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NON-REFEREED ARTICLE

Journalism during South Africa's Apartheid Regime

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Abstract

Vic Alhadeff was chief sub-editor of *The Cape Times*, Cape Town's daily newspaper, during the apartheid era. It was a staunchly anti-apartheid newspaper, and the government had enacted a draconian system of laws to govern and restrict what media could say. The effect was that anti-apartheid activists such as Mandela were not 'merely' imprisoned, they were also banned, as was the African National Congress. Under the law, it was illegal to quote a banned person or organisation. This meant if there was to be an anti-apartheid rally in the city – and we reported it – it could be construed as promoting the aims of a banned organisation. As chief sub-editor, I had to navigate this minefield. In addition, most English-language newspapers were anti-apartheid and had a resident police spy on staff (one of our senior journalists); on a number of occasions I would receive a call from the Magistrate's Office after the newspaper had gone to print at midnight, putting an injunction on a story. We would have to call back the trucks and dump the 100,000 copies of the newspaper and reprint. The challenge was to inform readers as what was happening and to speak out against apartheid – without breaking the law.

South Africa had its own Watergate equivalent. The apartheid government understood that English speakers generally were anti-apartheid, so it siphoned 64 million rands from the Defence budget and set up the Information Department. The aim was to purchase media outlets overseas which would be pro-apartheid, and it set up an English-language newspaper in South Africa, to be pro-apartheid. It was called *The Citizen* – and I was offered a job as deputy editor at double my salary, plus an Audi. (I declined the offer, for the record). Two journalists uncovered the scandal, and brought down the Prime Minister.

Keywords

Journalism, South Africa, Information Scandal, John Vorster, Censorship, Nelson Mandela

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I was pleased to be part of the two-day conference to celebrate the retirement of Professor Andrew Jakubowicz at the University of Technology in December 2017. I am not an academic and therefore, my contribution to the Festschrift is the text of my talk¹, a personal reflection on my experiences of working in South Africa during the Apartheid regime.

It is not widely known, but South Africa had its own Watergate. It brought down the Prime Minister, an entire government department including its minister and a raft of bureaucrats. And, as with Watergate, the scandal was uncovered by journalists.

But first, some background to the context of journalism in South Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s. There were three cornerstones which underpinned the apartheid system:

- The Race Classification Act, which divided the population according to colour — whites and so-called non-whites, who comprised – in ‘descending’ order – Indians, people of mixed race or coloureds, and blacks;
- The Mixed Marriages Act, which forbade marriage and relations between any of those classifications; and
- The Group Areas Act, which stipulated where people could and could not live, the objective being to keep them separate.

Those classified non-white had no right to vote, run for political office or use ‘whites only’ park benches, post-office doors, toilets, cinemas, public swimming pools or beaches. If injured in an accident, non-whites were left to die if ‘whites only’ ambulances were the only ones available. ‘White’ hospitals were prohibited from treating so-called non-white patients. Blacks were randomly stopped in the street by police and ordered to produce an identity card, or a Pass, as it was called; if they couldn’t do so, they were thrown into a police wagon and incarcerated. The law ensured that blacks received an inferior education – one that would limit their educational potential. Three examples are:

- School was compulsory for white students up to age 16; for Asians and coloured people to age 15; for blacks to age 13;
- 96% of teachers in white schools had teaching qualifications, while 15% of teachers in black schools were qualified;
- Black pupils received one-tenth of the funding of their white peers. In 1975-76, for example, the government spent 644 rands annually on each white pupil’s education, 189 rands on each Indian pupil’s education, 139 rands on each coloured pupil’s education and 42 rands on each black pupil’s education

This, the most damning statistic of all, had the effect of perpetuating a grossly inferior schooling system for blacks, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the country’s population.

Soweto was a sprawling black city on the edge of Johannesburg inhabited by about two million inhabitants, mostly men. The majority were prohibited from bringing their families to

¹ The talk has not been previously published as is; however, an 800-word extract from it was published in the *Australian Jewish News* in January 2018

live with them under a clause known as Influx Control. The men were mostly there as labour on Johannesburg's gold mines; many secretly brought their families to live with them from the homelands to which they were relegated, and if caught living their families, the charge would be 'Harbouring' their wife and children.

As chief sub-editor of *The Cape Times* – Cape Town's daily English-language newspaper – I became an agent of what was a draconian system of media censorship. There were two official languages in South Africa during the apartheid era – Afrikaans and English. The Afrikaans media generally supported apartheid, while every English-language newspaper – bar one – took an anti-apartheid position.

Operating at the helm of what was a staunchly anti-apartheid newspaper, it was a constant challenge to expose the iniquities of the system and inform the public what was really happening – without breaking the law. We were able to do it because the government respected the rule of law for whites – although I say that while noting that the country functioned in two parallel universes – one for whites, in which the rule of law applied, albeit predicated on the cornerstones of the apartheid system, tight media control and restrictions on civil liberties, such as public protests; and a despotic system for so-called non-whites, who were effectively regarded as units of labour, utilised – and exploited – by whites; whose family lives were routinely destroyed; who were classified as second-, third- or fourth-class people.

Based on the above, the rule of law applied for whites in that the system respected what was said in parliament and what was said in court; i.e. speech in both forums was regarded as privileged and could therefore be freely reported. This meant that when activists were put on trial for attempting to overthrow the political system, we could report every word. The Rivonia Trial, which ran for eight months from October 1963 to June 1964, leading to the conviction of Nelson Mandela and other activists for sabotage and a sentence of life imprisonment, was clearly the most high-profile. More routinely, when the handful of progressive MPs spoke in the parliament against the racist system, we could report every word.

The most high-profile was Helen Suzman, who for 13 years from 1961 to 1974 was the only parliamentarian unequivocally opposed to apartheid. An eloquent speaker with a sharp turn of phrase, she was frequently pilloried for three issues – for being Progressive, for being female and for being Jewish. This in a parliament dominated by [Calvinist Afrikaner](#) men. She was once accused by a minister of asking questions that embarrassed South Africa; to which she acidly replied: 'It is not my questions that embarrass South Africa; it is your answers.' Suzman would visit Mandela on Robben Island and then stand up in the parliament and describe the horrific conditions. We would report it. She would criticise the inhumane conditions to which ordinary blacks were subjected. We would report it. She was harassed by police and her telephone was tapped. She had an effective technique for dealing with the phone-tapping – she would blow a whistle into the mouthpiece. As we could report every word that was said in the parliament, in this way we could inform South Africans about the real plight of blacks.

The government had a practice of ‘banning’ people and organisations. Doing so condemned such people to a twilight existence. Activists such as Mandela were not merely imprisoned, they were also banned. The African National Congress was banned. It was illegal for media to be seen to promote the aims of a banned organisation, quote a banned person or publish photographs of a banned person. This meant media could not quote or publish photographs of Mandela and his colleagues. It meant that if an anti-apartheid rally was to be held, reporting it could arguably be construed as promoting the aims of a banned organisation.

All of this meant that Mandela and his colleagues were rendered invisible – were literally unseen and unheard. They were never quoted nor heard from for three decades. Not only that, but the only time they were referred to publicly was by government ministers, which meant they invariably had the words ‘terrorist’ or ‘communist’ appended to them. Unless, as mentioned, a Progressive politician such as Helen Suzman referred to them within the precincts of the parliament, and the speech was picked up by media.

Almost every English-language newspaper had a resident government spy – a member of staff who worked for what was known as BOSS – the Bureau for State Security. We all knew who ‘our’ BOSS agent was. On a number of occasions, after I had sent the first edition of the newspaper to the printers at about 11.45pm, the phone would ring. It would be the Magistrate’s office. He had been tipped off by our resident spy about a particular story which we were running and the Magistrate was placing an injunction on the story and ordering us to pull it out. It meant the trucks carrying the papers to the regional districts would be called back, the 100,000 copies of the paper would be dumped – at significant cost – and we would pull out the offending story and replace it. Some Zimbabwean newspapers – which were also subjected to censorship – frequently left the space blank where the story was to have appeared, in this way making a statement of protest and letting readers know that a story had been censored.

I doubt if many people in this audience are familiar with the name Steve Biko. Biko could have been the next Mandela. He should have been the next Mandela. A highly articulate black man from a coastal city called East London, he was arrested one night, manacled in the back of a police van and driven for 14 hours – naked, apparently – to a police station in another city. There he was tortured and eventually murdered. So viciously was he assaulted that he was struck on one side of his head but the injury manifested on the other side; it was an injury which medical people called *Contra Coup*, where the brain is dislodged so significantly that it causes a trauma to the opposite side of the head.

The killing of political activists, mainly blacks, but also some white, by security police was not an uncommon occurrence, the official explanation invariably being that they had committed suicide or fallen down some steps. Biko’s death shocked the nation, however, first, because he was known to be a charismatic leader with the potential to lead his people; second, because he was healthy one day and dead in police custody and with such brutal injuries hours later. We published a series of front-page stories about his death, including a comment from Police Minister Jimmy Kruger that Biko’s death ‘leaves me cold’.

I wrote two books on major events in South Africa. When updating one of my books for a third edition, I included a chapter on Steve Biko, but was advised to drop it because of the risk of the entire book being banned because of the chapter on Biko. We dropped it. This was typical. One erred on the side of caution, to avoid being fined, banned or imprisoned.

As mentioned at the beginning, South Africa had its own Watergate – journalists uncovering a government scandal which brought down the Prime Minister. Also as mentioned, all English language newspapers were anti-apartheid. So the government reasoned that if it wanted to get through to English speakers, it needed an English-language newspaper which would support the government. So it established one. It was called *The Citizen*.

One night, one of my superiors invited me to meet him after work, which meant 2am. We sat in his car parked near the beach and for two hours he argued that the future of South Africa lay in the hands of English speakers supporting the government. This, in turn, meant it was vital to establish a pro-government English newspaper. I was later offered a job as deputy editor of this new newspaper – at twice my salary plus an Audi car.

He was referring to what became known as the Information Scandal. What happened was that the government set up what it labelled the Information Department. It ferreted 64 million rands out of the Defence budget, as no-one could question that, and did two things: it established *The Citizen* and it sought to purchase media outlets, newspapers and radio stations in capital cities around the world, starting with Washington DC. Hardly anyone bought *The Citizen*; the government printed thousands of copies daily – and secretly pulped most of them! Photographers captured truckloads of copies being dumped.

As with Watergate, it was two journalists who uncovered the scandal, their investigations included pursuing the director general of the Department of Education all the way to South America, where he had taken refuge. It took months for the full extent of the scandal to unravel, but it culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister John Vorster, Minister of Information Dr Connie Mulder, his director general Eschel Roodie, who had fled to South America, and a raft of bureaucrats.

I conclude with a personal vignette: My wife and I left South Africa in 1984, while the apartheid system was still in place, and lived in Israel for two years. I edited two magazines while there, and in one of them wrote a feature criticising white South Africans for not speaking out more vigorously against the apartheid system. As Murphy's Law would have it, the South African ambassador obtained a copy of the magazine before it was sent to the 6,000 subscribers. He immediately issued threats to the publishers about what action he would take if they distributed the magazine. I was ordered to pulp the 6,000 copies and replace the article. I did so, and a call was put through to the Jerusalem Post, alerting the newspaper to what had transpired. It ran the story on the front page. I declined to comment.

And for the record, I never did take that job on *The Citizen*.

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