



Self-regulation

A contradiction for press and politicians alike

Lizette Rabe

Publisher: SUN PRess: Stellenbosch, 2020. 1151 words. R495

Review by Martin Nicol

Between 2011 and 2016, *The Sunday Times*, the most influential voice of journalism in South Africa, used its right to media freedom to publish three major stories which have since been shown to be total lies, planted by state captivists, organised crime and ANC factions. These were about a Cato Manor death squad, the illegal renditions of Zimbabweans by police and the rogue unit at the South African Revenue Service. The journalists involved were honoured at the time with the most prestigious awards from their colleagues for investigative journalism (Harber, 2020).

Judge Kathy Satchwell said that her

“big takeaway” from the inquiry she led into the scandal was: “The media’s role in a democracy and the importance of self-regulation” (Daniels, 2021).

Lizette Rabe is professor of journalism at Stellenbosch University. She has written a no-nonsense narrative history of the media in South Africa, from the earliest days of colonialism – when “Western modes of communication” first made landfall – up to the first wave of the coronavirus.

This is the first ever attempt at a comprehensive – and inclusive – account of the history of media freedom in South Africa. She finds media freedom long before the media began to play a role in democracy.

“There can be no democracy without media freedom,” writes Rabe. True! we respond – but it seems there can be media freedom without democracy, and media freedom can also undermine democracy. Media freedom can, in fact, destroy citizens’ trust in government and even in democracy itself.

Rabe relies a great deal – in fact pretty much exclusively up to 2009 – on secondary sources, all of which are carefully footnoted. But her unique contribution is to string them all together. The periodisation is pedestrian and not particularly helpful in bringing sense to the narrative. However several themes are usefully deployed – such as how the press came to be segmented

into English, Afrikaans and “black” elements and how these “trichotomous characteristics” defined the press for two centuries; how the black press developed in five phases (ending with “the black empowerment phase”); and how the alternative/resistance press flamed in and out.

That beacon of press excellence, *Fairlady*, somehow gets an index entry here but there is no mention of my favorite ever alternative publication – the often-banned *Learn and Teach*, with Mogorosi Motshumi’s Sloppy cartoon and the big readable font.

Rabe comes down hard on colonial and apartheid governments for their harsh actions against the press. Her theme – across the centuries – is how politicians and governments absolutely hate the media, and yet rely on the media for pursuing their own ends. Then she expresses surprise when the ANC government reacts negatively to both tongue lashings and inaccurate reporting from the press. She goes to the extent of repeating, at some length, the views of a long-time communications professor at UNISA, P.J. Fourie, who penned an article in 2009 entitled “A return to the Repression of Freedom of Speech: Similarities between the Apartheid Government and the ANC’s actions against the media”.

This is all fair comment, and is supported by detailed quotations, but it is a bridge too far as a credible argument. Even Fourie, writing five years later and comparing local press freedoms with those in our BRICS compatriots, entitled his contribution: “South Africa: A free media still in the making” (Milton and Fourie, 2015).

Never having read much of the Afrikaans press – ever – I found the explanations of its history, personalities

and directions over the years interesting and diverting. Ton Vosloo, card-carrying verligte and sometime Naspers mogul, writes a gushing foreword, suggesting a subtitle for the book: “Bloodied, but unbowed”.

Some of Rabe’s assertions I found astonishing: “To the Afrikaans press’s credit it must be said that, during the 1960s ... the Afrikaans press progressed to become the most powerfully organized force of opposition.” Elsewhere she writes, “In the mid-80’s the apartheid bastion started to crumble ... Afrikaners progressively realised how an inhumane policy humiliated the majority of fellow South Africans.” Also, “It was widely accepted that the Afrikaans papers *Die Beeld* (1965-70) and *Beeld* (1974 -) in particular and also other Naspers papers played a more important role in changing apartheid than the Afrikaans establishment press have generally been credited for.” James McClurg, ombud for the Argus Group, is quoted as saying that when historians turn their eye on this era (before 1990) [they should] “reserve a chapter for the contribution of the verligte Afrikaans press towards change in South Africa”.

None of this squares with my historical prejudices on how democracy was achieved – but Rabe has footnotes galore and by 1990 the National Party was indeed in favour of the total freedom of the press, a great change indeed!

Rabe has comments on the problem of “instrumentalism” in the press, as when Ranjeni Munusamy “brought ‘broad disgrace to the profession’,” by acting as cats-paw for Zuma supporters in an attack on the prosecuting authority in 2003. Earlier she quotes a visiting British journalist, aghast at the political journalism of the *Rand Daily*

Mail, who said “You aren’t journalists, you’re political activists” and that if he were chair of the board he would fire the lot of them. This bias towards political involvement seems to be a common characteristic of all South African journalists over all time. It even provides an excuse for the book’s title, *Alta continua*. “Self-regulation” is not part of this territory – for journalists, or for government!

Then we get to Chapter 9 – “the period from 2009 onward”. The events it describes are earth-shattering for journalism and media freedom as we used to understand it. State capture, ANC and EFF attacks on journalists, the implosion of the SABC and the complete re-arrangement of the media universe – and then Covid-19. Rabe’s methodology – explained at the start as “a narrative history” – is completely unequal to the task of marshalling sense or substance from the last decade. The chapter is a grab-bag of odds and ends, and no longer a coherent story like the bulk of the book.

Rabe’s book is a thought provoking guide to our media history – and it provides a context for reading *We have a Game Changer*, the (forgiveably!) self-congratulatory account of the first decade of the *Daily Maverick*. In fact, when you reach Rabe’s Chapter 9, skip it and read the DM book instead.

REFERENCES

- Daniels, G. 2021. “What about the rogues in the journalism industry?” *Daily Maverick* 168, 30 January.
- Harber, A. 2020. *So, for the record – Behind the headlines in an era of state capture*. Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.
- Milton, V.C. and Fourie, P.J. 2015. “South Africa: A free media still in the making,” in Nordenstreng, K. and Thusu, D.K. (eds). *Mapping BRICS media*. London New York: Routledge. 