

A golden age of investigative reporting, then and now

 By Ed Herbst 1 Nov 2013

"Tony Yengeni, an early Mbeki favourite, had the same experience. Having lost Mbeki's favour, he found that the Scorpions had leaked to the media details of his bank accounts and the deal whereby he had purchased a Mercedes SUV at a large discount while he was head of the defence committee. Disgrace followed, with a conviction for perjury for failing to disclose his interests to Parliament." - RW Johnson South Africa's brave new world - the beloved country since the end of apartheid (Allen Lane, 2009)

"Can you remember where you were when....?" To most people who, like me, have reached or are approaching the biblical three score years and ten, the question is usually posed in the context of the assassination of John F Kennedy.

To me however, as an inveterate news junky, the most vivid memories are of my whereabouts when major news stories broke.

In 1978 I was in Windhoek as part of an SABC news team sent to cover the United Nations-monitored elections under the aegis of Finnish diplomat, Martti Ahtisaari.

At the time, in South Africa newspapers such as the Rand Daily Mail under editor Allister Sparks and the Sunday Express under Rex Gibson were involved in a no expense spared battle to crack the [Info Scandal](#) story. Ace investigative reporters like Kitt Katzen, Chris Day and Mervyn Rees were taken off the daily news diary for two years so that they could concentrate exclusively on 'Muldergate'.

On Tuesday, 2 November 1978 the courageous Judge Anton Mostert, after staring down PW Botha, called a press conference and revealed details of the multi-million rand scam. The next day the RDM's front page lead was 'It's all true!'

Four days later Rapport reduced that three-word headline to one - 'Swendelary!' and I remember sitting in a Windhoek coffee shop avidly absorbing the detail of the biggest [corruption story](#) in decades.

Those were heady days and Allister Sparks, in a column, 'Serialised Scandal' in my alma mater, the [Natal Witness](#), compares investigative journalism then and now.

"Think back to the great 'information scandal' Muldergate. A puny affair in moral and monetary terms compared with the Arms Deal, but it brought down the Vorster government. John Vorster, he of the 90-day and 180-day detention laws, the creator of the South African Bureau of State Security (Boss) and the condoner of torture, the most feared man of his time, was kicked upstairs into a ceremonial presidency while his two cohorts, Connie Mulder and Eschel Rhoodie, were dismissed into obscurity. There was justice and closure in those evil times.

"Even we journalists who did the exposing in a brisk two years, a third of the time that the Arms Deal has been in the news, had our moments of glory. The investigative journalists, Mervyn Rees, Chris Day and Kitt Katzen, were acclaimed by their peers, while the editors, Rex Gibson of the Sunday Express and myself at the Rand Daily Mail, were flown to New York, feted at the National Press Club in Washington and crowned joint international editors of the year.

"Not so poor Stephanus Brummer and Sam Sole of the Mail & Guardian. They have toiled infinitely longer, written thousands more words and dug a great deal deeper than any of our lot did. But there has been no reward, no acclamation for them. Because there has been no end to their story. No vindication. Nor will there be. This serial will go on forever. at least until Jesus comes again.

"Their only solace is that it will provide them with lifelong careers. For the Arms Deal has become an industry. Our one growth industry in these hard times. It has already produced two books and sold millions of newspapers, and doubtless more will follow."

In one sense Sparks is entirely right. These are not happy times for South African reporters as [declining newspaper sales](#) show.

No longer valued or appreciated

I lived vicariously through the start of this turmoil because, in a brief period in 1999, eight outstanding journalists who I knew and respected, among them the senior political reporters Anthony Johnson and the late Barry Streek and Chris Bateman who broke the Gugulethu Seven story, all took voluntary severance packages because it had been made clear to them that as middle-aged whites, they did not fit the paradigm of the new rulers, the ANC. They knew they were no longer valued or appreciated and in the space of a few months more than a century of institutional knowledge and outstanding journalism talent was lost. This change was enthusiastically endorsed and promoted by Tony O'Reilly who had been given permission by Nelson Mandela to buy the [Argus Group](#) and all its newspapers - a prelude to what now seems to be perceived as [asset stripping](#).



The great Muldergate 'information scandal' was a puny affair in moral and monetary terms compared with the Arms Deal. (Image: <http://www.konflikty.pl/> via Wikimedia Commons)

But, in another sense, this is a golden age for investigative reporting in South Africa. In the Muldergate era there were two enduring themes, apartheid itself and the Info Scandal. Before that there were corruption scandals such as the Agliotti Ian deal and the Faros coal scandal but they were miniscule in scale and impact when compared to the ANC's trillion rand corruption of the past two decades and the intervals between these NP-era corruption stories being broken were huge compared to our present situation.

Today the corruption stories come at you in almost hourly, never-ending waves and at every level of government, from Nkandla and Guptagate to dodgy municipal tenders in Limpopo and KZN. Furthermore, you don't have to dig for the incriminating evidence - by and large it is leaked to you by those who ever more savagely contest the increasingly [bloody territory](#) at the perimeter of the ANC's taxpayer-funded trough ([see here too](#)).

As an example, one of my favourite investigative journalism stories is the account by Mzilikazi Wa Afrika of the Sunday Times about how he exposed the [Arms Deal corruption](#) of Tony Yengeni.

However, if the quote by RW Johnson at the start of this article is to be believed he acquired much of his information and relevant documents from the Scorpions at the behest of the then South African President, Thabo Mbeki.

Leaks ... some true, others not

Johnson cites several other examples of the media being suborned to contest the internal rivalries of the ANC through these leaks, and some of these leaks were neither accurate nor truthful: *"There was now a growing list of ANC worthies with a grievance against the Scorpions and the NPA. Mathews Phosa had been the first target. In March 2001 a torrent of information had been leaked to the media by the Scorpions implicating Phosa in corruption while he was premier, though no charges ever followed and the Scorpions never published their findings. Similar tactics were employed against two of the most prominent UDF leaders, Terror Lekota and Popo Molefe, whom Mbeki saw as a threat. Police raided Molefe, then premier of the North West, claiming that he had molested his own daughter. No evidence was found but the Scorpions leaked the police docket to the media and suggested that new evidence had been found; none was ever produced and no charges laid but Molefe's name was blackened.*

Meanwhile a Scorpions investigation of Lekota had found that he had various interests he had not disclosed to Parliament. This was leaked to the media. Lekota had to apologise to parliament, his reputation permanently damaged. P520.

Post Polokwane, with the curtain closing on the Scorpions, a new cast of perceived heroines and villains has taken centre stage as the Hawks look on - now its Glynnis Breytenbach vs Richard Mdluli and the "torrent of information" to which Johnson referred has become a flood.

A vendetta?

Tragically, it's also Judge John Hlophe vs Judge Dikgang Motsoneneke. As DA leader, Helen Zille said in her weekly newsletter on 9 October:

"Furthermore, in an extraordinary development this week, veiled suggestions emerged in the media that the charges against Judge Hlophe may have arisen out of a personal vendetta against him by the Deputy Chief Justice, Dikgang Moseneke. Within days, there were further reports that Judge Moseneke had presided over a case involving his brother and business partner, Tiego Moseneke. The timing of this report could not have been coincidental."

But there is another "torrent of information" which was not accessible to reporters now in their dotage. In my day, the librarian was queen. Editors, news editors, sub-editors, the Mahogany Row bean counters and the news room hacks would come and go come but the archivist and her rows of files in serried ranks anchored our endeavours. Their memories, their knowledge of current affairs was encyclopaedic and, as you hurried gratefully back to the news room clutching the requested file of newspaper cuttings, your gratitude was profound. Now, thanks to Larry Page and Sergey Brin all that information and more is immediately available.

So, for the aspirant investigative reporter, the future is bright and the present is exciting. He or she might not be the local equivalent of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein but the community newspaper or radio station for which they work constantly offers its own mini-Watergates because corruption, as [Mathews Phosa recently said](#), is pervasive.

They will not have the satisfaction that the Watergate duo had because their scoop will not end the career of a corrupt or incompetent politician or civil servant, [enjoying Nandos](#). They know that the people whose incompetence or nefarious activities they expose will simply resign, all investigation will then cease, no attempt will be made to recoup the lost money: they will be redeployed by the ANC to another well-paying sinecure. But it does mean, as Sparks pointed out in the context of the Arms Deal, that the potential of employment is boundless.

Shuffling the cadres

I can think of only one exception to the above rule and I would like to illustrate it by asking a question. The fact that our courts have ruled that [cadre deployment](#) in the public service is illegal and unconstitutional and the fact that it has had a catastrophic effect on all forms of government has not stopped the ANC from appointing some pretty dubious characters to lucrative sinecures. But will this well of stories dry up? Has there ever been an occasion when the excellent policing and the swift dispensing of justice that we briefly saw during the 2010 Soccer World Cup resulted in one of the ANC's multitudinous deployed cadres being expeditiously tried and jailed for corruption?

Yes.

Google the name Cynthia Maropeng.

What made the difference? The answer is that [Maropeng](#) did not steal from the tax payer-funded trough which seems - *de facto* if not *de jure* - acceptable to the ruling party. No, she stole from the ANC itself!

"The theft was first revealed by the Ngobeni commission, which traced leads indicating that Maropeng (36) had misuse money allocated for ANC constituency offices."

The ANC needed to send out a very swift and clear message that while it has a *laissez-faire* attitude to stealing from the fiscus - i.e. the Travelgate MPs - stealing from the ANC itself will be swiftly and harshly punished. Accordingly, her robust and entirely credible defence availed her nothing.

"Maropeng told the court during the trial that Mpumalanga's administration and its ruling ANC government were so corrupt that she should not be singled-out and blamed for 'minor' irregularities.

"Insisting she was being victimised for falling out of political favour with powerful ANC colleagues, Maropeng alleged that far more serious crimes were being committed with impunity by far more important politicians.

"She also insisted that she was merely emulating techniques used by political colleagues for setting up front companies and winning government tenders."

After a comparatively brief investigation and trial, Maropeng was [jailed for seven years](#) but that was more than a decade ago and it would be interesting to know how much of her sentence she served and what has happened to her since then. What the ANC's *de facto* policy on deployed cadres and corruption means however, as Sparks has pointed out, is that we live in eternally interesting times and, until the Second Coming, investigative reporters will never lack work.

TV has also done well - even the SABC, though in the latter case...

This article has essentially been about investigative journalism by newspaper reporters. On the broadcasting side, however, we have seen outstanding work done by Carte Blanche and e.tv's Third Degree.

The SABC has also done some excellent investigative work through Special Assignment but it has always seemed to have tried to avoid anything implicating senior ANC political figures in criminal activity.

To illustrate the linking symbiosis between the SABC in the apartheid era and the current one I would like to go back to the National Party reaction after Judge Anton Mostert's courageous press conference in 1978. Citing security legislation - as the ANC does now - the Botha government forbade local media from repeating Mostert's revelations. Only the SABC obeyed and it remained silent for three days.

On 31 January 2010 the Sunday Times front page lead was a story that President Jacob Zuma (67) was the father of a possible 20th child with the 39-year-old Sonono Khosa, the daughter of his old friend and soccer tycoon, Irvin.

The SABC waited for three days - while the story made headlines all over the world and dominated our local discourse - before the call from Luthuli House. It came when a statement was released in which the President [attacked the media](#) which had broken and headlined the story and used, inevitably, the culture angle. The state broadcaster carried a brief reference towards the end of the evening's main TV news bulletin with no accompanying interviews or studio analysis.

Another example: Just as the Botha administration cited security legislation to prevent discussion after Judge Mostert's revelations, the Zuma administration now seeks to prevent discussion about [Guptagate](#) by using the same tactic.

The more things change

But to those who have been handed the baton by Katzin, Rees and Day and who face [draconian secrecy legislation](#) by an increasingly totalitarian regime to increasingly suppress and smother increasing evidence of increasing corruption I can evoke the words of Dylan Thomas:

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

ABOUT ED HERBST

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