chief executive officer, Ivan Fallon, conceded at the TRC that there were shortcomings in the activities of the former *Argus* company from the 1960s until the early 1990s and that it was “deeply regretted”.

“We make no bones about these ... We regret them deeply,” he said. “But the company has changed dramatically, and I reject very strongly [the claim] that an apartheid mindset exists in this company today.” Rory Wilson, the managing-director of Independent Newspapers Cape, said the Argus had been “a rather staid, cautious and slow-moving newspaper company”. It had been so strongly driven by commercial motives that it “often blunted its cutting edge in exposing the wrongs of apartheid and human rights violations”. Also, it had made insufficient effort to overcome obstacles to the free access of news, imposed by apartheid laws. However, the Argus had also operated in a hostile legal and political context, he said. “Journalists were constantly harassed, threatened, abused and intimidated for doing their duty as they sought simultaneously to serve the interests of a largely white readership and a repressed, restless black majority.”

Wilson told the Truth Commission that the new leadership of Independent Newspapers had devoted much time and effort to ensuring that the imbalances of the past were redressed and that the shortcomings of the old Argus company did not persist and that a great deal was being done at all levels in terms of training, education and upgrading of staff from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ivan Fallon rejected a statement made earlier during the hearing by Thami Mazwai, head of Mafube Publishing and a former *Argus* employee, that the “apartheid mindset” lived on at Independent Newspapers. “Whatever has been said about the
old *Argus* Newspapers, Dr Tony O’Reilly and Independent Newspapers [which bought the company in 1993] have been from the outset significant friends of the new South Africa,” Fallon told the Truth Commission.

Wilson detailed the company’s shortcomings and said although many editors and journalists had taken a courageous stance in opposing apartheid, more should have been done. “Our company made insufficient efforts to overcome the obstacles of apartheid. Our staffs were generally too white, and blacks were only introduced on any major scale during the 1970s. We made insufficient attempts to generate news from disadvantaged communities, and this led to a distortion. The alternative press showed up our company for having lost touch with the oppressed masses.”

**Times Media Group and the TRC**

Cyril Ramaphosa, chief executive at Times Media Limited, told the Truth Commission that the TML group was committed to transforming itself. Mr Ramaphosa, who led TML’s submission to the TRC hearing on the role of the media during apartheid, said the English newspapers in South Africa had played “in the main” a courageous role in unearthing the evils of apartheid, but more had to be done.

He said criticisms of the way TML’s newspapers had produced news were true, particularly coverage of news relating to black people. This, and people’s mindsets, had to change. He gave the assurance that issues raised in the hearings had not “gone in one ear and out the other”. His editors were attending the hearings and were paying particular attention to the criticisms and were “internalising” them, he said. Ramaphosa also gave the assurance that black empowerment at boardroom level would be accompanied by empowerment in the company’s newsrooms. “It’s early days yet, but major steps are going to be taken to transform institutions and fortunately we have taken it up as a strategic objective to ensure we have a fair, true representation of the country’s demographics in the make-up of our company.”

TML chief operating officer Lawrence Clarke denied that the 1985 closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* had been politically motivated. Although he was not party to the decision, he said he had spoken to directors who were involved and they were adamant the decision was a commercial one because not enough advertising revenue was coming in. But a former editor, Raymond Louw, later said he believed the closure was politically motivated. He said the Mail’s advertising executives had made only perfunctory attempts to get advertising this was told to him by a senior advertising source.

Clarke said Times Media’s predecessor, South African Associated Newspapers, had been in dire financial straits in 1985 and he was convinced that the group would have collapsed if the *Mail* had not been closed. He said SAAN and TML had hired and fired more
editors than any other group, but they had always been replaced by editors who believed in the same ideals as their predecessors. He was unable to explain how a person like John Horak, who was widely suspected of being a police spy, and who admitted such to the Truth Commission, could have been promoted to a position where he was able to easily monitor, via the company’s computers, the output of any journalist. Clarke acknowledged the concept was “horrifying”.

Horak had earlier told the hearing that he had been a police spy and he claimed many senior editors knew of his work but did not take any action against him during the apartheid era. He singled out former *Sunday Times* editor Tertius Myburgh as one of the editors who had knowingly co-operated with him as an informer. But, Raymond Louw said he had been suspicious of Horak but without evidence he could not do anything. Louw said the *Mail* had been concerned about bugging, especially after a 1965 expose of inhumane treatment in South African prisons, and he had often resorted to having important conversations in passageways or writing notes to his staff. His successor Allister Sparks, who heads the SA Broadcasting Corporation’s television news department, had discovered after the Muldergate scandal that his secretary was a police spy.

Louw said he had not attempted a spy-hunt in the news room as it would have demoralised his staff. Instead he only discussed sensitive stories with a few trusted staff. Lawrence Clarke also claimed a proud record for the former SAAN group in opposing apartheid and for encouraging dialogue.

Both the Independent Newspapers group and the Times Media group said they had not interfered in the work of their editors but that their editors had always been mindful of “their fiduciary duties to their shareholders” which meant they did not risk pushing the borders of press freedom that the alternative newspapers later showed off to great effect.

**Security Police spies**

A former security policeman, Vic McPherson, told the commission’s special hearing on the media that there had been more than 40 informers working for the old intelligence services in the newsrooms of South African newspapers in the late 1980s. He said their role had been to spy, to manipulate news and to ensure positive coverage of the police and military.

The state president at the time, Mr F. W. de Klerk had been fully briefed about these clandestine “strategic communications”, Mr McPherson told the commission. McPherson was in charge of the security police’s Stratcom unit in 1989 and 1990. He said he had personally established a network of about 40 “contacts” in the media, including undercover police officers, paid informers, well-disposed journalists and unwitting sources. The media had been a target for infiltration because the state saw them as a tool for propaganda and counter-
revolutionary strategies. One of the undercover police officers had been Craig Kotze, a police captain who worked at the *Star* for six years. He later became a spokesman for Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok, and subsequently communications adviser to Commissioner George Fivaz. Another had been John Horak, who worked at several newspapers and the SABC for 27 years. McPherson said his own network had also included eight paid informers and about 30 other “contacts”. These agents had been based at more than a dozen news organisations including the *Sunday Times, The Pretoria News, the Star, Rapport*, the SABC, *Beeld*, the *Citizen*, South African Press Association, Reuters, the magazines *Huisgenoot, Insig, Republikeinse Pers, Rooi Rose* and the BBC’s South African office.

The aim of media infiltration had been to wage “psychological warfare” against liberation movements. All Stratcom projects had been approved by the Minister of Police and, in principle, by the president. Many of the projects had been intended to discredit leaders of the Mass Democratic Movement through the publication of prominent reports embarrassing them. The budget for media-related Stratcom projects had been R50 000, out of a total Stratcom budget of R4.5 million, McPherson said. The money had been used to pay informants, for travel expenses and to entertain journalists. McPherson said he had personally “run” six projects in various newspapers during 1989 and 1990.

**Craig Kotze, news room spy**

National Police Commissioner George Fivaz’s communications adviser Craig Kotze chose the TRC hearings to come clean and “reveal” one of South Africa’s worst-kept secrets: that he had been a security branch agent while he worked at The Star. From his testimony to the Truth Commission, he came across as neither an able spy nor a capable journalist.

I was expected to operate like any other journalist and I was in fact often scooped by opposition media on some big stories [like] the Winnie Mandela, Stompie Seipei and Olivia Forsyth stories among them.

**APPENDIX D**

[Full text of Guy Berger comment piece published in the *Mail & Guardian* March 7, 1997.]

Nearly nobody noticed when F.W. de Klerk told the Truth Commission in 1996 that government disinformation “could have created a climate” allowing for gross human rights
violations to occur. This surprise admission stands in contrast to the way the press is analysing its role during apartheid.

There has been some focus on those worst-case journalists who spied and lied on behalf of the system. The dirt is coming out on how weak or pro-apartheid editors in the “liberal” press spiked and censored stories that should have been published. There has been criticism that conservatives in the “mainstream” media under PW Botha agreed to “keep their house in order”, leaving it to the alternative weeklies to go it alone in exposing the worst abuses.

But there has been very little assessment of how even the liberal press performed day-to-day legitimisation of racial domination – even if some papers criticised the corruption and crimes that flowed so logically from this system. The Sunday Times recently recanted some of its most brazen records, such as when it celebrated a murderous South African Defence Force raid on Botswana with the headline: “The Guns of Gaborone”.

Then [the] Independent Newspapers drew up a dossier setting out historical “shortcomings” in the way its papers – under the Argus Company – had accepted press restrictions. In hot response, four retired editors of Independent papers have now defended their personal records as campaigners against apartheid’s gross violations of human rights.

Harvey Tyson, former editor of the Star, declared he would never apologise for what he had done as a journalist. Evidently, he has forgotten the regret expressed in his book Editors Under Fire. In it, he admits to having fallen for security police manipulation in publicising allegations that “KGB colonel” Joe Slovo had blown up his wife, Ruth First. Missing in this entire flurry, however, is any scrutiny of how everyday, routine reporting reflected – and contributed to a climate where black lives were cheap and human rights went unrecognised.

Unlike government supporters like the late former Sunday Times editor, Tertius Myburgh, Harvey Tyson was a liberal editor. Yet like most whites, Tyson probably believed the Slovo story to be plausible at the time. He viewed his role as a watchdog—but failed to see any difference between the legitimate property owners and the real thieves. The liberal press was, of course, not the same as the SABC which never seriously claimed to be anything other than propaganda for apartheid.

But it was not as different as people like Tyson would like to think. It reflected establishment assumptions where white newsmakers and white audiences counted. Blacks did not. Only a few brave, white English-speaking journalists saw the role of black resistance beyond their papers’ liberal – and limited – opposition.

Attacks by Nationalists added to the illusion harboured by many white liberal journalists that the key actors were themselves and the government. Not black South Africans. It is an understandable thing for people to assume that they are a leading force for freedom.
when victimised by a bullying government, and enduring court cases and ever tighter legislative controls.

Liberal journalists may be forgiven for evaluating their role in relation to such pressures. But this logic does fail to locate them in the broader sweep of things. The liberal press operated in, and took its cues from, the prevailing white landscape.

A handful of white editors rose above the conventional wisdom of the day. They “opened an account” and they paid a price: exile for Donald Woods, loss of their jobs in the cases of Raymond Louw, Allister Sparks and Tony Heard.

White journalists like these, who tried to lead the white readership market, rather than follow its prejudices and its interests, also ran into falling circulations. The decline was not compensated for by black readers who failed to attract advertising revenue.

If it wasn’t such context that constrained the role of the liberal press, it was the confined outlook of most white journalists. Many of these journalists did campaign against “petty” apartheid. But macro-apartheid – especially after Bantustan independence – got less critical attention. Coverage sometimes pilloried the pass laws; it routinely neglected the wages paid to migrant workers. The problem with the liberal press is not only that its opposition did not go far enough. Nor even that its champions like Tyson did not realise that there was a lot further to go. What was worse was the day-to-day reflection of what South Africa was about. Black people were invisible in most newspapers.

If you were Desmond Tutu, you got coverage – usually negative – in The Star. If you were a golf caddie featured in a Daily Dispatch picture, you’d be lucky to have even been photographed in the rain standing next to white men enjoying the shelter of an umbrella, with your name captioned as “Jackson”.

The record of black journalistic advancement is similarly pitiful. In 30 years, no white editor matched the record of Drum editor, Anthony Sampson, who empowered an historic generation of top quality black reporters, writers and investigators.

To understand all this context is not to justify the role of the liberal press. It is to explain it. The press today is unlikely to repeat its general complicity with the day-to-day, humdrum mechanics of racial domination. But liberal journalists – of whatever colour – may continue to overlook their role in legitimating other kinds of domination. This is the way that the media represents how men dominate women, adults abuse children, urban people scorn the rural, and the voices of the able drown out those of the disabled.
F. W. De Klerk has acknowledged that the way that realities are reflected can contribute to climate where human rights are violated. Journalists need to do likewise. [The Mail&Guardian]

Appendix E


Preamble:

ASEAN is a relatively young region, both in terms of independent history as well as the level of development. But with relative stability and wealth of natural resources, it promises to be the most dynamic region in the Pacific Basin.
ASEAN is geographically, ethnically, culturally, historically, and economically diverse. The extent of diversity has given rise to the development of unique national press.

The national press systems in ASEAN countries are, in turn, influenced by this diversity. The wealth of publications in so many languages in the ASEAN countries is a reflection of this unique situation.

It is clear that the ASEAN national press systems will continue to be influenced by the domestic situation in each ASEAN country although the region itself is becoming more open to outside influences.

The promotion and preservation of political stability, rapid economic growth, social justice and greater regional cohesion should and will be the main priority of the ASEAN press.

The degree of freedom among ASEAN national press varies according to the peculiar geographical, racial, cultural, political and economic circumstances of each country.

Philosophical and legal bases of ASEAN press systems

The philosophy of ASEAN national press systems is based on a common understanding of the nature of man:

- of holistic man, both rational and emotional, and
- of man in his cultural context, rooted in his understanding of community, authority, and religion or spiritual belief.

This philosophy:

- includes universal human values, as defined and filtered through each society’s cultural and historical experience, and
- influence the thrust of each society, and determines the direction and process of its search for fulfilment.

This philosophy integrates the thinking of those components of society concerned with the press system, including government, media, and the public, in their efforts to realise the national aspirations.

The philosophy of ASEAN national press systems is operationalised through:

- the Constitution, the laws, and administrative measures;
- the electoral process and other mechanisms of participatory democracy; and
- the media’s articulation of the philosophy as well as the actions arising from it.

In the light of the above, it is recommended:
1. That efforts be made to eliminate possible dissonance arising from differences in perception between the participating elements in the ASEAN press systems: the government, the media, and the public.

2. That the media be actively involved in defining their character and role in each society through mechanisms existing in the respective ASEAN nations.

3. That the press be considered a partner in development, with the responsibility of:
   (a) professionalising its ethics and practice; and
   (b) helping society progress in development and nation-building.

4. That both press and government always recognise the cultural context within which ASEAN societies develop, with a view to utilising the culture both as background for understanding, and as base for change.

5. That ASEAN nations consider each other’s range of experience as basis for learning in such matters as: press ownership, press councils, embodying the relationship of press and government in legislation, and other aspects of press systems.

The above recommendations would contribute to the translation of philosophy to practice in the ASEAN press systems.

Role and responsibility of the ASEAN press

Principles and recommendations, premised on the importance of working in an atmosphere of freedom

1. The primary functions of the ASEAN press are:

   (a) to support efforts at nation-building and to be a partner in national development;
   (b) to promote and enhance relations between ASEAN member countries;
   (c) to help mould a national identity;
   (d) to promote social harmony;
   (e) to help explain public issues and policies to facilitate their implementation;
   (f) to inform and educate;
   (g) to exercise self-restraint and good sense so as not to cause misunderstanding or tension between different ethnic, racial and religious groups.
2. To discharge these functions effectively and fully, it is vital that the media be given adequate access to information, which is essential to the development process.

3. In promoting relations between ASEAN member states, the media have to be mindful about certain reporting which could adversely affect, or even harm, relations. Good sense and sound editorial judgement must at all times prevail.

4. To promote ASEAN understanding, it is important that journalists of all ASEAN member countries cultivate each other and maintain close links. This could facilitate the verification of certain kinds of reports which may appear inaccurate or slanted.

**Freedom and responsibility of the ASEAN press**

**Objectives**

1. Since the ASEAN press is generally free in its day-to-day business, its objectives should be to use that freedom in the most productive manner, taking into account the many interest groups the ASEAN news media must serve.

2. The press in the ASEAN region has a vital role in national development. Hence development journalism should be encouraged.

3. The press should make fair comments on all institutions that combine to make up society as part of its freedom and responsibility.

4. The national press of ASEAN countries carry heavy responsibility in exercising freedom as they have to consider the element of loyalty to their countries as well.

5. The national press in each ASEAN country should endeavour to look at problems and issues in each member state from the ASEAN perspective.

**Recommendations**

1. ASEAN journalists, journalistic institutions, publishers and those concerned with press freedom in the ASEAN region should endeavour to encourage the adoption of the objectives mentioned above.

2. ASEAN governments should help promote a free, responsible and credible national press with adequate access to information for the national press.