

Does a liar as a source ever deserve protection?

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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It is easy to review ethical decisions in journalism with hindsight, when one has the luxury of time to wonder whether a choice made under pressure was the correct one...

Perhaps it is a little too easy. But the extract from investigative hound Mzilikazi wa Afrika's memoir published in last weekend's *Sunday Times* raised some fascinating questions about what journalists publish and what they withhold and how significant - and complex - that decision can be.

Wa Afrika writes of the time in 2003 that the *Sunday Times* was eager to get its hands on the questions put to President Jacob Zuma by the National Prosecuting Authority in connection with the investigation into his alleged corruption. The *Times'* crack investigative team couldn't get its hands on the document, so it turned to political reporter Ranjeni Munusamy, who was famously close to the Zuma camp. Zuma offered her a Faustian pact: he would give them the questions as long as they did not reveal their source and they published the evidence he claimed to have that his prosecutor, Bulelani Ngcuka, had been an apartheid spy.

Smart response

According to Wa Afrika, the *Sunday Times* came up with a smart response. If there was evidence on Ngcuka, they would publish it. Zuma sent the questions and they were duly published on the front page.

Zuma's office quickly issued a statement criticising the fact that these were being leaked to the media and Zuma went on air to blame Ngcuka. It was a bald-faced lie.

The agreement not to name a source who has asked for confidentiality is sacrosanct in journalism. If you don't protect your sources, you won't have any, and you can't do your job. But journalists are also meant to be committed to truth-telling.

Is one obliged to protect a source who misleads and manipulates you? Is it moral to protect a politician who is lying through his teeth, and destroying the life and reputation of another?

The relationship between a journalist and a source is one of trust. What happens when the source breaks that bond? Is the journalist released from the bargain? Wa Afrika hints in his account that he wanted to bust Zuma but his editor, Mathatha Tsedu, insisted that he hold to the pledge to protect the source.

The spy

When the *Sunday Times* team looked at the evidence against Ngcuka, it did not hold up. Zuma's camp alleged that he was Agent RS452 but Wa Afrika tracked down the white woman, who admitted that she had been the spy RS452. She regretted it, broke down, and begged Wa Afrika not to identify her.

He protected her, though another newspaper later identified her.

But Munusamy had made a pact, and she wanted to keep her side of the bargain. When Tsedu would not publish the allegations, she leaked them to *City Press*. In one of the oddest reports ever, *City Press* said the documents had been "leaked by a senior journalist ... sourced from the (department of public prosecutions)". This was one step further than protecting a source - it was lying about it in a way that served a political purpose.

Munusamy was fired by the *Sunday Times*. An inquiry later cleared Ngcuka's name and left Munusamy and *City Press* Editor Vusi Mona with dirt on their hands. Tsedu was shown to have made the right decision not to publish the allegations against Ngcuka. The big question is whether the course of events might have changed if it had been exposed that Zuma was behaving in such a dishonest and underhand manner.

The incident left everyone soiled. Mona was fired shortly afterwards and went to work for the government. Munusamy went to work for Zuma himself. She returned to journalism later and joined *Daily Maverick*, where she has become the most vehement and consistent critic of Zuma and his administration. One is reminded how often Zuma and the African National Congress complain about leaks to the media. The next time they do so, one must remember it means they have probably leaked something again.

Update:

Munusamy yesterday filed a complaint to the Press Ombudsman contesting Wa Afrika's account. "There are a number of falsehoods, fabrications and misrepresentations of facts in this extract [from his book]", she said. She never collaborated with Wa Afrika on this story, she said, because of "bad blood" between different departments at the *Sunday Times*.

She did not get the questions from Zuma and finds it "an unprecedented and stunning move by a media institution" to reveal a source in the first place, but "utterly bizarre" to reveal the wrong source. Wa Afrika had never discussed with her this "stitched up narrative of something that never took place". At around this time Wa Afrika had approached her for a R20,000 "loan" (her quote marks) and her inability to assist "could reveal the author's malicious intent in denigrating my character".

So now there is another few layers of dirt being thrown around, and two respected, senior journalists with utterly different first-hand accounts of the same incident.

Zuma will smile when he sees this.

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).
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