

REPORT FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Reflections on Journalism in the Transition to Democracy

Anton Harber

New democracies pose a particular challenge for journalists. They are vulnerable and sometimes shaky. One wants them to work and, therefore, one is seeking to define not just what constitutes high-quality and interesting journalism but also how one can best contribute to helping democracy take root. In South Africa, journalists by and large emerged from many years of fighting against state, corporate, and political pressures under apartheid in the 1990s with a fierce commitment to independence. This sentiment was often strongest, predictably, in those institutions that had suffered the most political interference, such as the state broadcaster and the Afrikaans press, both of which had served largely as mouthpieces for the apartheid government.

But what does independence mean in a young democracy, which is going to be flawed, troubled, and uncertain? Do criticism and scrutiny need to be tempered to promote the very institutions that gave media and journalists their freedom? Does one suspend one's harshest words to give a neophyte government an opportunity to find its feet? Does one hold the new authorities to higher standards than their predecessors, who after all were authoritarian and corrupt, or does one accept lower standards because they are new and inexperienced?

Does one serve democracy best by putting the government under unrelenting scrutiny or by allowing it a honeymoon period? Does one take the opportunity to assert one's newly won right to make as much noise as possible?

Making noise was, after all, what journalists were used to doing in South Africa—and perhaps the most crucial, and probably most difficult, realization was that they also had to adapt to a new world, a world that required different things of them.

JOURNALISM UNDER APARTHEID

Under apartheid, practicing journalism in South Africa had been both terribly tough and very easy. It was tough because journalists—or, at least, anyone who operated independently from state or ruling-party media, and who expressed any serious criticism of apartheid—were systematically persecuted and harassed. As editor of a small but strident anti-apartheid voice, the *Weekly Mail*, I was prosecuted about a dozen times for contravention of emergency regulations in force in 1990, each of which carried up to ten years' imprisonment. Our paper had been closed down for a month just a year before; it had been seized on the streets on a number of occasions; and a number of journalists working for me had been the victims of

attempted assassinations, lengthy detentions, and systematic prosecutions. Someone fired a shotgun through my front door, and my coeditor's house was firebombed. In addition, we had undertaken the dangerous task of trying to cover what was happening in townships, which had become violent and ungovernable.

The easy part of being a journalist, however, was that there was an obvious, identifiable, sitting target in the apartheid government. The situation was, so to speak, black and white—with few gray areas in between. Apartheid was evil, and the minority government had to be opposed at every turn. The journalist's role was, unequivocally, to expose government oppression at all times, to give voice to those the government was trying to silence, and to hold up a light for the liberation struggle. Under such imperatives, there were few rules.

In 1990, Nelson Mandela was unexpectedly freed from prison, his organization, the African National Congress (ANC), and others were made legal, and the state of emergency was lifted to allow negotiations among the parties to begin. Journalists suddenly found themselves with the freedom of expression for which they had fought so long and hard. Yet, now that they could do what they wanted, their job was much harder to do. There were no longer any easy targets, no simple right and wrong. There needed to be a new set of rules, only no one had written them yet. The story to be covered was more complex and nuanced. Previously, the litmus test for credibility was one's attitude toward apartheid and the liberation movement; now credibility was based on traditional journalistic virtues such as accuracy, reliability, and honesty. Previously, financial support had come through moral and political persuasion; now it would require workable business plans. Most of all,

the defensive, combative posture that journalists had adopted for their survival during the 1980s became strikingly inappropriate in the 1990s.

HOW CRITICAL IS CRITICAL?

The *Weekly Mail* faced an early test of what independence meant in a rapidly changing society. In early 1989, South African editors had to decide whether to investigate the rumors that the bodyguards of liberation leader Winnie Mandela had abducted four boys in Soweto. Mrs. Mandela was an icon whose bravery and strength were legendary. She was almost certainly the victim of repeated attempts by the notorious security police to entrap her. She was a formidable woman to take on under any circumstances, and there was considerable pressure from the liberation movement to keep quiet what would be a major political embarrassment.

There were certainly those editors who chose to look the other way, on the grounds either that it was too difficult and risky to deal with (for the more mainstream, conservative media) or that it would feed the apartheid enemy, and therefore was something that needed to be dealt with quietly within the liberation "family" (for the "struggle media"). Editors were haunted by previous experiences when security police used them to smear anti-apartheid leaders: the Alan Boesak story, when police recorded and released to the media the sexual antics of this anti-apartheid cleric; and the Joe Slovo story, when they tricked some newspapers into reporting that Slovo, an ANC military leader, might have killed his own wife, when she was in fact assassinated by apartheid agents. Still, the talk about the abductions was becoming so widespread, the stories so horrific, that no journalist, no matter his political leanings, could ignore

them any longer. Being passive in the face of such a story was a decision in itself.

One can debate the merits of any particular editor's decision; what is clear, however, is that the decision taken on this and similar dilemmas would come to define a newspaper's role during the transition period. The *Weekly Mail* had made its views very clear: it was on the side of the liberation struggle, it was deeply and fundamentally opposed to apartheid, and it made no claim to being nonpartisan or neutral. It has been started as an alternative to traditional liberal newspapers that had—in their obeisance to the rule of law and their pursuit of a mythical objectivity in the face of violence and racism—compromised with apartheid and censorship. Liberal papers had opposed apartheid, but to remain alive they had accepted the parameters of debate set by whites-only parliamentary politics, whereas the real struggle had moved to the streets, the factory floors, and that underground area out of the reach of the law. This had given birth to a range of what were called “alternative papers,” born in the new spirit of defiance and resistance and prepared to support international sanctions, illegal protests, and even armed struggle. The *Weekly Mail* was one of those.

Some of these papers defined themselves as tools of the liberation movement, even voices of specific organizations, such as the ANC, and had played an admirable and heroic role doing so. The *Weekly Mail* tried to carve out that narrow space within advocacy journalism that still allows for critical and independent thought. We pledged allegiance to a cause, not an organization, even though our broad affiliations were obvious from our writings. It was this commitment to critical independence that had defined newspapers and individual journalists

under apartheid and would continue to do so thereafter.

How was such a paper to treat Winnie Mandela, to whom we had been traditionally sympathetic? This raised all the issues of what it meant to take sides but remain independent, to advocate but remain critical, to be partisan but fair, to be committed but open-minded. These questions defined the difficult territory of the media in a society in transition.

We broke the Mandela story under a relatively small and bland headline, putting it on the front page, but without the traditional screaming lead of the tabloid the newspaper was. Doing this was a compromise. To have hidden the story inside the paper would have been cowardly, but to have given it a 96-point headline would have opened us to the charge of indulging in the cheap sensationalism that Mrs. Mandela often provoked. The angle we took on the story was that the surrounding community was troubled by her conduct, and the internal resistance movement, under pressure from the community, had resolved to do something about it. Thus, it was the community itself that had provided the motivation for the news story, not the apartheid regime or the opponents of the liberation struggle, even if the story might have aided their aims. This approach was one that the liberation movement would find uncomfortable but hard to criticize. Once the story was broken, the rest of the media followed.

INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE

Independence has its own dilemmas when one is in a situation of violence and conflict, in which journalistic principles may not always serve the cause of the weak and vulnerable. It is difficult to stand by a principled independence when it can cost lives or cause

real hardship. The Mandela story was one in which we sought to define our independence, but we knew we were on extremely shaky ground. We might have been giving the state the tools with which to further her persecution. We might have been inadvertently following the lead of agents provocateurs, who routinely infiltrated both her circles and newspaper newsrooms. As is so often the case in journalism, the line between doing good and bad was so hard to see that one would not notice one had crossed it before it was too late.

Perhaps most important was the realization that the notion of independence is defined by its times. "Independence from what?" one has to ask, and the answer shifts according to changing demands and priorities. As a new newspaper finding its feet in the early 1980s, independence meant establishing an alternative to the conservative, mainstream media that had compromised with apartheid and censorship. In the early 1990s, it meant financial independence, the belief that in the long run journalists had to stand on their own feet financially if they were going to maintain a viable political freedom. By this time, there was much less concern about a relationship with the mainstream media, as survival actually meant moving closer to them. And, in the mid to late 1990s, when our former liberation movement colleagues were in power, independence from them became of greatest importance, as it is for any journalist in relation to any government.

No media institution or journalist, however, is totally independent: one makes tactical and strategic decisions about what kind of independence is important to one's work and profession at any particular moment. In the 1980s, when the alternative press maintained its distance from the mainstream media, it was at the price of its financial independence.

When financial independence became the priority, then it had to close the gap between itself and more conventional papers. You could call this the law of relative independence: to assert total freedom as a journalist is to embrace anarchism, to forsake responsibility and, in fact, to cease operating; but if one can make the right strategic decisions concerning what kind of freedom is important at any particular moment, then one can balance the loss of independence in one regard against the gaining of it in relation to another. If journalism remains flexible and alert, it can make a space for itself to remain critical and open-minded.

TOUGH LOVE

Take the issue of violent crime in South Africa, a problem inherited from the past. It had been exacerbated by the years of resistance, which involved violence from both sides and was based on a contempt for the law and a corresponding admiration of the outlaw. There was also a new government that was asking for some leeway to find its feet and learn the workings of the arcane institutions of state authority. Not only did the government have to operate such institutions, however, they also had to transform them. There was now a constitution that gave protections to all citizens and required police to find tactics other than beating up suspects until they confessed. The police, meanwhile, were still crippled by racism and incompetence, and they needed to be taught how to behave under the new constitution. Citing these factors is, unfortunately, often a means of explaining away the failures of a new government to deal with them.

There are two easy, knee-jerk journalistic responses. The first is to play up the crime, its victims, and the failures of the justice and policing systems and to accept no excuses or

explanations from government. This panders to a popular concern, makes for some very juicy stories, and puts the government under severe pressure to act firmly and harshly. A media that sees itself first and foremost as a watchdog will pursue such a course with legitimacy—it is the “tough love” approach—and many did it instinctively.

The second is to play down the crime, on the basis of sympathy with the new government and the challenges it faces. This form of journalism seeks out the occasional triumph of the system in identifying and capturing criminals, and writes long, ponderous articles on the complexities of transformation of the police force from an arm of dictatorship into an arm of public service. The most admirable aspect of such an approach is its reluctance to pander to the populist cries to fill our prisons, bring back the death sentence, and take shortcuts through the rights of the accused.

Neither of these two approaches is likely to produce particularly good journalism. The middle path—finding the delicate balance between praise and criticism, pressure and understanding—is the most difficult and can lead to a wishy-washy conjuring act. I don’t think any of our media have achieved it with any consistency.

Similarly with the issue of corruption. The old regime was riddled with corruption, but there was the expectation for the new one to be squeaky clean. It was therefore held to a higher standard, in conformity with the new constitution, which had transparency and accountability deeply embedded within it. Was such an expectation fair? Could one expect individuals who had been in exile, prison, or underground to handle all these complex issues better than those who had been in power for decades? In fact, it seems likelier that those who had been historically excluded from power and wealth might find corruption more tempting.

The press thus faced a constant plea from the new authorities at all levels: please understand that we have inherited a mess and we need time to deal with it. Why is the media suddenly so alert to corruption, when it seemed to live more easily with it under the old regime? One of the hallmarks of South Africa’s new constitution was a commitment to transparency. And now, those who had resisted the new constitution were often the ones using it against the very people who wrote it.

Pleas for understanding from the new government soon turned to pressure, which was inevitably shaped by the weight of our racial divides. Those who played the role of watchdog, showing the worst of crime and corruption, were accused of undermining the new order and resisting change. They were also mostly white males. Those who played the role of understanding and explanation, playing down the problems and highlighting steps, however slow, to address them, were accused of pandering to the government, and were often young and black. Independent-minded whites were easily labeled as guardians—perhaps unconsciously—of the old order, while independent-minded blacks came under enormous pressure for racial and historic solidarity.

As the ANC consolidated its hold on government and other institutions, informal pressures to conform have increased. To criticize the ANC is to criticize the party of liberation and the party that represents the masses, the party that recently took 70 percent of the vote in the third democratic election on May 15, 2004. To expose inadequacies in the new government is to undermine the new black elite. Inevitably, there was a rash of stories about people elevated to new positions who were corrupt or incompetent, and naturally most of these were black. The charge of racism soon followed.

There were certainly those who jumped at any evidence that the new government was failing, and this meant that even sympathetic critics could be lumped together with those hankering after the old order. A series of complaints to the Human Rights Commission led to a formal inquiry into racism as a motivating factor in the string of accusations made in the media against members of the new bureaucracy and new black elite. A series of hearings, research, and debate certainly highlighted the lack of racial transformation in much of the media, but they also had a chilling effect on anyone who wanted to expose or criticize incompetence or corruption.

The situation is complicated by a widespread desire for the government to succeed. There is awareness among journalists about how close to the precipice this country came a decade ago. There is a consensus that the South African experiment with reconciliation and compromise is of universal importance—if we fail, it will be the failure of one of the great historic attempts at racial reconciliation, and, apart from the horrors of us returning to a state of conflict, it will be the collapse of a model that the whole world is watching. And it would be terminal for Africa, a continent that desperately needs a working role model to break the stereotypes of corruption and collapse.

To want government to succeed and yet to keep the critical distance so important to journalism requires great skill and maturity. And this was often absent.

TRANSFORMATION WITHIN TRANSFORMATION

To cover transformation meant that we also had to transform ourselves.

The new government recognized that the media was both a tool of social change and a target, just like any other institution that still

carried the scars of apartheid. Nelson Mandela himself launched a critique of the media for being too white and too trapped in the attitudes and habits of the past.

One of the greatest ironies of such criticism was that the newspapers that had been sympathetic to the liberation movement faced the most pressure for transformation. Little was expected from those that had given support to apartheid, particularly the Afrikaans newspapers. Still today there is little pressure for the giant Naspers media group to follow the same black empowerment path as others, mainly because most of the media they produce is in Afrikaans, and therefore below the political horizon of the new generation of leaders.

But the alternative, oppositional media was expected by many to go along with its friends and allies as they negotiated their way into power and then took the reigns of government. It was thus the liberal media that faced the most pressure to transform its newsrooms and participate in the empowerment movement. “We thought you were with us,” was a common response to the exposure of any wrongdoing in the new government.

Transformation addressed the media at three levels: ownership (the need for greater racial diversity of owners); staffing (the need for the demography of journalists and managers to more closely represent the racial composition of the country); and content (the need for a media that could grapple with the demands of transition and not just take up the knee-jerk responses outlined earlier).

The greatest impact was felt in staffing. A strict affirmative-action plan became a legal requirement, and there was close scrutiny of progress because of the high profile of media institutions. This meant the rapid replacement of older, white, male journalists and managers with younger, black, and

female personnel. The effect of this was, as is to be expected, mixed. Many of the country's most experienced journalists abandoned the profession or the country; many young and bright cadets found themselves grappling with responsibilities and demands way beyond what they could cope with. The character of newsrooms had changed, but skills and experience levels had dropped—the very attributes most needed to deal with the complex and difficult stories of the postapartheid era.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the new government would be particularly sensitive to criticism. It was inexperienced, and the skills learned in the trenches of the liberation struggle were not easily transferred to the realm of political power. It faced formidable social and economic challenges and potential instability. It wanted the media to stand with it to face these challenges, especially since some of the media had taken part in the liberation struggle. There was a sense of bewilderment, however, at why members of government, who had after all brought liberation and democracy, were so closely scrutinized. This ambivalence perhaps also made it inevitable that the new government would be clumsy when it came to handling the media, its behavior characterized by poor communications management and prickliness in dealing with journalists.

Editors and government met in 2001 in a summit designed to address the sour relationship that had developed between them. Government came to the meeting with a critique of the media for its focus on the wealthy and neglect of the poor and the rural. Editors accused the government of frustrating journalists with poor communications. It was a historic meeting that gave reason for a great deal of reflection on the desired relationship between journalists and the new government.

Editors decided to cooperate to form a presidential press corps, a group akin to the

White House press corps or the lobby system in England. All media would have access and be able to nominate a representative; that person would go through a security check and then, provided she accepted the rules of the game, have access to special briefings, a pool system for the presidential jet, and other forms of privileged access. It was hoped that this was a first step in improving communications between government and media, moving it from a situation of sometimes open conflict.

One of the oddities of the new arrangement has been a revolving door between journalism and government. The authorities have repeatedly recruited some of the best journalists to help them with communication. Later, many of them have returned to newsrooms with both a better understanding of and a fuller sympathy with government: the head of news for national broadcaster SABC, Snuki Zikalala, is a former spokesman for the Department of Labour; the head of radio news, Pippa Green, is a former communications officer for the Minister of Finance; the labor writer for a leading financial weekly, Shareen Singh, was also with the Finance Ministry. Clearly, this has advantages and disadvantages for an emerging press grappling with its relationship with the state. Given the shortage of skills and experience, this jumping in and out of bed with each other was perhaps unavoidable, if not altogether desirable.

Many of these developments came at a time when opposition papers were under severe financial threat. Many of the most strident anti-apartheid voices, such as *New Nation*, *South*, and *New African*, known collectively as the alternative press, closed when international funding dried up after 1994. My own paper had to be sold to the *Guardian* of London to survive. Independence now meant freedom from local influ-

ence; foreign influences were of less concern. (Though even that would not last; within a few years freedom from London management also became important.)

It was not only the alternatives that faced bottom-line issues. The major media had been protected from the global market for some years because of apartheid. The opening up of the South African media market meant more competition, and this led—as it has in so many countries—to the slashing of newsroom resources and personnel in a way that had serious effects on the quality of journalism.

The newspaper industry was consolidating. Under apartheid, four companies (two English-language, two Afrikaans) had dominated print media; postapartheid, this had come down to just two, which claimed roughly 75 percent of the market. Broadcasting was opening up considerably, however, with the introduction for the first time of private, commercial broadcasting to compete with the giant state broadcaster. The new government was largely responsible for this: it was hands-off in relation to print media but created a regulatory framework for broadcasting that promoted diversity and the creation of new owners.

A TRADITION OF DISSENT

South Africa has a long tradition of an outspoken, alternative media, one that has operated noncommercially but was often able to tackle issues and conflicts that a conservative commercial media could (or would) not. The result is that this alternative press has played an unusually important role. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, there were a host of independent, black-owned and black-run newspapers. They were all tiny and short-lived, but of huge importance because they gave voice

to the new political elite that would shortly launch the organization that became the ANC. They were written and edited by the likes of Sol Plaatje, Tengo Jabavu, John Dube, and others who formed the leadership of the first national political organization.

In the 1950s, a left-wing press campaigned for the ANC and its allies, highlighting apartheid repression and those mobilizing against. In the 1980s, the rise of the internal opposition to the apartheid government also led to the emergence of alternative papers that relentlessly attacked the government and had little compunction in supporting the liberation movement. These papers were all small and underresourced but, because of the particularities of South African history, often boxed above their weight. There was also a long-standing far-right-wing press, which campaigned for the maintenance of apartheid and attacked any compromise in racial segregation.

I cite this history because there is a rich tradition of journalists who refused to conform and who gave voice to unpopular views, and some of these have played an unusually large role in the achievement of democracy. It is one of the oddities of apartheid that, despite ongoing and sometimes brutal censorship, a reasonable diversity of voices remained alive almost throughout. The government's desire to maintain a semblance of legality and legitimacy in the face of international approbation, combined with a determined set of opposition journalists, meant that these voices were never quite silenced.

After 1994, however, journalists faced the twin combination of financial and political pressures, with the ironic result that South Africa now has more media but a smaller range of opinion. Alternative voices closed down, and the new ones that developed fell into two categories: either they reflected the

lifestyle of the new elite (particularly among magazines) or they created a new tabloid audience, with sex and crime and little politics. South Africa is one of the few countries in which newspaper readership and sales are going up, but there is less and less independent, critical journalism that can feed the public debate so essential to the development of democracy.

Some argue that this is the mark of a stable society: a media clustered, like so much of the country's politics, in the center of the political spectrum. There is a myth that alternative voices are only needed in times of conflict; in South Africa, they have been needed just as much in times of peaceful rebuilding. South Africa has laid the constitutional grounds for more openness, debate, and diversity, but it is still caught in a crucial debate about what level of tolerance and dissent best contributes to building a successful nation. At the heart of this is a question of what kind of nation building one wants: is it one that treasures a rich cacophony of voices and views or does one need a choir singing

in harmony? For journalists, it is a complex question of finding an independence of mind and soul that does not mean independence from the drive to make democracy work and take root.

In his famous essay, "The Prevention of Literature," George Orwell wrote, "At present we know only that the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity."¹ He was wrong. In South Africa, minds flourished in captivity. Witness the university of Robben Island, where resistance leaders learned so much behind bars. Witness much of the groundbreaking journalism under apartheid. But, like certain animals freed from captivity, the hardest thing of all may be to learn to adapt to—and enjoy—freedom.

¹ George Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature," in *In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950*, vol. 4 of *Collected Essays: Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin, 1968).