

The pen and the sword: Media transformation and democracy after apartheid

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report on the South African media under apartheid is an indictment of the complicity of 'free' media with the apartheid state. This chapter examines critiques of the media which argue that the contemporary structures of media ownership promote the reproduction of its history of news values, routines and practices, thereby compromising its ability to serve the interests of the new democracy. The country's first democratic elections in 1994 thus heralded in discourses of transformation which are examined in relation to the ANC's policy formulations regarding media transformation, ownership and diversity in post-apartheid South Africa. The chapter also probes conceptions of media accountability which are at the heart of government-media relations.

Key words: transformation, diversity, ownership, policy, accountability

Introduction

Post-apartheid discourses of 'media transformation' can best be understood in terms of the print media's history of 'ethnic presses': the Black press, the English press, the Afrikaans press (Steenveld 2007). Each had a particular agenda in relation to the group's political status. Thus, the history of these presses is also a history of social, political and economic struggle in South Africa. A snapshot of this history was made visible in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 1998 enquiry into the media¹. The state had more than 100 laws to regulate and inhibit media action. In response, the owners and managers devised various methods of self-regulation and self-censorship to survive, but in doing so left their journalists without institutional protection, leading to the accusation of the media's complicity with the apartheid state (Steenveld 2007).

Most significantly, according to the report, was 'the political banning and suppression of Black organisations, and their

newspapers effectively enabled the commercial (“white”) press to become “mainstream”, as other voices were effectively silenced’.² Not surprisingly, the ‘news values’ constructed a ‘white world’ which did not challenge the ‘consensus’ of the state, consigning ‘Black news’ to special ‘Black editions’ of metropolitan papers. The report also notes the ‘discriminatory treatment of Black journalists within newspaper organisations that claimed to be opposed to apartheid rule’ and comments on how they were required to ‘tone down’ their reports (suggesting the unspoken ‘norm’ from which the representation of situations was judged).

In sum, the TRC concluded that the apartheid state had defined the terms of operation of the press. This resulted in a press which was commercial, mainly ‘white’ owned and managed, mainly staffed by ‘white’ journalists (predominantly male) who reported on ‘South Africa’ from this very limited perspective. Other voices were marginalised or harassed and banned. Thus the ‘liberal’ or ‘free press’ pre-1990 was not only unrepresentative in terms of who had access to it as producers of knowledge about South Africa, but its representations of South African society were also largely from a singular, hegemonic perspective. In the words of Phillip van Niekerk, former editor of the *Mail and Guardian*:

Only a few years back, virtually all the media, the English press, the Afrikaans press, and the broadcasting media were in the group of monopolies – monopolies not only of ownership, but monopolies of ideas ... For years I worked on what was characterised as the liberal English-language press of South Africa. Professional frustrations of my contemporaries and I were ongoing and destructive. It was an inherent conservatism, a fear of alienating white readers ... (1990: 39).

Today, despite demographic changes in the newsroom and a new cadre of Black editors, critiques of the press are still racialised (the ‘white’ press), thereby invoking this history as a means of emphasising the continued hegemony of ‘white’ capital in the industry. In this chapter, I examine contemporary discourses of ‘transformation’, as well as the ANC’s 2010 policy document, *Media transformation, ownership and diversity*, as a way of conveying the cut and thrust between the media and the state in their engagement for, respectively, ‘independence’ and ‘control’. But first, I begin with a brief overview of the print media industry because it is deemed the most politically significant.

Features of the current print media landscape

Four large companies dominate the print media industry: Avusa Ltd, Media24, Caxton, and Independent Newspapers (for details see Duncan 2011). Together they produce 23 dailies, 14 weeklies and more than a hundred ‘community newspapers’ or ‘knock and

drops³. The table below gives an indication of the market share of the four major companies (Media Development and Diversity Agency 2010).

The current ownership patterns reflect the complex relationship between economics and politics, so that ethnic ascriptions of particular newspapers refer to their readership, regardless of who owned, managed and staffed them. Significantly, Anglo-American mining capital 'unbundled' its interests in the 'English' press, to what is now Avusa, and the foreign-owned Independent Newspapers (Tomaselli 1997). Avusa is now not only the main player in the economics journalism market with *Business Day* and *Financial Mail*, but also owns the largest circulation Sunday paper, the *Sunday Times* (circulation 504,000 and 3.9m readers), the *Citizen*, and the regional *Daily Dispatch* (which has a weekly isiXhosa supplement) and *Herald*. But it, too, entered the Black market by buying the *Sowetan*, the leading Black daily (circulation 130,000 and 2.1m readers) and the *Sunday World* (circulation 181,200 and 1.9m readers) to challenge the hegemony of *City Press* (circulation 197,112 and 2.5 readers). Independent Newspapers, foreign owner of most of the English language daily newspapers, also re-positioned itself economically (and politically) by entering the tabloid market with the *Daily Voice* for Cape Town's working class readers (circulation 41,900 and 325,000 readers), and by starting the isiZulu newspaper, *Isolezwe* (circulation 99,100 and 655,000 readers) and its Sunday companion, *IsolezwengeSonto* (circulation 60,568 and 205,00 readers).

The most significant 'transformation' was accomplished by Media24, owned by Naspers, the media representative of Afrikaner capital, and responsible for the publication of Afrikaans language newspapers. Post-1994, it also began changing its political identity by expanding its economic interests beyond the ghetto of Afrikaans media by entering the Black and tabloid markets. In addition to its stable of Afrikaans daily and Sunday newspapers, it also acquired *City Press* (circulation 197,112 and 2.5m readers) the leading Black Sunday paper, *Sunday Sun* (circulation 176,282 and 3m readers), *Die Son*, the world's first Afrikaans tabloid (218,000 and 0.5m readers) and *Daily Sun*, the country's largest daily seller (circulation 513,291 and 5.1m readers). What is evident from these changes is that the commercial strategy of all the media houses was to tap the Black and working class markets that had been regarded as not politically important enough during the apartheid era. This necessitated not only a change in content, but also experimenting

with various mixtures of South African English and Afrikaans, as well as producing newspapers in isiZulu and isiXhosa. This is not surprising given South Africa's language demographics:

According to the 2001 census, isiZulu, the most common home language, is spoken by nearly a quarter of the population. It is followed by isiXhosa at 17.6 per cent, Afrikaans at 13.3 per cent, Sepedi at 9.4 per cent, and Setswana and English each at 8.2 per cent.⁴

One of the major newspapers in the 'Other' category is the *Mail & Guardian*, the last remaining of South Africa's 1980s independent 'alternative press' movement. Formerly owned by the Scott Trust, owners of the *Guardian*, it is now owned by Zimbabwean media entrepreneur Trevor Ncube. Its current weekly circulation is 50,000 copies read by 383,000 people, thus defying 'the downward circulation trend' that is current in the industry (Parker 2012). It is a significant media and political player because of its reputation for investigative journalism and for consistently holding the government to account (Steenveld 2007). In 2010, it spawned an independent investigative journalism centre, amaBhungane, isiZulu for the 'Dung Beetles – the equivalent of the American muckrakers. Focusing on the classical fourth estate role of journalism has been a successful market strategy to capture the upper end of the media market, which is in sharp contrast to other media companies who sought to bolster their finances through tabloidisation and an appeal to the 'lower end' of the market (Steenveld and Strelitz 2010).

Transformation

The discourse of 'transformation' dates back to the first democratic elections in 1994. The new government of national unity was tasked with setting up the constitutional and legislative foundations for a democratic state. One of the challenges it faced was to constitute a 'national identity'. The constitution can be read as the basis of this new identity. As it is founded on the principles of 'non-racialism and non-sexism'⁵, it is arguable that this is the privileged discourse of the new nation. Even though early 'struggle' debates were about the kind of change that was being sought, framed classically as 'the race/class' debates (Posel 1983), it is arguable that the hegemonic discourse of transformation has been framed in terms of addressing issues of 'racial' and gender inequalities, as opposed to, for example, questions concerning class inequalities.

This is not surprising as 'the struggle' was popularly promoted as 'against apartheid': white privilege and black oppression. Although the 'triple alliance' between the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), and the Communist Party (CP) demonstrates their shared interests and

intersecting constituencies, it also points to ideological distinctions and the differential power of their mobilising discourses. This is evident not only in the framing of the constitution, but also in the development of social and economic policy. Significantly, the ANC government dropped its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which had been supported by its alliance partners in favour of Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), which was not (Terreblanche 1999).

Its adoption of neo-liberal economic policies has maintained the economic status quo established by 'racial capitalism' (see Marais 2002; Bond 2000). However, they have sought to mitigate this through the policy of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), aimed at creating a Black middle class. Current discussions of a 'Second Transition' attempt to reposition 'the first transition' as dealing with political institutions (focusing on racial and gender inclusion), while the 'second transition' points to the need to focus on the economic inclusion of all (ANC 2012). However, this begs questions on how this can be achieved, and the ideological and policy differences between the Alliance partners.

Media transformation

While there is a common understanding that 'transformation' is another word for 'change', what 'counts as transformation/change' is contested (de Vos 2009). The academic debate focused on whether changes in the media were economic/structural, or whether there were also changes in personnel and power within newsrooms which could effect changes in media content. Tomaselli (1997) and Berger (1999) outlined the changing ownership of SA media, indicating the advent of Black ownership into the media market since 1996 (see also Barnett 1999: 653). Tomaselli argues that the mid-1990s media change was in terms of the colour of the ownership, making little impact on the media's role vis-à-vis the inequalities produced by capitalism. Berger takes a different view, arguing that Black ownership not only has a symbolic social impact, but also provides a possible space for changes in media management, staffing and thus content.

Tomaselli concedes that 'what this interpenetration did herald ... was the possibility of new management styles, which mobilise African practices and beliefs in a meshing of capitalist imperatives with the cultural habits and values of Black employees ...' (1997: 65). Given the history of newsrooms and the news values that informed what was reported, this change was regarded as not insignificant. Despite this, Boloka and Krabill (2000) argue that 'transformation of the media' should really refer to 'transformation of media power' (2000: 80) which they see as being achieved:

...when it [media transformation] reflects in ownership, staffing, and the product, the society within which it operates, not only in

terms of race, but also socio-economic status, gender, religion, sexual orientation, region, language etc. This is only possible if access is opened – again in ownership, staffing, and product – not only to the emerging Black elite, but also to grassroots communities of all colours (ibid: 76).

In short, they question ‘to what degree media have made substantive – transformative – changes, rather than superficial changes geared toward maintaining privilege among an elite instead of redistributing privilege’ (ibid: 79). These debates were subsequently taken up in the government’s articulation of its media policy which informed its approach to media regulation.

The ANC’s characterisation of the problem

It is in response to the contemporary media context and growing media critique of its ‘delivery failures’ and corruption that the ANC government framed its approach to the media outlined at its National Policy Conference in 2010. Its policy document, *Media transformation, ownership and diversity*, describes an ‘ideological offensive’ against it, driven by the mainstream media and opposition parties (ANC 2010). The objective of this ‘offensive’, in its view, is to promote ‘market fundamentalism to retain the old apartheid economic and social relations’. The ANC thus represents itself as a quasi-revolutionary party (despite its neo-liberal economic policies which have deepened the economic divide), and castigates the media for embodying the ideological evils of this economic system against which it has to do battle. In this Manichean representation, the ANC purportedly supports a ‘developmental state, collective rights, values of caring and community solidarity, [and] non-sexism’, while the mainstream media’s ideological outlook is described as supporting ‘neo-liberalism, a weak and passive state, and overemphasis on individual rights, [and] market fundamentalism’ (ibid).

This document is worthy of close attention as it presents a ‘justification’ for government intervention in the sphere of the media, its main public critic. The document introduces the notion of a Media Appeals Tribunal, which pre-empted the more recent Protection of State Information Bill. Both these attempts at government intervention have since been the object of on-going civil society mobilisation, and increasing objections from within the party itself (Hartley 2012). In the following sections, I first examine its use of a political economy argument to critique media practice. Then I comment on its implicit reference to notions of ‘development journalism’. And finally, I comment on the concepts of media responsibility and media accountability, as they are at the heart of the ANC’s policy-thinking about how to deal with the media, despite the constitution’s guarantee of media freedom.

The political economy critique of the media

The ANC critiques the South African media industry drawing on classical political economy arguments about the way in which the economics of media production constrain newsroom practices and thus the ideological slant of their outputs (see Herman and Chomsky 1988; Herman 2000):

The pursuit of profit means that owners do not readily invest in the development of journalism; they often rely on syndicated reports, grouping editorial content, etc. Commercial interests are thus increasingly impacting negatively on editorial quality. These and other related factors constitute the real threat to media freedom, diversity and democracy (ANC 2007: 1).

The usefulness of a political economy approach to understanding features of the South African media landscape that many find troubling is evident (see de Beer and Steyn 2002). But the leap from this limited analysis to the conclusion that 'these and other related factors constitute the *real* threat to media freedom, diversity and democracy', is problematic. The use of the word 'real' is a telling sign that some other reason is *not* the threat. The point of using the political economy argument (which is generally unassailable) is to make the *political* argument that the government's policies are okay; it is the media's framing and representation of them that are problematic, thus justifying 'whatever remedial measures may be required to safeguard and promote the rights of all South Africans' which may include 'the need ... for a media tribunal' (ibid).

But as Golding and Murdock remind us, 'we can think of the economic dynamics as playing a central role in defining the key features of the general environment within which communicative activity takes place, but not as a complete explanation of the nature of that activity' (2000: 74). Similarly, Hall has argued that we should see the economic as setting limits for what is possible – in the first instance – but not for predicting what the outcome may be (1996: 45). In contrast to the claims of the ANC, Hall argues that the 'question of ideology could not be extrapolated from some other level; (1982: 83). And arguing from a slightly different perspective, media scholar Michael Schudson stresses that the political economy approach overemphasises the economic dimension and does not give enough weight to the 'political': it is thus 'insensitive to political and legal determinants of news production' (2000: 181).

From this perspective, the ANC is correct in pointing to the economic factors which shape news production, and thus shape the ideological terrain of which they are part, but we should also be mindful of other factors. Thus my first critique of its (rather crude) use of the political economy argument is to point to the nature of the South African state, and the government's role in contributing to it. While the ANC might describe its policies as favouring a

'developmental state', its detractors argue that many of its macro and micro economic policies contribute to the construction of South Africa as a neo-liberal, capitalist state (Bond 2000). From this perspective the ANC is itself implicated in the production and reproduction of the kind of ideological terrain that it accuses the media of reproducing 'neo-liberalism, a weak and passive state, and overemphasis on individual rights, market fundamentalism' (ANC 2007).

James Curran offers a more nuanced approach to assessing the impact of the economics of media production. He proposes analysing the media in relation to forces that either tilt them towards representing 'the powerful', or those that move them in the opposite direction, to the less powerful in society (1996: 139). But he also points to ways in which the political and cultural world into which they are inserted temper these 'purely' economic factors. Using this framework offers some interesting insights into post-apartheid media transformation.

Curran suggests that market forces such as ownership, market pressures dependent on advertising revenue, and news routines and values, tend to tilt the media towards serving 'the powerful' or the *status quo*. It is evident from South Africa's press history that news routines and values are deeply embedded and thus pose a potential problem in a society in which issues and people have to be seen afresh. Steven Friedman makes a good case for this arguing that a middle class bias is evident in the South African press's minimal reporting of on-going protests by local communities deprived of basic services; its differential reporting of the property rights of the poor and the middle classes; and its representation of the proposed Protection of Information Bill as an assault on itself rather than ordinary people who would need to access information (2011). But although his arguments support the general case, Amner's examination of the use of 'community dialogues' by the *Daily Dispatch* shows this newspaper's attempts to find new ways of producing its news agenda and getting sources from different social sectors (ibid).

In contrast to 'market forces', Curran points to social and political forces, or 'cultural' forces that push the media downwards towards serving the less powerful. First he points to 'countervailing cultural power'. The significance of the 1994 election could be seen in this regard, as it marked a shift in 'cultural' power in South Africa. The new constitution codified the new social norms developed in the years of struggle. While there was no real shift in economic power, cultural power is contested. Curran (1996: 142) argues that the location of this form of power, especially if dominant in society, could temper the discursive field in which the media operate, and in this way check the unmitigated tilt towards the economically

powerful. The shift in cultural power was also accompanied with *political power*.

There is now a new political network, as former activists are incorporated at all levels of the state, and their ex-comrades hold influential positions in the media. In this way, the formerly marginalised can potentially use their newfound connections with the state to influence the goals, policies and organisation of the media. The Human Rights Commission of enquiry into racism in the media is one example of this. The establishment of the Media Development and Diversity Agency is another. The aim of this agency is 'to promote access to the media by marginalised groups and to enhance media pluralism' (GCIS 2000: 5). In other words, cognisant of the way in which market forces tilt media towards economically powerful media audiences, the rationale of the MDDA (Media Development and Diversity Agency) is to intervene to redress this towards those whom 'the market' does not readily serve.

Thirdly, Curran also argues that subordinate groups can influence the media by effecting changes in the sources traditionally used by journalists (1996: 144). As governments and government departments are key news sources, the change in government has the potential to shift reporting towards the interests of the newly enlarged electorate. While this has happened, the other effect has been to focus on the short-comings of the newly elected government. On the one hand this could be viewed as the media serving the public by holding government accountable to them, on the other, given the history of the South African media *vis-à-vis* past governments, this newfound 'watchdog' role is seen as a new form of media racism.

Finally, Curran argues that journalists have the potential power to counter the institutional and market forces to tilt the media towards the economically less powerful. Whether this is actualised or not, depends on how autonomous they can be in their work environments (the extent to which they have internalised the 'routines and practices' of their news organisation), and how they interpret 'professionalism' – as serving their profession (and owners' interests), or as serving the public interest. Commenting on the impact of the changes in the demographics of the newsroom, one editor noted:

... people who may agree on fundamental values will find themselves fighting because of questions of tone and interpretation ... flattening out the differences in people's voices, people's journalistic and writing voices ... What kind of engagement is there with the diversity of voices that actually enriches? How do you make provision in a newspaper that's

guided by quite a tight style manual for voices that run in different sorts of cadences and sing different sorts of tunes? (Dawes 2010).

The 'development media' subtext

As noted above, the ANC describes its 'outlook and values' as including a 'developmental state, collective rights, values of caring and community solidarity'. Later it notes that the 'media must be encouraged to foster and develop social cohesion', which include:

- the building of national consensus on a common set of values consistent with the new democratic order;
- promoting and supporting the development of national pride as a South African nation around events such as the hosting of 2010;
- promoting national unity among the various national groups in the country and supporting the principles and values enshrined in our constitution;

This approach favours particular media roles which foreground notions of 'national interest', 'national unity', and 'national consensus' which are typical of some versions of 'development journalism' spawned by the new World and Communication Order (NWICO) debates of the 1970s and 1980s (MacBride 1979; MacBride and Roach 1993; Nordenstreng 1984) and which critics fear will lead to 'sunshine journalism' (Lent 1977; Harris 1977; Ogan 1980). It is appropriate that the government addresses the shortcomings of market-driven journalism. But its biggest challenge in the 'battle of ideas' is to promote a critical reading and viewing culture: through education and a differentiated media system in which different kinds of media can flourish – such as, for example, labour media or 'far-leftwing' media through, for example, the institution of the MDDA.

Media responsibility and accountability

The former discussion implies notions of the role the media 'ought' to play in a democracy – or what its responsibility 'ought' to be. Government's responsibility to its electorate in this regard is seen as holding the media accountable – which is the aim of its media policy. The ANC government is concerned that media self-regulation is not appropriate for protecting citizens, hence its proposal about a Media Appeals Tribunal. Media scholar Denis McQuail offers useful frameworks for unpacking the tension between media freedom and media accountability, offering insights into practical ways of mediating the two.

Drawing on Hodges' work, he draws the distinction between 'responsibility' and 'accountability': 'responsibility has to do with defining proper conduct; accountability with compelling it' (Hodges

1986: 14). McQuail describes free media's responsibilities as obligations which are 'either assigned, contracted, self-imposed or denied' (1997: 519). This formulation allows us to focus on where the obligations come from, and whether they have the buy-in of the media. For example, the media themselves talk about their public interest role, indicating that this is an obligation that is self-imposed and therefore easy for them to meet – though what is meant by public interest is moot. But when the government suggests that the media should 'promote national pride as a South African nation around events such as the hosting of the 2010 World Cup', this may be an obligation that they may wish to deny. Part of the current difficulties between the media and the government is that they have different views about what the media's responsibilities should be. These need to be made explicit before public policy can be made to address perceived failures to meet obligations that may not even be recognised as obligations.

McQuail suggests accountability can take three forms: legal, social, or moral. He also suggests that the mechanisms of accountability can either be '*liability* for harm caused, or *answerability* for quality of performance' (1997:519, my emphasis). This distinction between liability and answerability is especially useful for differentiating between an adversarial relationship between parties in which legally enforceable action is resorted to, and a relationship in which debate and negotiation are the possible routes to reconciling and resolving differences (McQuail 1997: 517). This distinction takes the sting out of the notion of accountability. It takes away the assumption that media accountability necessarily implies a curb on media freedom. Indeed, he argues that the rationale for media accountability is not media control, but rather to secure three conditions (which are not easy to reconcile) necessary for the media to fulfil their role in a democracy: media freedom, limiting potential harm the media might cause, and promoting 'positive benefits from media to society' (ibid: 525). Friedman takes a similar view with regard to the South African media arguing that its continued middle class bias weakens the case for press freedom as it can 'survive only if it is seen by a much broader spectrum of citizens as a crucial source of knowledge and a vital instrument in the continuing quest to hold to account those who exercise power over them' (2011: 107).

McQuail also points to three kinds of frames from which to consider media accountability: '*a legal-regulatory frame; a financial/market frame; and a public service/fiduciary (or public trust) frame*' (1997: 521). Both the media and the government recognise the South African Constitution as setting out the terms of the obligation, and the courts as the mechanism for the legal-regulatory frame to adjudicate freedom of expression and media freedom. But difficulties have arisen around the different merits of freedom of expression versus the right to dignity and equality (Steenveld

2009). The media themselves are most mindful of the *financial/market frame* of media accountability, as they are accountable to their shareholders to be profitable, and to their readers/viewers to deliver what they are interested in (in a form that is appropriate and appealing etc.). It is in this sphere that the government challenges the media's accountability to their audiences, suggesting that they have failed to represent the interests of particular sectors of the public. While Friedman would agree, critics argue that government policy could address this through greater support for the Media Development and Diversity Agency which is mandated to enable media which would otherwise be economically viable (MDDA 2010).

Finally, the *public service/public trust frame* operates along less clearly defined procedural lines, than in terms of commonly understood social goals or ideals, such as the 'public interest' or 'social responsibility'. This is another realm in which the ANC challenges media performance, but because they have different views on the media's social responsibility, it is difficult to put mechanisms for media accountability in this realm into place.

Coda

The dynamics and tensions between the media, the state, and 'the people' were evident in the 'Spear of the Nation' debacle which exploded earlier in 2012. On 20 May, *City Press*, a Black Sunday newspaper published an article headlined 'Zuma's "Spear" an attack on Black culture – BMF' (Black Management Forum) which accompanied a photograph of a painting by white South African artist Brett Murray depicting the President in the iconic stance of Lenin, but revealing his penis. The BMF viewed the painting as '... an attack on the culture of the majority, the Black people of South Africa. It cannot go unchallenged.' They also saw the painting as a 'crude attempt' to reinforce the 'hostility harboured by a small number of South Africans towards our democratic dispensation and towards members of the national leadership' (*City Press*, 21 May 2012). An art critic saw it as a typical racist colonialist representation of the Black male colonial subject (Schutte 2012).

The publication of a photograph of the offending artwork caused a furore. The President launched a High Court application to have it removed from the gallery, as well as having the photograph removed from the newspaper's website, as it impugned his dignity. The ANC called for a boycott of *City Press*. Tweeters called on the public to defy the boycott. The Congress of South African Trade Unions organised a march on the art gallery, while the South African Communist Party called the painting 'sadistic', noting: 'Freedom of expression has never meant freedom to insult and harm the dignity of another person'.⁶ The Publications Board rated the painting as viewable only for over 16-year-olds. The Nazareth Baptist Church

called for the stoning of the painter. Numerous articles and blogs were written either in defence of the painting and its photographic publication in *City Press* on the grounds of freedom of expression, or against the painting and its public reproduction on the grounds that they impugned the dignity of South Africa's 'first citizen'. After a week of public outcry, Ferial Haffajee, the paper's first *woman* editor, took the photograph off its website. The story was headlined: 'The Spear is down – out of care and fear'. She explained her position:

City Press is not and has never been an object of division; neither am I. I prefer to understand *City Press* as a bridge across divides, a forum for debate. ... My own identity is that of critical patriot, I am a great fan of my country, and that is how I want to edit. Besides, there are really important stories we lost sight of like the continued investigation into Lieutenant General Richard Mdluli, unemployment and the infrastructure budget... That we are now a symbol of a nation's anger and rage is never the role of media in society. We are robust and independent, yes, but divisive and deaf, no (Haffajee 28 May 2012⁷).

This media outcry recalls the accusation of racism levelled against the *Mail & Guardian* and the *Sunday Times* more than a decade ago by the Black Lawyers Association, and the Association of Black Accountants (Steenveld 2007, 2009). The ensuing public debate revealed then that South Africa was a deeply fractured society. A decade later, Haffajee's reasons for taking the photograph off the *City Press* website offer telling comment on the current state of South Africa's democracy, and the media's place in it:

The other lesson in all of this is that our common national dignity is still paper-thin; that our mutual understanding across cultures and races is still a work in progress and that pain is still deep. We have not yet defined a *Mzansi* way of maintaining a leader's dignity while exercising a robust free speech or reached an understanding that a leader embodies the nation, no matter what we may think of him or her... Of course, the image is coming down from fear too. I'd be silly not to admit that. The atmosphere is like a tinderbox: *City Press* copies went up in flames on Saturday; I don't want any more newspapers burnt in anger.

The contestation over this image highlights the cleavages along lines of gender, race, class, culture; what is considered 'news worthy'; the contentious rights of free speech and dignity; the lightning rods to pain and abuse; the violence of pen and sword. Every three minutes a woman is raped in South Africa, but this has not stopped the nation in its tracks. The media clearly have a huge responsibility in traversing this minefield and need courageous editors to lead the way.

Notes

- 1 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Vol. Four Chapter 6: Institutional hearing: The media. Available online at <http://www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/commissions/1998/trc/4chap6.htm>, accessed on 4 July 2012
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 For information about Caxton and CTP, see http://www.caxton.co.za/pages/pub_CommNews.htm, accessed on 4 July 2012
- 4 See SouthAfrica.info for South Africa fast facts. Available online at: <http://www.southafrica.info/about/facts.htm#ixzz1xycYIPgl>, accessed on 4 July 2012
- 5 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Ac 1996, No. 108 p. 3. Available online at <http://www.capetown.gov.za/en/CityHealth/Documents/Legislation/Act%20-%20Constitution%20of%20the%20RSA%20Act%20-%20108%20of%201996.pdf>, accessed on 4 July 2012
- 6 Nation divided over Zuma painting, *Mail & Guardian*, 21 May 2012. Available online at <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-05-21-nation-divided-over-zuma-painting/>, accessed on 4 July 2012
- 7 Ferial Haffajee (2012) The spear is down out of care and fear, *City Press*, 28 May 2012. Available online at <http://www.citypress.co.za/SouthAfrica/News/The-Spear-is-down-out-of-care-and-fear-20120528>, accessed on 4 July 2012

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