

Press freedom in SA

Parliament is hearing evidence on a Bill on the protection of information. An ANC discussion paper on a media tribunal is circulating. The combined effect is a fiery debate about press freedom in SA. The arrest of Sunday Times journalist Mzikazi wa Afrika inflamed things further (although the jury is still out on the charges against him).

Two players in the game

Both government and the media contribute to this inflamed debate. Lets consider the role of both.

Government first. The Bill gives wide discretion to political appointees (e.g. directors-general) to classify information as confidential, i.e. not available to the public. They need not even admit that such information exists.

An anecdote from the Union Buildings recently illustrates how this could play out. A journalist doing a story on genealogy wanted some details on pres Zuma's genealogy. The journalist was told that the information is "protected"! Now Pres Zuma's genealogy probably has no big public relevance.

But what if the same civil servant decided that information about Mr Julius Malema's Limpopo contracts was also "classified"? Under the new bill that would be possible and the information would be kept secret.

Unrestrained discretion to keep information out of the public domain undermines an open society. Current proposals by government and the ANC will undermine openness.

Now let's look at the **media**. The current debate exposes serious weaknesses in our media.

In an open society, we have to be able to trust our news media. At the moment, newspapers make sloppy mistakes. In the same week that the above debate was raging, SA's most serious paper, Business Day, had to apologise on its front page for a report about the minister of Communications, genl Siphiwe Nyanda. Allegations were published which were simply not corroborated or tested.

This undermines one's confidence in what one reads in Business Day – bad for the newspaper, also bad for an open society.

The very next day The Times carried an apology for a headline which said "Jail journalists – Nzimande". This illustrates a fairly common problem – headlines are often not substantiated by the story it introduces. Again, it undermines the credibility of the newspaper, and thus, an open society.

Quality, money and technology

These apologies indicate a serious problem with quality. Why? Is money to be blamed?

A lack of investment in newsrooms certainly plays a role. Salaries are low, senior staff few and far between, libraries have been closed down and time for thorough corroboration limited. More and more

writing is contracted out to freelancers, but the average rate per word is so low that most freelance journalists need support from a spouse in order to practice journalism.

Some of this under-investment may be understandable. Globally print media has been through a torrid time. In the US they arguably suffered as much as the banks during the past recession, the only difference being that they were allowed to fail. An American institution, The New York Times, was in such serious trouble that it had to be bailed out by the richest man in South America. That venerable French institution, Le Monde, was teetering on the verge of collapse and had to be rescued by new investors.

Part of the reason for the financial pressure is the disruptive power of technology, particularly the internet. Like radio and TV earlier, it has played a role in cutting away the commercial viability of newspapers. News has become a general commodity, and margins reflect that.

Yet many newspaper groups still generate splendid profits. The Independent Newspapers in SA have a healthy margin running in the low twenty percent. Many companies can only dream about such margins. Some of that should be re-invested, inter alia in people.

Technology had another impact on journalism – the uncritical use of the internet. Rather than doing their own checking and following up, many uncritically copy what they read on the net. Rubbish copied, rubbish printed.

Wrong mission

Money and technology are not the only issues. In my view there is another, less obvious problem: the way many media players view their role in society. They define themselves almost exclusively as watchdogs on those in power, particularly those in political power.

As a result the old BBC mission statement, “inform, educate, entertain”, has fallen by the wayside. Few newspapers try to educate (a noticeable exception is the Daily Sun, perhaps a reason why it is so successful). To inform has morphed into dishing up dirt and focusing on the negative. Entertainment is still with us in the endless parade of sport and celebrities.

Simple, straightforward reporting on the truth in a fair and balanced way has gone out of fashion.

It is in reporting in such an old-fashioned way that the watchdog role is fulfilled. Sometimes that truth must be painstakingly uncovered. Sometimes it must simply be reported. Sometimes people must just tell their stories. However, that does not seem to be good enough for the watch dogs. This kind of arrogance is not conducive to quality journalism.

Self regulation

The code of best practice and an ombudsman for the media on which media self regulation is currently based does not seem to be very effective. A recent enquiry by an ombudsman revealed that the vast majority of journalists in a newsroom have never read the code; complaints to the ombudsman take a long time to resolve and some editors do not even bother to respond to complaints. That arrogance

again. Also hardly an example of the efficiency one would want. Self-regulation would have to be jacked up considerably. Some editors admitted as much.

ANC's problem

These problems with the media must be distinguished from the concerns of the ANC and its alliance partners. They take umbrage at especially the print media's "narrowly anti-ANC oppositionist stance." One spokesperson went so far as to claim that the print media is just part of a DA political attack on the ANC.

The obvious solution to this concern is for the ANC to invest considerably more time and effort in educating and informing the media about what they are doing in executive power. As an analyst I remain amazed at the amount of information that is generally available from government, and how little of that find its way into the general media. The result is that citizens are not properly informed and public debate is skew.

Deja vu

Where will the current fracas lead us?

In the 1970s there was also a dramatic showdown between Prime Minister John Vorster and the SA media. He famously declared "get your house in order or I will do it for you". That was National Party against English newspapers. A compromise was reached: proposed legislation was dropped and a self-regulatory body that could level considerable fines (R10 000 at the time) was instituted. In practice most fines were around R250. A similar stand off developed during Mr PW Botha's tenure. Both gentlemen backed off from introducing legislation to curb the media.

SA is now much more of an open society than in Messrs Vorster's and Botha's time. If it was difficult to push a media bill through Parliament then, it would be much more difficult now. In addition there is the small matter of a Bill of Rights and Constitutional Court.

Therefore, I doubt the Protection of Information Bill would make it into law *in its current format*. In the same vein I think it would be very difficult for the ANC to enact a media tribunal.

But on the other hand the media would again have to look closely at the way it operates and regulates itself.

The one player will have to back-off, the other one will have to step up to the plate. Let's see how the two players behave.