



The Round Table

The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs

ISSN: 0035-8533 (Print) 1474-029X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctr20>

Media Freedom in South Africa

Martin Plaut

To cite this article: Martin Plaut (2018): Media Freedom in South Africa, The Round Table, DOI: [10.1080/00358533.2018.1448341](https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2018.1448341)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2018.1448341>



Published online: 19 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Media Freedom in South Africa

Martin Plaut

Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The hope that South Africa would be a beacon of media freedom and plurality when apartheid ended with the election of President Nelson Mandela has, sadly, faded. This erosion of media freedom has mirrored the gradual loss of support for the governing party, the ANC. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the media have come in for intense pressure as they fulfilled their obligation to act as the nation's watchdog. As one commentator observed: 'The ANC does not like a free and independently owned press with its watchdog capabilities' (Naspers Chairman Ton Vosloo, November 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-11-06/south-african-media-squeezed-by-growing-state-pressure.html?hootPostID=5e634bc4ab61a577488d8ea295b3cce2>, accessed 20 March 2017). Another commentator, the Economic Freedom Fighter's Member of Parliament Fana Mokoena, asked: 'The SABC is a microcosm of South Africa when all that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing. How did this happen?' (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-12-12-sabcmotsoeneng-coup-courtrules-hlaudi-must-fall/#.WE-rkZKKSML>, accessed 20 March 2017). This article discusses the decline of media freedom in South Africa and explores the causes for the decline.

KEYWORDS

South Africa; media freedom; apartheid; South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC); African National Congress (ANC); Muldergate

Introduction

The hope that South Africa would be a beacon of media freedom and plurality when apartheid ended with the election of Nelson Mandela has, sadly, faded. In its latest assessment, Freedom House designates the country's media as 'partly free', which is probably an accurate assessment.¹ The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's index of freedom of expression registers a gradual decline since the beginning of the millennium. In 15 years the index has fallen from 84.6 to 75.8, a decline of 8.8 points.²

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Rating	84.6	84.6	83.9	84.2	83.6	83.3	83.0	83.0	79.6	76.2	75.8	75.5	75.2	76.3	72.3	75.8

This erosion of media freedom has mirrored the gradual loss of support for the governing party. In 2016 the African National Congress lost control of a series of municipalities in the conurbations around Johannesburg, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth.³ Under the presidency of Jacob Zuma the political strength of the ANC has declined with almost daily accusations of nepotism, corruption and incompetence. As the party's parliamentary chief whip, Jackson

Mthembu, put it despairingly: ‘We have become corrupt to the core. All we are concerned about is to accumulate wealth as if there is no tomorrow.’⁴ This has resulted in conflicts inside the government, which has sapped its ability to function effectively. The Finance Minister, Pravin Gordhan, was described by the Huffington Post as the ‘leader of the resistance’ for refusing to concede control of the public purse to the president and his cronies.⁵ As the website put it, Gordhan has been ‘harassed, harangued and hassled’ for refusing to give in to what is termed ‘state capture’. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that the media have come in for intense pressure as they fulfilled their obligation to act as the nation’s watchdog. Since submission of this article, fast changing events in South Africa around President Zuma’s ‘redeployment’ and the Gupta family concerns, together with the inauguration of President Cyril Ramaphosa, mean pressures on the media continue to evolve.

The Media Under Apartheid

South African journalism has a long history. The first newspaper—the *South African Commercial Advertiser* was founded in Cape Town in 1824.⁶ Early journalists campaigned with considerable success for the end of slavery and the rights of people—regardless of race—to enjoy the vote.⁷

This led to the first non-racial franchise in the Cape in 1836. The discovery of diamonds and then gold in the late nineteenth century led to a rapid growth of towns around the mines. This, in turn, led to a flowering of newspapers in Kimberley and Johannesburg. Soon these commercial ventures were joined by titles aimed at winning rights for the country’s ethnic groups. *Die Afrikaanse Patriot*, appeared in 1876, supporting the Afrikaans cause. In the Eastern Cape the irascible John Tengo Jabavu founded *Imvo Zabantsund* (Black Opinion) in 1884, the first truly independent newspaper edited by a black African. Mohandas Gandhi launched *Indian Opinion* in 1903, to support his attempts to win rights for South African Indians. Important as these initiatives were, the main media were commercial, including English titles (*Cape Argus* and *Cape Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Rand Daily Mail*), Afrikaans titles (*Die Burger*, *Die Transvaler*, *Rapport* and *Beeld*) as well as papers aimed at the black population, such as *The World*, *Drum* and the *Sowetan*.

The newspapers were joined by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which was established by an Act of Parliament in 1936, taking over assets of earlier broadcasters and maintaining a monopoly that lasted until 1986 (in radio) and 1998 (in television). The SABC was, initially, an English speaking domain, supporting the Allied cause in the Second World War. But as its staff volunteered to fight, they were replaced by Afrikaners, many of whom were of a far more conservative opinion.⁸ With the election of the National Party in 1948 the SABC became the mouthpiece of the apartheid government. There was little attempt at unbiased broadcasting. In 1971 the corporation was explicitly instructed to broadcast television which should play its part in strengthening South Africa so as to: ‘nurture and strengthen our spiritual roots ... foster respect and love for its own spiritual heritage and to protect and project the South African way of life as it has developed here in its historical context’⁹ The SABC did not challenge this, but the authorities continued to keep a wary eye on its output. It was said—perhaps apocryphally—that South African prime ministers and presidents watched the daily news with a telephone at hand, ready at any time to call the editor.

While the broadcast media reflected the views of the government, the same cannot be said of the rest of the media and they paid a heavy price for their independence. Journalists,

black and white, found themselves up against state censorship and worse. Not content with a repressive environment, the authorities poured millions of Rand into covert propaganda projects designed to counter what they saw as a subversive media. The founding of the *Citizen* newspaper was a case in point, a paper designed specifically to counter the liberal *Rand Daily Mail*. At the same time foreign journalists were wined, dined and bribed in an attempt to create a more favourable view of South Africa abroad, in what became known as the Muldergate scandal.¹⁰

Despite pressure from the state, a host of alternative media succeeded in springing up and flourishing in the wake of the Durban strikes of 1973 and the Soweto uprising of 1976. Linked to the non-racial trade unions, the black consciousness movement and then the ANC aligned United Democratic Front, a range of titles developed from *FOSATU Workers News* and the *South African Labour Bulletin* to *Grassroots* and the *Weekly Mail*.¹¹ Unions were founded to represent the journalists working in this sector, including the Media Workers' Association of South Africa.

Post-Apartheid

The end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela and the ANC government was a moment of real optimism. The South African Constitution guaranteed the right of freedom of expression, including freedom of the media.¹² It was widely anticipated that the country would have a lively media scene, with plenty of diverse views being heard, many of them for the first time. The press, radio and television were expected to hold the government to account, but few foresaw that this would pose real problems. The incubus of apartheid had been lifted. It was hoped that a newly diversified media would increase the offer to the public and that they would no longer feel the heavy hand of government.

At the same time it was important not to ignore the violence that had marked the last days of apartheid, particularly within the black community. Conflict had become the hallmark of life in the townships. In August 1990—six months after Mandela had been freed from prison and while the future of the country was still being negotiated—a seminar was held by the Institute of Race Relations, one of the bastions of the anti-apartheid movement.¹³ Five senior black journalists and editors were invited to discuss the state of the media. The picture they painted was bleak; indeed the situation they described was said to be 'shocking'. They explained the attempts to silence journalists if they revealed the underside of the violence that had swept through the black townships during the struggle against apartheid. Those sections of the press that had portrayed the reality of the conflicts and divisions that existed found themselves intimidated. As one speaker put it:

We have a situation in which journalists are far less exposed to arrest, detention by the government than they used to be, but are being threatened and manhandled by political activists in the townships, in the towns and elsewhere, and are being told to toe the line or else.¹⁴

Thami Mazwai of the Sowetan gave a concrete example.

Reporters in Natal say they are having difficulty practicing their profession: one night Inkatha people will come to them saying, 'Look, we don't like what you are writing,' and then the next night people from the ANC or the UDF will come and say, 'Look, we don't like what you are writing,' and in the end they feel like saying, 'I have had enough' and getting out.¹⁵

The conflict with Inkatha took some years to be resolved, but although the ANC gradually gained the upper hand it did not become more tolerant of political movements

seeking to represent the black majority. Its rivals were dismissed out of hand. So the Black Consciousness Movement found itself described as 'a group of petit bourgeois intellectuals', without real 'links to the masses'.¹⁶

Despite these concerns there was—on the whole—a belief among journalists that the worst excesses of the past were behind them and that their trade would probably flourish, despite local difficulties. Certainly there were challenges, among them the de-racialising of what was a largely white dominated industry. This was tackled with some success in newsrooms across the country. In 2000 Guy Berger was able to conclude that:

...the media has emerged from apartheid significantly transformed from what it was before. Racism exists in South Africa, but it no longer rules in either politics or media. Democracy and development are part of the daily diet of a transforming society.¹⁷

No doubt others would contend that this had not gone far enough, but progress was certainly made.

The same cannot be said of the ownership of the media. The state (through its control of the SABC) and private corporations (through the printed and the electronic media) were very concentrated. At the same time it did begin to transform the racial hue of its owners. As Berger pointed out, Dr. Nthatho Motlana formed New African Publishing, which bought the *Sowetan*; Cyril Ramaphosa organised a Black Economic Empowerment group that took a 34% stake in Times Media Limited, while unions took holdings in other media companies.¹⁸

The ANC was—at first—keen to see a vigorous media. Nelson Mandela was confident enough as president to encourage such a development. 'A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy', he told the International Press Institute on 14 February 1994.¹⁹ His successor, Thabo Mbeki, was a very different personality. A man who always saw enemies in the shadows, he soon had an adversarial relationship with the media. As early as 1994 Mbeki (when he was still Mandela's deputy) had accuse the press of harbouring a tendency to look for crises and to look for faults and mistakes. As Daniels makes clear, this soon became his hallmark. In September 1995 Mbeki was suggesting that all media criticism of the ANC was an indication of racism. Black journalists were called on to fight the ANC's corner. Addressing Anton Harber, former *Weekly Mail* editor, and one of South Africa's most eminent white journalists, Mbeki said: 'Now criticism and complaining is what I expect from him.' The message to black journalists was clear: get behind the government's programme.²⁰

If Mbeki was critical of the media, Jacob Zuma—elected president in December 2007—saw journalists as little more than his servants or his enemies. As he declared in a letter in the ANC's official journal in January 2008: 'At times, the media functions as if they were an opposition party.'²¹ But it was President Zuma's behaviour that caused the real rift. Accusations of nepotism, corruption and underhand dealings became the daily currency of political debate, and were widely reported. Zwelinzima Vavi, secretary general of the main trade union movement, COSATU, summed up this mood when he attacked the government for its behaviour. He described them as a 'corrupt political elite' who were behaving like 'political hyenas' and turning the country into a 'full-blown predator state'.²² The ANC, instead of initiating reforms, has become increasingly frustrated and angry. Its response has been to lash out at reports of malfeasance. Daniels concludes her discussion of the relationship between the party and the journalistic community with this observation:

The media was the symptom for the ANC of all that was wrong with society. When confronted with its own shortcomings, reflected in the media, the ANC displaced—or projected onto the

media—its own failures. In a classical displacement process the media became the cause of the society's malaise.²³

The ANC was determined to remedy the situation. As the party's most recent policy document (discussed at its policy conference in June–July 2017) makes clear, the ANC seeks to regain the legitimacy it has lost by dominating the media.²⁴ The document suggests that this is a 'heavily contested terrain' that must be confronted. The document portrays the ANC as victim; under attack from hostile forces, but determined to use its power to defend itself, claiming: 'The hegemony in the battle of ideas has resulted in the odds being stacked against progressive forces ...' This is clearly the perception of President Zuma and his associates in the party leadership, but is it an accurate picture?

The ANC's Response: Muldergate Revisited

While even Mandela might have been occasionally frustrated with the media and Mbeki gave it a dressing down, Zuma is made of different mettle. Trained in the Soviet Union, he became head of the ANC's intelligence while in exile.²⁵ A tough, clever and resourceful man, he is not the kind of leader who would accept the media's critical gaze without responding. The response he has chosen mirrors those of the apartheid government: find an alternative media that is willing to do the ANC's bidding. This has taken three strands. First, as noted earlier, to ensure that the SABC projected a line that the ANC found acceptable; second, to encourage the establishment of new media that would support the government; and third, to purchase critical newspapers and ensure that they came into line. If all these failed then the ANC still has legislative remedies up its sleeve, although this would not be easy, given the protection of free speech written into the constitution.

Controlling the SABC

The SABC, with its offer of television, radio and online platforms, has an unrivalled position in the South African media landscape. The ANC's determination to exercise control over the broadcaster dates back at least to 1991, when a party conference decided that what was required was to take control the SABC's output.²⁶ The broadcaster's reach made this an obvious strategy for a governing party wishing to control the media. As the *State of the Newsroom* report published by the University of the Witwatersrand put it: 'The national broadcaster, the SABC, dominates the Broadcast landscape in both radio and television.'²⁷ In television the offer is extensive.

The SABC operates four television channels: SABC 1, focusing on youth entertainment, drama and sport broadcasting in the Nguni languages and English; SABC 2, focusing on nation building with an emphasis on the complexity of the country culturally, historically and traditionally and broadcasting in Sesotho, Afrikaans, XiTsonga, TshiVenda and English; and SABC 3, a full-spectrum channel in English. The most recent television station, SABC's 24-hour news channel, began operating in August 2013.

Yet the SABC's dominance was not as great as it once was. Since 1986 the television monopoly enjoyed by the SABC was broken, with Naspers initiating Media 24. Since then others have joined, including the eNCA news channel and ANN7, which is owned by President Zuma's allies, the Gupta family. Despite these the SABC's reach is impressive. It claims a weekly television audience of 79.3 million adults.²⁸ In radio the SABC is unrivalled,

particularly in languages other than English: it has 23 radio stations with a weekly audience of 40 million. No other broadcaster can match its reach, particularly into the rural areas. Its isiZulu station Ukhozi is the biggest in the country—with more than 7 million listeners a week. Of the top 10 radio stations in the country, 8 belong to the SABC. It is the primary source of news for the majority of the population.

This dominance has made the SABC a key target for government—from the apartheid years onwards. The determination to control the SABC and to manipulate it for party purposes has resulted in a crisis that goes back many years. Under President Mbeki, the head of SABC news, Snuki Zikalala, instituted a blacklist of commentators who were banned from the airwaves.²⁹ The list included, somewhat ironically, the president's own brother, Moeletsi Mbeki, who was critical of government. Zikalala's removal in April 2009 led to what SABC journalists describe as 'a bit of a Prague spring' but the situation soon deteriorated, becoming even more restrictive.³⁰

Under President Zuma the situation deteriorated still further, undermining the credibility of the organisation and making SABC staff deeply frustrated by their inability to tell a plain tale accurately. The Public Protector's report of February 2014 quoted an unnamed former SABC board member as saying: 'When governance and ethics fail, you get a dysfunctional organisation. Sadly those in charge cannot see that their situation is abnormal. That has been the case at the SABC for a long time ...'³¹ The report stated that there was 'abuse of power', 'maladministration', corporate governance deficiencies, and recommended that action be taken against the then acting Chief Operating Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng. A close supporter of Jacob Zuma, he was only fired following the Public Protector's finding that he had lied about his qualifications. Sadly, the SABC's troubles did not end there.

It was Motsoeneng's unswerving loyalty to President Zuma that explained his longevity as COO. He was determined to use his position to change the tenor of the organisation's news coverage. In 2013 he had instituted a ruling that 70% of all news stories broadcast by the SABC should be 'positive'.³² 'For me, it is actually disappointing to see what news coverage there is out there, because there are so many positive issues happening in this country', Motsoeneng told the *Mail & Guardian*.

The media normally focus on the negative publicity. I believe, from the SABC's side, 70% should be positive [news] stories and then you can have 30% negative stories. The reason I am championing this is because if you only talk about the negative, people can't even try to think on their feet. Because what occupies their mind is all this negative stuff. 'My thinking is when you deal with positive stories, you are building a nation. You are building the future of the kids. That is what I believe all of us in the media should do.'

But even this policy, of 'sunshine news' was insufficient for the ANC. In 2016 Motsoeneng went further, instructing that all coverage of anti-government violence would be banned.³³ The SABC said it condemned the burning of public institutions and had taken a decision that it would not show footage of people burning schools or other facilities in any of its news bulletins with immediate effect.

SABC journalists, who had put up with a great deal, refused to accept the directive, which they rightly regarded as censorship. Eight senior staff protested, were suspended and then sacked. Their treatment caused a storm, with journalists and civil society protesting at their dismissal.³⁴ The Society of Editors supported their cause, saying that they had been harassed, with some even receiving death threats.³⁵ Eventually—after a court case—the

eight were reinstated. Speaking to a Parliamentary committee of enquiry, they explained how bad the situation had become.

We felt that the newsroom had become a source of derision, despair and criticism from the people we are fundamentally accountable to, and that is the South African public. If we did not stand up, the cost of not defending an independent broadcaster would be insurmountable,

said Krivani Pillay, one of the SABC 8.³⁶

While Motsoeneng had gone and the SABC's journalists had made a stand, the broadcaster's troubles were far from over: the organisation was in a financial crisis after being mismanaged for years. This was the conclusion of a parliamentary enquiry:

4.3.10 Evidence during the inquiry confirmed and in some instances revealed that the challenges faced by the Board which including instability, dysfunction and political interference, had impeded the Board's ability to hold the SABC executives accountable. Coupled with this, instability at senior management level has had a significant impact on the SABC's ability to fully execute its mandate.³⁷

Funding Alternative Media

Political interference alone did not bring the SABC to the brink of bankruptcy. The ANC had adopted a range of measures directly out of the Muldergate playbook. The first was to establish a media company friendly to the party with the assistance of supporters of President Zuma and then to feed resources to it from the SABC. The aim was to fund a newspaper and a television company owned by the Gupta family, close allies of the president.³⁸ This began with the establishment of the *New Age* newspaper. 'The *New Age*, the pro-government newspaper owned by the Gupta family scored some R125 million in advertising in 2012, almost R75 million of it from government, parastatal or government-linked organisations. Not too bad for a brand-new newspaper that in 2012 didn't even have certified circulation figures,' concluded the veteran journalist, Mandy de Waal in 2013.³⁹

Matters did not end there. After the Guptas established their TV channel ANN7 in 2013, it is alleged that the SABC began syphoning off money to pay for the venture. Evidence of this was provided by Vuyo Mvoko, one of four SABC journalists during his presentation to the parliamentary enquiry.⁴⁰ 'What SABC executives haven't informed you about is they have allowed SABC money to be used to build a rival channel—ANN7,' he explained. Mvoko said that the SABC paid for the production and broadcasting of breakfast briefings that regularly featured cabinet ministers and President Jacob Zuma. None of the cash they made went to the SABC, despite the considerable sums received from sponsorship and the charges made for attending the breakfasts. Mvoko said that the SABC was paying for its rival. 'It's the SABC that has to pay for its [own] downfall and to build this alternative channel,' Mvoko explained. The South African *Sunday Times* headline said it all: 'SABC "built up" Gupta rival television station.'⁴¹

These decisions had a catastrophic impact on the finances of the SABC. In 2015 Gavin Davis, a Democratic Alliance MP and a member of the portfolio committee on communications warned that the SABC was in crisis, 'the scale of which is only starting to become clear' and that the SABC 'is facing financial ruin.'⁴² His warnings were dismissed as scare-mongering. Yet just two years later this dire prediction had come true. Even the SABC own spokesman, Kaizer Kganyago, accepted that the organisation's finances were 'under pressure',

with the SABC now funding its activities from its reserves.⁴³ But he put the blame on others—including the state of the global economy and a parliamentary enquiry into the fitness of the SABC board to hold office. However, members of staff suggested that the situation was far worse. ‘We’re not even sure [if] we can pay salaries at month’s end’, said one insider. ‘Hlaudi’s [Motsoeneng] chickens have come home to roost’, said another.

The parliamentary enquiry heard further allegations that the Guptas had only established ANN7 after failing to seize control of the SABC’s news production, and that journalists critical of these events had been investigated by the State Security Agency.⁴⁴ The decision to bring in State Security was—allegedly—taken by Motsoeneng.⁴⁵ The measures he ordered were draconian: state security agents went to one SABC employee’s home village to interview locals about his lifestyle. The agents also demanded that certain members of staff take polygraph (lie detector) tests.⁴⁶

Seizing Critical Newspapers

The third tactic adopted by the ANC was to take control of important independent newspapers. In August 2013 the first indications of what was taking place began to emerge.⁴⁷ ‘Independent News & Media South Africa, expected to change hands for R2-billion later this month, could find itself under the effective control of the South African government and two mystery Chinese investors’, reported the *Mail & Guardian*. It soon emerged that the report was accurate. Venerable newspapers, including the *Cape Argus*, *Cape Times*, the *Mercury* (Durban), the *Star* (Johannesburg) and the *Pretoria News*, had changed hands. Two Chinese companies: China International Television Corporation and China-Africa Development Fund, domiciled for tax purposes in the tax haven of Mauritius, had taken 20% of the company.⁴⁸ South Africa’s state-owned Public Investment Corporation (PIC) had bought a 25% stake, using Government Employee Pension Fund money. The remaining stake in Independent News & Media was to be held by a consortium led by Cape Town businessman Iqbal Survé and his company Sekunjalo Investment Holdings. The Sekunjalo consortium would include a broad-based component and a raft of politically connected people and organisations. The *Cape Times* editor, Alide Dasnois, was sacked apparently for failing to deal with the death of Nelson Mandela in a manner which Survé approved of.⁴⁹ She had rushed out a special ‘wraparound’ tribute to the president, but argued she had no time to change the front page. Her supporters suggested that Survé’s action had more to do with the story that appeared on the front of the paper, reporting the Public Protector’s report into a controversial tender awarded to a Survé company. Dasnois was finally vindicated, but did not regain her position. Soon readers began complaining that the *Cape Times* was biased against the opposition Democratic Alliance, which runs the city. The administration was routinely accused of being racist.⁵⁰ The overall impact was to deaden the instincts of the journalists employed on the papers. As Anton Harber concluded: ‘The new chief executive, Dr. Iqbal Survé, moved quickly against independent and critical voices on some of his newspapers.’⁵¹

Black Ops

There was one, final, tactic employed by the ANC: media manipulation during elections. A covert ‘war room’ was set up on behalf of the party during the 2016 local elections

with a budget of R50-million to create false narratives favouring the ANC and targeting opposition parties.⁵² *AmaBhungane*—an investigative website—explained what took place: ‘A covert team, initially known as the War Room, intended to “disempower DA and EFF campaigns” and set a pro-ANC agenda using a range of media, without revealing the ANC’s hand.’ This included establishing a seemingly independent news site and chat show, using ‘influencers’ on social media, and planning to print fake opposition party posters. The ANC attempted to suggest that they had no involvement with the operation when the issue was raised in court (following the non-payment of one of the contractors) but few believed the denials. As the commentator, Ranjeni Munsumay put it: ‘This is not only about the criminal acts and big personalities being shamed. It is also about the erosion of trust and further diminishing of the ANC’s credibility ... The ANC cannot simply wash its hands or throw someone under the bus.’⁵³

These operations need to be seen in a wider context. The Guptas have moved a considerable proportion of their assets out of South Africa and now have a base in the Dubai.⁵⁴ This has not ended their relationship with President Zuma and they have gone to considerable lengths to defend their position. This includes hiring the British Public Relations firm Bell Pottinger to polish their tarnished image at a cost of £100,000 a month from March 2016.⁵⁵ There are allegations that the firm has attacked wealthy white South African businessmen, in an attempt to draw fire away from the Guptas. These included Johann Rupert, whose family made their fortune in the tobacco industry. Bell Pottinger is alleged to have ‘sought to divert public outcry towards the Gupta family and refocus attention upon other examples of state interference and capture, notably by “white monopoly capital”’, according to a document uncovered by the South African *Sunday Times*.⁵⁶ The campaign was said to have had ‘a heavy focus upon use of social media, a series of fake bloggers, commentators and Twitter users have been launched in an effort to manipulate public opinion’. A detailed assessment of the plan drawn up for the Guptas was published by the *Citizen*, leading to an outcry against Bell Pottinger.⁵⁷ Placards denouncing Victoria Geoghegan, the PR firm’s executive allegedly handling the Gupta portfolio, were carried by crowds during protests against President Zuma in April 2017.

Conclusion

From the evidence it would appear hard not to conclude that the ANC learned a great deal from the apartheid spinmeisters who preceded them. From buying critical newspapers and establishing pro-government television stations to using spooks to investigate and intimidate journalists, to establishing black operations, including fake news media—the ANC has done them all. In one respect the ANC surpassed their predecessors: the National Party had been in power for 25 years before John Vorster instructed Mulder to channel government funds to the *Citizen*. The ANC under Jacob Zuma was pouring revenue into the Gupta’s *New Age* after just 18 years in office. The pupil was a fast learner.

At the same time it is important not to overstate the case. The country still enjoys a relatively unfettered media—certainly by African standards. Excellent, independent journalism can be found daily in newspapers from *Business Day* and *City Press* to the *Weekly Mail*. There are combative, investigative blogs, including *AmaBhungane*, the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Politicsweb*. And there are a range of alternative television news channels and independent radio stations for the public to watch and listen to. But the pervasive impact of government

intervention has taken its toll. The greatest failure has been the promise shown by the SABC to offer a genuinely independent media offering that answered to no-one but its audience. Many tried to achieve this goal in the golden years that followed Mandela's election, but the dream soon died and the ruins are there for everyone to witness.

Notes

1. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/south-africa>, accessed 20 March 2017.
2. <http://iiag.online/>, accessed 19 March 2017.
3. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-36997461>, accessed 18 March 2017.
4. <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2017/03/24/anc-is-fractured-to-the-core-chief-whip-jackson-mthembu>, accessed 25 March 2017.
5. <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/2017/02/21/pravin-gordhan-the-leader-of-the-opposition/>, accessed 20 March 2017.
6. Richard Pollak (1981) *Up Against Apartheid: The Role and Plight of the Press in South Africa*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 11.
7. See Stanley Trapido (1980). The Friends of the Natives: Merchants, Peasants and the Political and Ideological Structure of Liberalism in the Cape, 1854–1910, in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*. London: Longman, pp. 247–274.
8. Ibid. p. 71.
9. Ibid. p. 68.
10. Ibid. pp. 20–37.
11. See Keyan Tomaselli and P. Eric Louw (eds.) (1991) *The Alternative Press in South Africa*. London: James Currey.
12. Chapter 2, subsection 16, South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996. http://www.acts.co.za/constitution_of/_constitution_of_the_republic_o, accessed 21 March 2017.
13. Institute of Race Relations (1991) *Mau-Mauing the Media: New Censorship for the New South Africa*, Johannesburg: IRR.
14. Ibid. p. v.
15. Ibid. p. 15.
16. Abebe Zegeye and Richard Harris (eds) (2003) *Media, Identity and the Public Sphere in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Leiden: Brill, p. 16.
17. Guy Berger, Deracialisation, Democracy and Development: Transformation of South African Media 1994–2000, quoted in Glenda Daniels (2012) *Fight for Democracy: The ANC and the Media in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, p. 32.
18. Ibid. pp. 33–34.
19. Ibid. p. 128.
20. Ibid. p. 35. Daniels makes clear that Mandela too took this line on occasions.
21. Ibid. p. 140.
22. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Political-hyenas-in-feeding-frenzy-20100826>, accessed 24 March 2017.
23. Daniels, op. cit. p. 151.
24. Communications and the Battle of Ideas, discussion document, http://www.anc.org.za/sites/default/files/National%20Policy%20Conference%202017%20Communications_1.pdf, accessed 26 March 2017.
25. Jeremy Gordin (2008) *Zuma: A Biography*, Jeppetown: Jonathan Ball, pp. 24–26.
26. Ruth Teer-Tomaselli (1994) Militance and Pragmatism: The Genesis of the ANC's Media Policy, *Africa Media Review*, 8(2), p. 77.
27. State of the Newsroom report, 2014, University of the Witwatersrand, <http://www.journalism.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/State-of-the-newsroom-2014.pdf>, accessed 26 March 2017.

28. The audience views more than one platform—hence the figure which is higher than the total population of the country, SABC Annual Report 2016, p. 11, <http://www.sabc.co.za/wps/wcm/connect/9fed16004e69edcdb0abf88c39fca03d/AR+2016+part+1upd.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=9fed16004e69edcdb0abf88c39fca03d>, accessed 26 March 2017.
29. <https://mg.co.za/article/2009-03-11-icasa-hears-sabc-blacklist-complaints>, accessed 30 March 2017.
30. <https://mg.co.za/article/2009-04-29-opposition-welcomes-zikalalas-exit>, accessed 30 March 2017.
31. 'When Governance and Ethics Fail', Public Protector of South Africa, Report No. 23 of 2014.
32. <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-08-30-00-sabc-calls-for-70-happy-news>, accessed 26 March 2017.
33. <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/sabc-bans-broadcast-of-protests-destruction-of-property>, accessed 26 March 2017.
34. <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-07-19-south-africans-rally-around-the-sabc8-journalists-dismissed-this-week>, accessed 26 March 2017.
35. http://sanef.org.za/news/entry/sanef_applauds_the_courage_and_commitment_to_ethical_journalism_displayed_b/, accessed 26 March 2017.
36. <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/sabc-8-paint-grim-picture>, accessed 26 March 2017.
37. Interim report of the ad hoc committee on the SABC Board: Inquiry into the fitness of the SABC Board, dated 27 January 2017, https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/misc/2017/SABC_Ad_Hoc_Committee_Interim_Report_27_Jan_2017_adopted_published.pdf, accessed 28 March 2017.
38. The relationship between the president and the Guptas, and its impact on South African media, is covered in considerable detail in an article written by a pseudonymous writer who goes under the name of Lily Gosam, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/rdm/politics/2017-01-18-zuma-the-guptas-and-the-great-media-heist/>, accessed 30 March 2017.
39. <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-04-19-the-new-age-a-growing-media-empire-built-with-your-money/#.UXDIvYUYLow>, accessed 28 March 2017.
40. <http://ewn.co.za/2016/12/13/sabc-said-to-have-funded-establishment-of-gupta-owned-ann7>, accessed 28 March 2017; <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/media/2016-12-13-sabc-built-up-gupta-rival-television-station/>, accessed 28 March 2017.
41. <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/media/2016-12-13-sabc-built-up-gupta-rival-television-station/>, accessed 28 March 2017.
42. <http://www.channel24.co.za/TV/News/SABC-in-crisis-facing-financial-ruin-says-DA-20150521>, accessed 27 March 2017.
43. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/sabc-faces-collapse-20170319-3>, accessed 27 March 2017.
44. <http://city-press.news24.com/News/hlaudi-has-the-president-on-speed-dial-heres-what-you-need-to-know-from-sabc-inquiry-20161213>, accessed 28 March 2017.
45. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/hlaudi-calls-in-the-spooks-20161127-2>, accessed 28 March 2017.
46. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/sundaytimes/stnews/2016/12/23/Secret-purge-Hlaudis-dirty-war-at-SABC>, accessed 28 March 2017.
47. <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-08-08-00-independent-sale-tightens-media-noose>, accessed 28 March 2017.
48. <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-08-15-chinese-companies-scoop-shares-in-independent-news>, accessed 28 March 2017.
49. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/cape-times-must-apologise-to-former-editor-press-ombudsman-20160801>, accessed 28 March 2017.
50. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/the-cape-times-from-hero-to-zero>, accessed 28 March 2017.
51. <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-02-11-op-ed-twenty-five-years-after-mandela-freedom-sa-media-struggle/#.VNvpmHb7d7k>, accessed 28 March 2017.

52. <http://amabhungane.co.za/article/2017-01-24-inside-the-ancs-black-ops-election-campaign>, accessed 28 March 2017.
53. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-01-30-black-ops-alternate-facts-and-damn-lies-the-ancs-escalating-credibility-crisis/#.WI8j9pKKSMk>, accessed 28 March 2017.
54. <http://www.thesouthafrican.com/gupta-family-takes-up-residence-in-one-of-dubais-most-expensive-residences/>, accessed 10 April 2017.
55. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-09-13-the-great-orchestrated-gupta-love-up/#.WOtGx461vok>, accessed 10 April 2017.
56. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/sundaytimes/stnews/2017/03/19/White-monopoly-capital-chosen-distraction-in-PR-strategy-to-clear-Guptas1>, accessed 10 April 2017.
57. <http://citizen.co.za/news/news-national/1476840/read-alleged-report-bell-pottingers-gupta-pr-plan/>, accessed 10 April 2017.