Praise to the media, but much else can be done

By Anton Harber

28 Mar 2014

At times such as these, I want to sing the praise of those elements of our news media that show courage and doggedness.

Everyone is agog with the public protector for her strength in dealing with the Nkandla scandal. (Okay, not quite everyone. Just those whose jobs don't depend on Number One, admittedly an increasingly shrinking number.) But it was journalists who broke the story, stuck with it over almost five years, kept it alive, fought to get the information out and stood firm in the face of the contemptuous obfuscation of the authorities. Two newspapers stand out on this particular story: the Mail & Guardian and City Press.

The story began with a journalist, since prematurely deceased, Mandy Rossouw, who noticed some building going on during a visit to the area, inveigled her way into the site office and saw the large-scale plans. She reported in the M&G in December 2009 that taxpayers were paying what she called a "whopping" R65m for the expansion of the president's family homestead. It was a lesson in just keeping your eyes open and noticing things, and asking the right questions. She was wrong in only one respect: it was not as whopping an amount as she thought. It grew to more than R200m, reported first by City Press, which sneaked in before the M&G, which had been leaked the same documents.

So the cover-up began

As the number grew, so did the story and the attempts by ministers to dance around it. They published two cover-up bids: the report of the Inter-ministerial Task Team on the Security Installation at President Zuma's Nkandla Private Residence and Parliament's joint standing committee on intelligence's report on this report. Both said he had not benefited from the state spending, and implied he had failed to pay enough attention to ask about it.

But the journalists did not give up.

It is worth remembering that ministers tried to ban photographs of Nkandla on security grounds, and brave newspapers - notably the Times - called their bluff. It was one of those fine moments when an attempt at censorship and control was met by defiance and contempt, and the would-be censors were sent packing.

The M&G applied for documents in terms of the Promotion of Access to Information Act, and was refused, again on security grounds, and threatened legal action. The Department of Public Works played an old lawyers' trick: they handed over so many documents - more than 12,000 - that they must have been hoping to drown the reporters in paperwork. It did not work, as the M&G hounds took the documents apart very quickly. And they are still pursuing the matter in court as they believe some crucial papers are still missing.

The reporting was not without controversy, such as when the M&G published the public protector's interim report against her wishes. There was hot debate on whether they were endangering the investigation, but they opted to publish and be damned.

Nelson Mandela: 'Critical, independent and investigative media is the lifeblood of any democracy'

At a time when some of the institutions of democratic accountability - such as Parliament, the National Prosecuting Authority and the national broadcaster - are faltering, the bands of investigative reporters in the oft-maligned private media have remained steadfast. One is reminded of Nelson Mandela's words in 1992: "Critical, independent and investigative media is the lifeblood of any democracy."

So why am I holding back in my praise for the media? It is because of another, chronically under-reported story: the Farlam Commission of Inquiry into the Marikana killings. If the media put into this a fraction of the resources it is putting into covering the Oscar Pistorius trial, then we would be learning a great deal more of the conduct of the police, mining owners and unions in this terrible affair - getting some real insight into the relations of power in South Africa.

We may be world leaders in investigative reporting, but we lag behind when it comes to routine, day-to-day accountability reporting - also the lifeblood of our democracy. I wonder if it is something the new owners, who promise to bring change to our private media, will address. I fear not. Their livelihood may well depend on present and future Number Ones.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote Diepsloot (Jonathan Ball, 2011), Recht Malan Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of The A-Z of South African Politics (Penguin, 1994/5), What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic (Jacana, 2010) and Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism (Jacana, 2010).
View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com