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# Whose freedom? South Africa's press, middle-class bias and the threat of control

Steven Friedman

## Abstract

Threats to the autonomy of South Africa's press have prompted protest – understandably so. But, while media control or censorship are inimical to the free flow of information, which is essential to democracy, the mainstream press's response to real and perceived threats has done more to reveal the depth of its middle-class bias than to rally citizens behind the defence of freedom. The article seeks to demonstrate that the mainstream media's understanding of freedom is restricted to the liberties of the suburban middle classes. It supports this argument by analysing both the journalistic preoccupations it seeks to defend and the phrasing of its attempts to oppose state control. And it argues that the framing of press freedom as a purely middle-class concern will make it increasingly unlikely that free expression can be effectively defended.

**Keywords:** bias, class, commercial press, democracy, media freedom

## Introduction

Where we sit, the cliché has it, determines where we stand. Which is how non-academic language expresses the insight of critical theories of knowledge that there is no 'neutral' knowledge: what we see and know is shaped by who we are (Husserl 1970) – by our interests and social position. South Africa's mainstream commercial press, in the main, indignantly challenges this truism even as it illustrates its accuracy.

The mainstream press does not see itself as the vehicle of a particular view of society. It insists that it is a source of unvarnished knowledge for all. In 2006, the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), striking a familiar chord, declared:

The media are your eyes and ears on the world .... Media freedom guarantees your right to know what's going on in your country, and participate fully in the decisions affecting you. Media freedom is your freedom. Insist on it. (SANEF 2006)

In 2003, SANEF and other organisations stressed to the Hefer Commission the press's role 'as the watchdog of the public interest' (Louw 2003). Similar themes could be cited from scores of articles, speeches and statements by the press and its champions.

The mainstream press repeatedly depicts itself as a source of a knowledge which is the property of the entire society, and therefore presumably reflects a common social reality. And so it is also, in its own view, an important check on power for all citizens. These implicit claims to universality are made frequently, but never more so than when – as in 2010 – it fears that it will be the target of government control.

This article will seek to show that the mainstream South African press's claims to universality do not withstand critical scrutiny. It will deal specifically with the mainstream, commercial, print media, with a bias towards those newspapers which cater for middle-class readerships. It will argue that this mainstream press, which also exerts a crucial influence on the way in which news is reported by other media, is neither the 'eyes and ears' of society, nor its watchdog: it performs both functions, not for all of society, but for the suburban middle class. The press, it will show, sees the world through the eyes and ears of the middle class, and the freedom it seeks to guard is that of the middle class. It will argue that this has important implications for the future of press freedom. While this freedom is intrinsic to democracy, it cannot survive if it is understood – by the media as well as power-holders – as the right of only some to speak. Press freedom is likely to enjoy the social support it needs to 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. This is, however, unlikely unless a print journalism emerges which is far more in touch with the needs and experiences of grassroots citizens.

## Democracy and the media

It is trite but true that media freedom is an essential prerequisite of democracy. But it is important to spell out the theoretical context of this reality, because this will better help us understand the flaws in the mainstream press's understanding of its democratic function.

Democracy is, in essence, a system of popular sovereignty (Habermas 1999); it asserts the right of all human beings to an equal share in the decisions which govern the political community of which they are part. Democracy is only fully achieved, therefore, when all adult members of a political community enjoy an equal say in the decisions which govern that community. While no society has ever achieved this and none will, it provides the yardstick by which the depth and breadth of democracy in any society are measured. Citizens exercise this say by using the rights available in democratic systems to engage in collective action to force power-holders to account and to respond to them (Friedman 2007). In reality, most citizens do not participate in decisions in this way. While some theories insist that people do not participate because they do not want to (Dahl 1961, 114; Olson 1971), a far more plausible account insists that people desire a say in decisions, but that many lack the power to achieve it (Gaventa 1982). The key constraint to broad and deep democracy, then, is an inequality in power relations which excludes many citizens from exercising their right to participate.

The elements which rob many citizens of the power to exercise their right to speak are varied. But an important source of popular powerlessness is a lack of access to

information. People cannot exercise their right to a say if they do not know what power-holders are doing or what instruments are available to hold them to account. So, a crucial determinant of the depth and breadth of democracy is the information about the exercise of power available in any society, and the range of social groups who enjoy access to it. Since the media are the prime source, they wield considerable power over the dissemination of information citizens need to exercise sovereignty.

Two crucial consequences flow from this: first, any government restriction on the media's ability to disseminate information restricts democracy, unless it can be demonstrated that the restriction is necessary to protect the right of citizens to participate in decisions which affect them – circumstances which are very rare. So, any attempt to abridge media freedom to protect power-holders is a serious assault on democracy. But the second aspect is equally important – that media are accountable for whether they perform their democratic function. Media can and should be accountable for the extent to which the material they publish reflects the full range of social experience. A media which tells only part of the story, or tells the story only of a part of society, is not only failing in its professional task, but is hindering the development of a deeper and broader democracy. This is not an argument for government control, but it is a very strong argument for accountability, understood not as controls or sanctions imposed by an authority, but as a responsibility to account to society by encouraging free debate on the institution and whether it serves democracy (Friedman and Edigheji 2006).

In South Africa, that debate is arguably a greater priority than in many other societies. The country has emerged from decades of institutionalised racial domination which was, inevitably, supported by ideologies and understandings which cast whites as superior, blacks as inferior (Friedman 2009). These views of the world were not restricted to active supporters of the apartheid government – they were ubiquitous in white society and the media (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller 1987). While there has been racial change in the media since 1994, whites have retained significant decision-making power in the press; whether it is used to perpetuate stereotypes which undermine democracy in a very direct way is an important question which deserves sustained public debate.

These are not debates which the mainstream press is eager to entertain. Questions about the preconceptions which govern press coverage are routinely deflected by labelling them assaults on press freedom. One well-known example occurred in the late 1990s, when the Human Rights Commission conducted an enquiry into racism in the media. To be fair, the commission weakened its case by commissioning a report so overstated that sections could be held up to public ridicule. But the press were quick to make full use of this strategic error, to portray the notion of racism in the media as an absurdity: it embarked on a campaign to ensure that the issue of media racism was banished from the public agenda (Durrheim, Quayle, Whitehead and Kriel 2005). This incident is indicative of a pattern in which public debate on press biases is stilled by a press response which portrays any criticism as an assault on freedom. During 2010, critical debate on the role of the media was virtually silenced, as criticism is (implicitly or explicitly) portrayed as support for state control. Even an analysis of the Protection

of Information Bill which, while opposing the proposed law argued that it would not constrain the media in the way in which press commentary said it would, was met with sustained and sometimes *ad hominem* attack (Dawes 2010).

The framework proposed here insists that there is no contradiction between opposition to control on the press and critical evaluation of the degree to which it performs its professional and democratic function: the concluding section will argue that the press's rootedness in a shallow social base is a severe threat to attempts to avert control. Thus far the media's middle-class bias has simply been asserted; it must now be demonstrated.

## **The world or their world: The view from the suburbs**

During the heated controversies over press freedom which dominated public debate in 2010, arguments about bias have usually been phrased in ways which suggest that the press is inherently biased against a majority black-led government.

The argument has been made repeatedly by governing party politicians, but not only by them. One commentator expressed some sympathy for the ruling party, arguing that much press coverage of the African National Congress (ANC) portrays it as corrupt, power-hungry and incompetent (Cinman 2010). The assumption is that the mainstream press does this because it is expressing the perceptions of middle-class (mainly white) suburbanites who feel threatened by a black-led government. In this view, this press's role is less to speak truth to power than to wield the power which the privileged exercise over those they consider alien and threatening. And, if this is indeed its role, it becomes less a watchdog on power than an expression of the prejudices of the past.

There is more than a grain of truth in this critique. Much media coverage of the ANC ignores its internal differences, painting it as uniformly threatening or incompetent, rather than a party in which there are pressures for and against both honesty and competence (Friedman 2010a). To portray the entire ANC alliance as corrupt is to ignore the campaign against corruption launched by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) (Mkhize 2010). The motives for this propensity to demonise rather than analyse are complex, but it takes no great leap of the imagination to recognise that, to many black readers, much of the political comment in the mainstream press might seem more like a repetition of the prejudices which underpinned apartheid, than an attempt to hold power to account.

This is, nevertheless, a shaky foundation on which to erect a critique of press bias. Despite the points about racial bias made earlier, the line between opposition to a governing party and racial prejudice is exceedingly thin, and often lies in the eye of the beholder. To assume that vigorous criticism, no matter how lacking in nuance, is a product of prejudice is to deter publication of much of the information which governments would prefer to suppress, but which citizens need to know. If, therefore, the only evidence of mainstream press bias was a tendency to denounce the ruling party rather than to understand it, the claim that newspapers reflect only the concerns of the suburban middle class would be difficult to sustain.

The evidence of bias comes from elsewhere – it is derived less from what the mainstream press writes, than what it ignores. And it consists in highlighting too little, not too much, which reflects negatively on political power-holders. Its self-image insists that its role ‘is to keep citizens informed of all aspects that affect life in the country, whether by government edict, the law, economic practice, or the ethical standards of individual behaviour’ (Latham 2010). In reality, it informs only some citizens of only some realities. Evidence that the freedom which it seeks to preserve is that of the middle class is derived primarily from its propensity to ignore the experiences and perspectives of people outside its suburban world – even where this reporting would confirm its own values and concerns. Several examples will illustrate the point.

### Selective sadness

In October 2007, much of the press rallied around then *Sunday Times* editor, Mondli Makhanya, and deputy managing editor, Jocelyn Maker, who, it was reported, were to be arrested after the newspaper published an exposé accusing the then Minister of Health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, of lying, theft and drunkenness. In the event, neither was ever arrested or charged, but for several days their circumstances were portrayed as a mortal blow to freedom of speech.

Perhaps the most eloquent response was that of columnist Xolela Mangcu, who penned an open letter to former president Nelson Mandela, expressing his grief and anxiety:

Tears came to my eyes as I read news of the imminent arrest of *Sunday Times* editor Mondli Makhanya and deputy managing editor Jocelyn Maker. You see, Tata, the foundations of our democracy have never been shakier, the credibility of our justice system never more suspect, the institutions of state never more compromised and our public culture never more hateful as it is now. (Mangcu 2007)

This outpouring of emotion at the prospect of action which was never taken contrasted sharply with the silence from national newspapers and columnists days earlier, on September 28, when police had, according to eye-witness accounts by clergy, attacked a peaceful march by the shack-dweller movement *Abahlali base Mjondolo*, in the streets of Durban (Pithouse 2010). Although this attack prompted a statement of protest by church leaders who had witnessed it, no reports were carried in the national press and no columnists shed tears. A violent attack on *Abahlali*’s stronghold, Kennedy Road, in September 2009 (AFRA 2009), supported by sections of the KwaZulu-Natal government, received some national coverage but never graduated to the top of an inside page, let alone page one. And it elicited no comment from national editorial writers.

This was not an isolated example of indifference to repression when the victims are the black poor. On the contrary, the approach of the mainstream press was typified by remarks by Anton Harber, a former newspaper editor and Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, who, in response to the threat of government measures against the press, told a Canadian current affairs radio

broadcast: 'The implications are that there's a clampdown on the extraordinary freedom of expression we've had in this country since 1994' (CBC News 2010). The identity of the 'we' becomes clear when we note that the mainstream press and its middle-class readers have indeed enjoyed 'extraordinary' freedom of expression since the advent of formal democracy. But constant allegations suggest that the same freedom is not evident in the townships and informal settlements where, since at least 2004, social movement activists have reported repeated intimidating action designed to deter independent activism (McKinley and Veriava 2005). For years, in contrast to the freedom enjoyed by the suburban middle class, people at the grassroots who challenge the monopoly of local party bosses have had no freedom to differ at all.

### The voiceless revolt

A further example of the mainstream press's lack of interest in grassroots South Africa is its coverage – or lack of it – of the six years of protest in areas where poor citizens live.

In 2009, weeks after the Zuma government took office, the press began reporting on 'service delivery protests' by residents of townships and informal settlements. One theme of the coverage was an attempt to understand why the protests had begun so soon after the new administration took office. So ingrained among the press was this notion that the protests had begun in 2009, that one prominent media scholar cites as a reason for government attempts to control the press, the protests of '2009 and early 2010' (Berger 2010). The protests actually began in 2004 (Alexander 2010), but were only discovered by much of the press in 2009 – clearly, a press which takes five years to notice that the poor across the country have taken to the streets in protest at the quality of government service is entirely unaware of the world beyond the suburbs.

Even after the press had discovered the protests, it did very little to report or make sense of them. Reporting on protest events has remained sparse, mostly offering descriptions of rioting mobs, but little or no attempt is made to find out what motivates the protests. The phenomenon has been explained away by the deeply misleading phrase 'service delivery protests', which has become a convenient rubric to explain away, and thus avoid the need to explain, the protests. A critic, contrasting the press's extensive coverage of the arrest of *Sunday Times* journalist Mzilikazi wa Afrika with its failure to cover police action in the townships, wrote:

Somewhat lost in the flurry has been an appreciation of the fact that every day poor people attempt to hold government accountable and every day they face the kind of treatment meted out to Wa Afrika. The print media is partly to blame for this obscuring as, to date, it has not represented ... local struggles as anything other than sporadic 'service delivery' protests when, in fact, they are becoming so commonplace as to represent a fully fledged rebellion of the poor. (Dugard 2010)

She might have added that the press fails not only to convey the ubiquity of the protests, but shows little or no interest in finding out what motivates those who engage in them or, for that matter, the local politicians and officials at whom the protests are targeted.

Coverage of the protests has been not much different to the approach the press took to disturbances during the colonial period – or much coverage in South Africa during the apartheid period (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller 1987). One of the most significant expressions of grassroots disaffection since 1994 is presented – when it is covered at all – as a violent and mysterious set of events for which strange and presumably primitive people are responsible. By contrast, ‘ratepayers’ revolts’ by white suburban residents are covered far more extensively, and report in detail on the grievances of the dissenters and their view of the world (e.g. Breytenbach 2009). So the conflict between government and citizens is portrayed, in the main, as one between it and rate-paying citizens, despite the fact that they are only a small fraction of those who are protesting.

### Property rights for some

A constant theme in the mainstream press is concern that property rights are being (or will be) threatened by government action. Concern for the right of citizens to own property and dispose of it as they wish, however, seems to apply only in the suburbs.

In August 2010, researchers and activists contributed an opinion page article in *Business Day* which told of a statement by the MEC for Human Settlements in North West province, Desbo Mohono, threatening to remove a man from his government-provided house in Tlhabologang, Coligny, because she had found that the house was occupied by a businessman operating a tuck shop from the premises, while the owner, who lives on a neighbouring farm, charged the tenant R700 a month in rent. The MEC gave the businessman 14 days to remove his belongings, saying the owner would be deregistered and his house given to another beneficiary on the waiting list. The authors pointed out that she had no right to remove the tenant because, while recipients of government houses cannot sell them, they can lease them to tenants. They suggested that the behaviour of the owner was entirely rational, and that the MEC’s attitude typified the government’s approach to housing, which was to impose options on poor people rather than understanding and respecting their choices (Tissington, Rust, McGaffin, Napier and Charlton 2010).

It seems difficult to imagine an issue more ideally suited to the concerns of the mainstream press. Heavy-handed government intervention was allegedly attempting to undermine decisions by individuals seeking to maximise their ability to participate in the market economy. The issue also reflected negatively on a core policy of a government which this press usually loses no opportunity to criticise. Yet, this article was relegated to one of the least prominent spaces on the opinion page, and no newspaper followed up the article or commented on it. The failure to take this issue seriously spoke volumes – it trumpeted that, for this press, threats to property rights, like freedom of expression, are important only if the threatened property is owned by suburban residents; the property rights of the black poor are of no interest. That the rights of the suburban middle class are, in this press’s view, the only rights worth defending, is further illustrated by a third example – reaction to the Protection of Information Bill.



## Monopolising victimhood

Much controversy over the Protection of Information Bill during 2010 has led to two related assumptions being made: first, that the proposed law, which gives officials wide powers to classify information and imposes heavy penalties on anyone disclosing classified information, is aimed at the press. Second, that its harmful effects can be mitigated by inserting a 'public interest' clause, exempting people accused of publishing classified information if they showed it was in the public interest to do so. On the first score, a typical formulation insists: 'Proposed law changes under the Protection of Information Bill currently before Parliament will essentially make the work we do illegal' (Daily Dispatch Online 2010). On the second, the Print Media Association of South Africa (PMSA) noted that the bill makes no allowance for disclosures in the public interest. It wants a public-interest defence, because this would 'allow a journalist who publishes classified information to argue that the disclosure was justified ... because it revealed evidence of significant incompetence, criminality, wrongdoing, abuse of authority or hypocrisy on the part of government officials' (Donnelly 2010).

This approach raises two related problems. The one is that, whatever the purpose of the legislation (and it may not be aimed at the press at all), it is highly unlikely that it could be used to prevent print journalists from doing what they now do. It is, however, very likely that it could be used to prevent grassroots citizens from acquiring information they badly need to exercise their rights as citizens of a democracy. The other is that a public interest clause – even if it did, as the press insists, offer it essential protection – would offer nothing to grassroots citizens deprived of their right to information.

The PMSA and other parties' concern for a public interest clause is difficult to understand, because something like it is already in the bill. Section 17 stipulates that information may not be classified if the purpose is to conceal illegal acts or 'incompetence, inefficiency or administrative error' by the government. Nor can classification be used to 'restrict access to information in order to limit scrutiny and thereby avoid criticism' or to 'prevent embarrassment to a person, organisation, organ of state or agency' or to 'unlawfully restrain or lessen competition' (Friedman 2010). It is unclear why a section imposing so explicit a set of restrictions on classification should be considered a less secure protection than one broadly asserting the right to disclose in the public interest. More important is the likely concrete effect of this qualification.

If a document can be shown to seek to achieve any of the aims described in Section 17, it clearly cannot be regarded as classified. This may have no influence on the actions of officials, but would be decisive if the status of a document were to be decided by a court. If a newspaper were to publish a classified document and it was prosecuted, the defence would surely be that the subject matter was envisaged by Section 17, that the document is not therefore classified, and that no offence has been committed. The defence would surely succeed. It is highly unlikely that this protection would be available to citizen groups demanding to know about the uses to which public money has been put in a township. Since officials are unlikely to interpret Section 17 strictly (or, in some cases, to take any notice of it at all), the citizens would no doubt simply be told that the information was classified. Since they are likely to lack the resources

to challenge the decision in court, the law would be used effectively to deny them the information to which they are entitled, and without which they cannot exercise their right to a say in the decisions which affect them (Friedman 2010).

Of course, the press should not need to take legal action or face prosecution to establish its right to publish. But the obvious difference between the mainstream press and a shack settlement civic group is that the former has the resources to challenge official decisions and the latter does not. Since it seems likely that, after one or two failed prosecutions, the authorities would abandon prosecutions against the press (particularly if one of the failures was followed by a suit claiming damages for wrongful prosecution), the concrete outcome would be that the law would not restrict the press, but would severely curtail the rights of all citizens who lacked the means to challenge official rulings in court. So, the most vocal opponents of the law – the press and its suburban constituency – would be largely unaffected, while the poor would face a body blow to the exercise of citizenship.

The insertion of a public interest clause would not alter the dynamics discussed here. Even if a public interest defence is more effective in protecting the rights of the press than the proposed Section 17 (something which none of the analyses has demonstrated), it would need to be enforced in the same way as Section 17: again, it would be naïve to assume that officials and politicians would instinctively avoid classifying information because a qualifying clause had been inserted in a law. On the contrary, a public interest clause would probably offer less protection than Section 17, because, while the current provision is fairly explicit about what may not be classified, the press's own remedy would expect officials to make classification decisions on the strength of someone's else's understanding of a broad and vague concept, 'public interest'. And so, again, the only way in which action could be taken to ensure that classification decisions did not prejudice rights, would be through the courts. Again, the press and those with means would be able to enforce their rights, while those at the grassroots would not.

The mainstream press's reaction to this analysis does as much to confirm middle-class bias as its constant insistence on portraying the bill as an assault on the right of suburban journalists to expose the malfeasance of government politicians, rather than an attack on the most essential democratic rights of grassroots citizens. In most cases, the question of how the poor are to enforce a public interest defence is ignored, confirming that whether poor citizens enjoy a right to information is of no interest to this press. To the extent that it is addressed at all, the mainstream press resorts to the familiar argument that the freedom of the press is also that of grassroots citizens who can, presumably, rely on it for information. This is fantasy, since the gap between all the press and grassroots South Africa is vast: according to one survey, in 2005, 32 per cent of South Africans reported that they never get their news from newspapers, and only 19 per cent claimed to receive news from this source every day (Mattes, Chikwanha and Magezi 2005).

Rhetoric aside, the press has no great objection to an outcome in which the bill remains a potent instrument in the hands of officials who wish to prevent information from reaching grassroots citizens, as long as it offers it the requisite protection. Freedom is the preserve of it and its suburban readers, not of all South Africans.

## Ideologies of insulation: The press's view of the world

Inevitably, these biases in coverage stem from a world view which underpins the mainstream press's understanding of itself and the world. This provides the framework in which middle-class bias operates. While an examination of this press reveals many examples of a bias which assumes that the world of the suburbs is that of everyone else, two examples, drawn from the attempt during 2010 to ward off political pressure, illustrate the thinking which produces the biases discussed here.

### As others see us

One of the more (unwittingly) revealing interventions in the debate was that of one of the most vocal representatives of the mainstream media, former editor Raymond Louw.

Not content with repeated warnings that press freedom is in dire peril, Louw wrote that the darkness of which he routinely warns had already descended: the threat to freedom of information, which commentators had warned would scare off foreign investors, was 'already here and has been for months'. His reason? That on April 29 'New York-based Freedom House, the respected monitor of the freedoms of countries and media, downgraded SA to "partly free" – a category harking back to apartheid' (Louw 2010).

The suggestion that freedom of information needs to be defended primarily because this would satisfy investors and others in the capitals of the global North, is a frequent theme in defences of press freedom. To name but one other example, a leading editor warns that

the very existence of the threat of a Media Tribunal is already changing the way people look at us. Editorials in *The Financial Times* and *The Times* last week both carried strong warnings against the Tribunal. The reputational lift we got out of the World Cup will rapidly fade, no matter how many flags we wave here to convince ourselves we are doing well. (Bruce 2010a)

The obvious implication is that the reference group whose opinion matters most is the decision-makers and opinion-formers of Western Europe and North America. This is a frequent theme in the mainstream press's treatment of South African realities, but Louw's reference to Freedom House takes this preoccupation to a new level.

This 'respected' evaluator of freedom throughout the world ranks the freedom of countries and their media by assigning each country a score between 1 and 7. They are then ranked as 'Free' (1 to 2.5), 'Partly free' (3 to 5) and 'Not free' (5.5 to 7). The rankings are influential among academics and others engaged in democracy promotion in North America and Western Europe:

The survey findings are reached after a multi-layered process of analysis and evaluation by a team of regional experts and scholars. Although there is an element of subjectivity inherent in the survey findings, the ratings process emphasizes intellectual rigor and balanced and unbiased judgments. (Freedom House 2005)

So, Freedom House selects people whose opinions it trusts, asks them what they think of the state of democracy in each country, and then puts a number on the judgement. An opinion to which a number has been assigned remains an opinion, and so the implied notion of Freedom House as a scientific arbiter of freedom is inaccurate: it is a conduit for the opinions of some people. Those who are likely to find these views congenial are best indicated by a statement on its website, which declares: 'Freedom House's diverse Board of Trustees is united in the view that American leadership in international affairs is essential to the causes of human rights and democracy' (Freedom House 2010). The 'freedom' which Freedom House measures, is one shaped by the prejudice that America – despite Guantanamo Bay, water-boarding, extraordinary rendition and a 2000 presidential election decided in a state where the voting machines were said to be faulty and the Governor was one of the candidates' brother – is the sole arbiter of human rights and democracy. It should come as no surprise that, despite the abuses mentioned above and the introduction of detention without trial in Great Britain, Freedom House continues to score the United States (US) and Western Europe as entirely free (Freedom House 2010).

To put the issue further in perspective, South Africa's media freedom ranking was downgraded to 'reflect the threat posed by media-hostile rhetoric on the part of top government officials', as well as official encroachments on the editorial independence of the South African Broadcasting Corporation and the 2009 Film and Publications Act, which 'legitimises forms of prepublication censorship' (Louw 2010). In Louw's view – and presumably that of the press of which he is so admired a champion – the opinion of an institution which finds the infractions listed here a more serious breach of freedom than the detention of people for six years or more on mere suspicion, is a 'respected' source whose opinion ought to shape debates on the South African media.

That one of the mainstream press's most zealous champions should see the deeply biased opinions of a group of Americans as a more important reference group than the sentiments of grassroots South Africans, will come as no surprise. The fact that these prejudices were expressed in a published article testifies to how natural and normal these biases seem to those who hold them. They will, however, seem less than self-evident to South Africans who do not share suburban respect for Northern opinion, and whose judgements are shaped by their own experiences, rather than the opinions of Americans concerned with spreading their view of the world to its four corners.

### Keeping them in their place

A revealing insight into the mainstream press's self-image is offered by a seemingly trivial (but in reality important) response – the refusal of one editor to meet the governing party's general secretary to discuss threats to the media.

In August, 2010, *Business Day* editor, Peter Bruce, revealed in his weekly column that he, like other editors, had been invited by ANC Secretary-general Gwede Mantashe to discuss the ruling party's complaints against the media, which had prompted pressure for a media tribunal. Bruce said he would refuse to attend:

I just don't want to be a part of any meetings whose object is to make my country less of a democracy. If I go, and if other editors go, it will merely legitimise what the ANC wants to do anyway – they'll be able to say they 'consulted' the media. But not, at least, with me. This is not Vichy. (Bruce 2010)

Thus far, Bruce's position, while open to debate, seems based on the reasonable fear that by attending a meeting with a governing party which has already made up its mind, he would be affording a veneer of reasonableness to an arbitrary decision already taken. This view is contradicted by Bruce himself, who goes on to reveal that he does not believe any decision has been taken:

What saddens me is that I know Mantashe's 'warning' is actually a cry for help. He knows the tribunal is a dreadful idea but he needs 'engagement' so he can face the party and say he has some sort of agreement with editors that will make it not necessary ... But Mantashe is like the lion in the Wizard of Oz who needs to find his courage. Only tough love will help him and the ANC now and going forward. Gwede, be a man and do what is right. If you can't, then you and the ANC must push on and do your worst and live with the consequences. (Bruce 2010)

So, the editor knows that the secretary-general wants to use the meeting to fend off action against the press, but refuses to attend despite this, because the politician is in need not of allies, but 'tough love'. As a strategy for protecting the press against control, refusing to help a politician who wants to avert that control does not pass rational scrutiny. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that something else is afoot. And that is, surely, the assumption that Mantashe has developed ideas beyond his station by believing that he can approach the editor for help – even if the purpose is to prevent action against the press. Why else the patronising demand that the politician 'find his courage'? And why else use the phrase 'tough love', which is usually associated with the need to impose discipline on someone incapable of helping themselves? The clear implication is that the subordinate must sort out his own difficulties without relying on his superior's help. It is worth noting that, during apartheid, attacks on the press were common. There is no recorded instance of an editor refusing to meet a government politician to defend press freedom during that period, and it is reasonable to assume from this that only politicians who themselves were raised in the suburbs, are entitled to demand meetings with editors.

There can be no clearer statement of the assumption that press freedom is an entitlement of the suburban middle classes, on which a politician from a different social stratum has no businesses trespassing. It is safe to assume that, if press freedom is saved, it will be because other editors did engage Mantashe while Bruce remained in his office. But his position is not an isolated idiosyncrasy – he received several admiring letters from readers and an endorsement from a former *Business Day* and *Sunday Times* editor, Ken Owen:

My admiration for Peter Bruce has its limits, but I do applaud his refusal to be associated with the African National Congress–South African Communist Party (SACP) project to muzzle the media ... Mr Bruce has fired an early shot in what looks to me like the SACP's long-planned 'second stage of the revolution'. (Owen 2010)

It is unclear why Mantashe, who chairs the SACP, would be holding a meeting to ward off the 'second stage of the revolution'. But, while the logic may be faulty, the enthusiasm with which one editorial champion of the prerogatives of the middle class hastens to applaud another, confirms that Bruce is not alone in the press in assuming that playing a leadership role in a party voted for by most of the electorate is not a sufficient qualification for engaging with the voice of suburbia.

## **Conclusion: A fool's errand**

Towards the end of 2010, former ANC cabinet minister, Pallo Jordan, described attempts to control the media as a 'fool's errand' (Williams 2010). He was warning his colleagues that, as hard as they might try to control it, information about power holders was sure to surface sooner or later. But that, of course, does not necessarily mean that voices such as Jordan's will be heeded – politicians may try to keep compromising information and uninvited comment away from the public gaze by seeking to control the media, even if this is likely to ensure ultimate failure.

Whether they try will have much to do with whether the mainstream press is willing and able to abandon its own fool's errand – its assumption that it is possible indefinitely to defend a freedom which is framed purely as that of the suburban middle class. More may be at issue here than the future of the press. Despite the efforts of COSATU and sustained protest in the townships, history may yet record that democracy was preserved during its first decade and a half, largely because the suburban middle class was a strong source of countervailing power which constrained the options of politicians who sought to impose their will on society. In any democracy, state power is held to account only if citizens have sufficient power to force government to take them seriously. In a context in which the governing party is guaranteed an electoral majority, accountability is enforced not by the vote, but by the capacity to act collectively to force office-holders to listen (Friedman 2007). And, while the black majority in general and the poor in particular may command the votes, it is the suburban middle class which enjoys the resources to act collectively to claim the attention of government. Among the majority outside the suburbs, only COSATU commands equivalent organised power, and it is constrained by its alliance with the ANC. That it has been largely the organised affluent and the suburban middle classes which have limited state power, ensuring continued space for the exercise of civil liberties, seems, therefore, highly plausible.

This is, however, not sustainable – a democracy buttressed only by a relatively small middle class, dominated by apartheid's historical beneficiaries, will, at some stage, run aground as politicians seeking to snuff out freedoms succeed in portraying opposition to them as the voice of racial privilege. There are too few middle-class people, and the history of the suburbs is too closely implicated in minority domination, to make the present a plausible guarantor of future freedom. Only if the depth and breadth of the organised citizenry who are able to demand accountability grows appreciably, will democracy be sustained. Similarly, only if the press and those who speak for it reflect the realities of the majority, and develop much closer links with a wider spectrum of

readers, will its freedom be secured by governing politicians' recognition that they can tamper with freedom only at the expense of alienating their constituency.

The agenda required to secure the growth of a press for all citizens is beyond the scope of this article. But a willingness by journalists and their supporters to reflect on their biases and how to reduce them, would be a start. There is no law of nature and the market which prevents the mainstream press from seeking to take the experiences of all citizens seriously. The threat of state-imposed restrictions is not a signal to ignore this challenge in the interests of a spurious solidarity – it is a warning to begin addressing it urgently, lest failure to look beyond suburbia makes the threat of control a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Biographical note

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