BLURRED LINES:
HOW SOUTH AFRICA'S INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM HAS CHANGED WITH A NEW
DEMOCRACY AND EVOLVING COMMUNICATION TOOLS

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ABSTRACT

South Africa’s developing democracy, along with globalization and advances in technology, have created a confusing and chaotic environment for the country’s journalists. This research paper provides an overview of the history of the South African press, particularly the “alternative” press, since the early 1900s until 1994, when democracy came to South Africa. Through an in-depth analysis of the African National Congress’s relationship with the press, the commercialization of the press and new developments in technology and news accessibility over the past two decades, the paper goes on to argue that while journalists have been distracted by heated debates within the media and the government about press freedom, and while South African media companies have aggressively cut costs and focused on urban areas, the South African press has lost touch with ordinary South Africans — especially historically disadvantaged South Africans, who are still struggling and who most need representation in news coverage.
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CHAPTER I: Introduction

A. Background and Purpose

South Africa’s 1994 political overhaul, while a landmark victory for anti-apartheid activists, sounded the death knell for the country’s alternative, anti-apartheid newspapers. Primarily supported by overseas funding, many publications folded in the transition when funding for anti-apartheid advocacy dried up.

Forming a new and fully democratic government has not proven easy for South Africa. The ANC-led government has been vulnerable to corruption and inefficiency, and many of the changes and solutions to social ills that were promised in the 1994 Constitution have gone unrealized. South Africa still struggles to extract itself from the political apparatus that was the apartheid state, an example being the new government’s approach to freedom of the press, which reflects similar tactics of intimidation and prevention of access to information that were characteristic of the apartheid government.

With the demise of small, independent publications and the ANC government’s use of conservative policy on press freedom to create a chilling effect in journalism, a gulf has opened where investigation and criticism of South Africa’s ruling powers and information on South Africa’s social ills once stood. The struggles of the South African anti-apartheid newspapers have carried over into the present-day struggles of print media to shed light on the current South African reality of widespread poverty and political mismanagement — struggles driven by an essentially one-party political environment, confusion over the function of the press in a post-colonial democracy, and a lack of financial support for independent print media.
Because the future of the press that resists government corruption and overreach in South Africa is so unclear, due to reasons explained above, I plan to write an honors thesis that lays out the emerging trends in South African journalism. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the experiences of current reporters in South Africa who are doing work critical of the government and independent from the influence of advertisers. The thesis will compare various forms of media such as radio, online and print journalism and their individual successes and struggles, including financial viability, relationships between various media and the South African state, and the responsiveness and accessibility of media to the South African public. The thesis will also analyze current journalists’ accounts of the barriers they face when writing critically about the ANC government and individual case studies of censorship and prosecution of journalists. The thesis will attempt to show how South Africa’s particular brand of political and social chaos in the 20-some years since apartheid fell has kept journalists and media companies from effectively addressing the impact of globalization on how news companies are owned and financially managed, which has contributed to the extremely weak current state of South African investigative journalism, particularly in the print sector.

B. Research Questions and Methodology

The following research questions will guide my thesis project: Why are there so few nonprofit, independent news publications in South Africa? What are the fastest-growing and most profitable media for alternative journalism in South Africa’s current economy? Do journalists who are doing work that is investigative and critical of the government experience barriers to accessing information or a chilling effect that keeps them from pursuing difficult stories? How does the ANC
go about criticizing, responding to, and attempting to reform the press? Does the lack of alternative journalism in South Africa affect public perception of the press? Are their sectors of the press that have seen particular success or striking failure? What are the social issues and groups of people affected by the lack of a vibrant alternative press in South Africa, groups that go unnoticed due to gaps in alternative coverage?

My method for answering these questions will be to survey literature from the past 23 years of South African democracy about the challenges and struggles of the South African press in the years since apartheid ended. Most of the attention in this paper will be paid to the print media, though other media sectors will be mentioned as well, often in the context of how they impact the print media sector. The thesis will document the ANC’s history of dealing with the press through legislation, lawsuits, and public comment. I will research how members of the press have reacted to the ANC. I will look at the financial status of various sectors of the press to demonstrate how and why certain sectors have had success while others have not. I will consider current data and reports by experts in media-related fields and compare their diagnoses of the South African press. I will search out the criticisms that have been levied against the press relating to any lack of coverage in certain areas, potentially in research projects, op-ed pieces, on social media and in other forums where South Africans share their personal experience with the press.

C. Definitions and Acronyms

Shaun Johnson, a renowned anti-apartheid journalist and chief executive of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, lists four criteria for a publication to qualify as part of the South African “alternative” or opposition press, a main subject of this project. First, that the publication is
non-commercial, or in other words, its main aim is not profit; second, that its raison d’être is resistance in some form; third, that it sees the established, commercial media as not fully representing South African voices or fulfilling South Africa’s needs; and fourth, that it is aimed at a mostly black audience (Johnson 24). This is what is meant by describing the history of the alternative press in South Africa.

Another important definition is of the South African tabloid. Herman Wasserman’s extensive study of the South African tabloid genre describes tabloids as collections of human interest stories, heavy on images and graphics, with pithy, sensational, conversational prose in a “snappy and lively style of language” that can be read or scanned quickly (Wasserman 2010: 14). These papers are not necessarily defined by their typical square, glossy format, as the tabloid sector in South Africa has also seen many broadsheet newspapers take root.

The following acronyms will be used frequently throughout this paper and may be useful to know:

ANC — African National Congress
SANEF — South African National Editors’ Forum
MDDA — Media Development and Diversity Agency
INMSA — Independent News & Media South Africa
SABC — South African Broadcasting Corporation
PDMTTT — Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team
ICASA — Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
CHAPTER II: Review of Literature

**History of alternative press in South Africa.** The first alternative newspapers in South Africa were the mission journals of the mid to late 1800s. As Johnson writes, “Under their influence black progress was defined in terms of the assimilation of Western ‘civilisation’” and “European acceptance of Africans, not power” (Johnson 1991: 16–19).

Johnson goes on to highlight a series of African publications that popped up in South Africa following the mission journals and beginning with *Imvo Sabantsundu*, founded in 1884 and “the first newspaper to progress from being written for and by blacks, to being under their ownership and control as well” (Johnson 1991: 17). *Izwi Labantu* emerged in 1897 and was closely tied to the South African labor movement and the South African Native Congress. Limb and Johnson found that *Izwi* was followed by other, similar African-language papers that covered such issues as maltreatment of native laborers, low wages for black laborers, exploitation of unpaid apprentices, refusal to employ certain ethnic groups, accident rates, low pensions and assaults by white miners against laborers (Limb 2000: 87–91; Johnson 1991: 18). However, workers themselves were generally not participants in the running of the press, which was geared toward black, literate elites, and both the literacy rate and circulation for African publications remained low (Limb 2000: 84; Johnson 1991: 18).

The next phase of alternative print media was characterized by publications closely associated with organizations and political groups. *Abantu-Batbo* was an African nationalist newspaper founded in 1912 “against a background of increasing oppression of South African blacks” (Johnson 1991: 19) and was hugely instrumental in the rise of African nationalism (Limb 2000: 100). The publication covered workers’ rights, particularly women’s, including the abuse of
domestic workers, and it objected to emerging pass laws for African women, which required black women to carry identification cards and to have explicit permission to be in white areas outside work hours. *Abantu-Batho* was closely tied to the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Native Congress. *Inkundla ya Bantu*, founded in 1938, “articulated a broad, inclusive variety of African nationalism,” but it folded in 1951 just three years after the National Party officially took power.

During the beginning of the National Party’s rule, the ANC acknowledged the need for an official publication to represent the party but could not penetrate the monopoly of the white-owned press (Limb 2000: 109). As Potter explains, because of Africans’ exclusion from the political process, opposition to apartheid was mostly voiced through the English-language, white-owned press (Potter 1975: 27). The impact of this opposition, furthermore, was negligible as the apartheid government’s responsiveness to criticism dwindled (28).

Additionally, not all black newspapers were as radical as ANC-affiliated publications. *Imvo Zabantsundu* and *Umteteli wa Bantu* were less sympathetic to African workers and denounced communism and radicalism. *Bantu World* was run by the “African petty bourgeoisie” and had a condescending view of the African working class (Limb 2000: 105). By the mid-1930s, most independent, African nationalist publications “had either collapsed or been taken over by the white-owned media conglomerate Bantu Press” (Limb 2000: 96). Eventually Bantu Press-owned publications began denouncing the ANC and the militancy of South African workers’ unions (Limb 2000: 109). Then, as Switzer explains, African nationalism in the print media sector all but disappeared after most of them were bought out by whites, closed, or became depoliticized
following the Great Depression and “merged with a new captive black commercial press controlled by white entrepreneurs” (Switzer 2000: 39).

As Fourie explains, the result of the press’s “captivity” during this period was that mainstream publications’ content “catered mainly for the white population and their needs… To a great extent, the citizens were uninformed about the misery of the majority of the black population who lived under the apartheid rule” (Fourie 2002: 20).

Censorship of the opposition press under apartheid. The apartheid government’s intent to suppress the freedom of newspaper journalists was first clarified by the 1950 Press Commission, which, as Potter demonstrates, “revealed the Nationalists’ concern with the Press,” and particularly with the financial success and resources of the English-language press, which was doing damage to the South African government’s reputation abroad (Potter 1975: 102). The commission reviewed thousands of news articles, classifying them on a range from “good” to “very bad”; questioned journalists about their writing; and built cases against individual journalists to claim their writing was “damaging” to the government (Potter 1975: 104).

The commission preceded the 1954 Commission of Inquiry in Regard to Undesirable Publications, which Potter argues intimidated the National Press Union (NPU) into setting up its own Press Board (Potter 1975: 109). The NPU was a capitalist organization that served a narrow range of financial interests rather than an ideological mandate. Louw and Tomaselli conclude that “the broad pattern that emerges is one of the capitalist Press, through the NPU, often conceding to self-imposed censorship by installment in order to hold off the perceived threat of direct State interference” (Louw and Tomaselli 1991: 78).
State interference in the press was a very real threat. In fact, violence and intimidation were used consistently against members of the press, especially of alternative newspapers. As Zug explains, The Guardian, a radical anti-apartheid newspaper that had become closely aligned with the ANC by the 1950s, was a particular target. The apartheid government’s security branch “arrested, watched, deported, raided, beat, shot, tapped telephones, intercepted post, and harassed those working on the paper” (Zug 2000: 129).

In 1960, the apartheid government banned the ANC, and so began the chilling effect Switzer and Limb show that ruled South African journalism from 1960 to 1980 and crushed the voices of apartheid’s opposition — or forced them underground (Limb 2000: 114; Switzer 2000: 41). The Internal Security Act of the 1970s expanded the previous Suppression of Communism Act, allowing the government to ban organisations and publications without proof that they were members of the South African Communist Party.

The government revived the Press Commission in 1964, Potter writes, this time rating 75 percent of the articles published in the British press by South African newspapers as “bad” or “very bad.” The commission found that journalists were both failing to show “the successful manner in which all race and language groups in South Africa had adjusted themselves, ‘so as to live to a remarkable extent, in peace and harmony with one another’” (Potter 1975: 106). But the commission also found that journalists “deliberately concealed the ‘barbarity or semi-civilized nature of the Native,’” supposedly by failing to report on violent acts by natives against whites.

Potter claims the importance of the 1964 commission was not that it resulted in legislation, which it did not, but that it hung over the press as an ever-present threat, making journalists more cautious about what they chose to write (Potter 1975: 108).
Even when the apartheid government pushed legislation, such as the Newspaper Press Bill in 1977, which would have established a press “code” and a press council to enforce it, the legislation generally did not become anything beyond a threat. But as Potter argues, in many cases the threat was enough toward the goal of limiting press coverage.

The Steyn Commission was another part in the saga of the government’s desire to regulate the press. Fourie explains that the first commission in 1980 stipulated that the press should further the “national interest” and be critical primarily of foreign governments, as well as “sustain and promote a positive image of the state’s security and defense agencies” (Fourie 2002: 23). According to Louw and Tomaselli, in 1981, a second Steyn Commission was appointed, which made the following recommendations: that journalists be required to earn accreditation like medical and legal professionals; that journalists must meet a minimum education qualification to work; that the state should be able to discipline journalists by banning them for a short period or for life; and that there be a register of journalists overseen by a press council, which could remove journalists from the register for “unprofessional conduct” (Louw and Tomaselli 1991: 81). In June of the same year, the Registration of Newspapers Amendment Bill began requiring all newspapers to pay a deposit of R40,000 to the state, which would have been about USD $50,633 at the time (82).

In the most violent years of apartheid, from 1985 to 1990, press censorship heightened, as Fourie demonstrates. During the state of emergency in 1985, cameras were banned, journalists were subpoenaed to reveal their sources and state officials searched journalists’ and editors’ homes (Fourie 2002: 26). Only accredited reporters were allowed into unrest areas. The state began using the courts to prosecute journalists and by September 1989 had 24 separate cases underway involving 198 journalists from nearly every anti-apartheid newspaper (Louw and Tomaselli 1991: 90).
Anton Harber, who was editor of the anti-apartheid newspaper *The Weekly Mail* in the 1990s, writes of the climate in 1990 surrounding the paper:

“Our paper had been closed down for a month just a year before; it had been seized on the streets on a number of occasions; and a number of journalists working for me had been the victims of attempted assassinations, lengthy detentions, and systematic prosecutions. Someone fired a shotgun through my front door, and my co-editor’s house was firebombed.” (Harber 79)

Harber wrote that he was personally prosecuted about a dozen times under apartheid laws that carried up to ten years’ imprisonment each.

An advantage during this time for journalists at radical, anti-apartheid publications such as the *Weekly Mail* was, as Harber puts it, that right and wrong were black and white, because what the apartheid government was doing was evil. But journalists such as Harber, who continued working when the ANC came to power, would soon see those ethical boundaries begin to blur.

**Factors leading to decline of alternative press post-1994.** The end of apartheid paired with the evaporation of funding and the frustrations of black journalists proved too much for many alternative publications. Switzer writes that publications also struggled to adapt to a changing audience and the changing needs of the South African public following such a dramatic political shift (Switzer 2000: xii). A new social environment brought about new social problems, such as the lack of inclusion of marginalized people in the economy, access to basic social services, safety and security, public health and education, but many of these issues were not so relevant to the literate elite reading the newspapers as had been the system of apartheid (Chuma 2016). Louw and Tomaselli argue that “for the left-wing press this should have signalled the beginning of a growth
period in which they utilised the new space created” but instead “saw the start of a period of decline in the fortunes of this press” (Louw and Tomaselli 1991: 222–225).

Furthermore, news organizations in the early 1990s were still primarily white-owned, which had negative implications for progressive black journalists, as Mazwai explains when he says black journalists are “expendable” and often have their opinions challenged by white editors (Mazwai 1991: 63).

With some exceptions, even alternative publications like the *Sowetan* were run by whites. Gabu Tugwana, a reporter for *New Nation*, a British anti-apartheid newspaper, said *New Nation’s* model was different from other papers like the *Sowetan* and *City Press*, which “were white-owned and administered” but “had a big personnel of black journalists.” At *New Nation*, black journalists played a significant role in editorial decisions. At *City Press* and the *Sowetan*, Tugwana said, white editors made the decisions (Mpofu 1996: 46).

Louw and Tomaselli go on to say that anti-apartheid journalism was fashionable among progressive white elites in the 1980s, but the democratic transition ended that trend. Chuma credits this decline to the misguided tactics of the “profit-chasing mainstream,” which after 1994 began focusing exclusively on issues impacting the relatively wealthy elite, their target audience (Chuma 2016).
CHAPTER III: Media-State Relations Post-1994

In order to understand the current relationship between journalists and the ANC, it’s important to understand that journalists faced violence from other political groups in addition to the apartheid government in the last few years prior to independence. In fact, journalists faced some of the same violence and interference from ANC leadership that they had faced from the apartheid government (Harber, Konigkramer, Molusi, Mazwai).

Mazwai, a reporter for The Sowetan newspaper, explains that the paper was boycotted by the ANC because its reporters covered political activity not only of the ANC but of the Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) and the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) as well. Konigkramer explains how the Ilanga newspaper, run by the Inkatha Freedom Party, was constantly under threat from ANC members in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. Many shopkeepers stopped selling the paper due to intimidation, a van carrying the newspaper was hijacked at gunpoint, and readers of the paper were even forced to physically eat it by ANC activists. Its circulation dropped by 23,000 while readership of the pro-ANC Umafrika newspaper rose by 40,000 (Konigkramer 1991: 19).

Commenting on this toxic media environment, a senior labor and political journalist for the Sowetan said, “I find it interesting that people have resorted to the very tactics they so strenuously criticised when it was the state that used them” (Molusi 28).

Threats against journalists by ANC members came at the same time when those who opposed the ANC or supported opposing political parties were being “necklaced,” or burned alive with a rubber tire thrown around one’s neck, in the streets because they were perceived as sellouts and traitors who were hindering the struggle for freedom. At the same time, the apartheid
government was under immense pressure from abroad and was weakening or eliminating many elements of apartheid, such as the banning of the ANC, as Switzer explains.

Mazwai said journalists were told by ANC activists that they must toe the line “or else,” which he called “sheer political blackmail.” Mazwai also said he himself had received phone calls threatening the safety of his family, including one in which he was told he was going to be attacked and was instructed to take his wife and children elsewhere so they would not see the attack (Mazwai 1991: 16).

Harber, the Weekly Mail editor in the early ‘90s who was prosecuted during that time by the apartheid government, was also intimidated by the ANC. When Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who was Nelson Mandela’s wife and a revered anti-apartheid activist at the time, was arrested for the abduction of four young boys in Soweto, the Weekly Mail “faced an early test of what independence meant” (Harber 80).

Many publications simply did not cover the arrest, either because they were conservative, mainstream publications, and the story was difficult and risky in such a violent period, or because they were alternative publications, and the story “would feed the apartheid enemy, and therefore was something that needed to be dealt with quietly within the liberation ‘family’” (Harber 80).

Journalists writing for alternative publications at this time were caught between objectivity and loyalty to their cause; anti-apartheid publications had chosen a side and practiced what could accurately be called advocacy journalism, or “the use of journalism techniques to promote a specific political or social cause” (Jensen 2008). Rehana Rossouw, who began her three-decade career in journalism working for anti-apartheid publications in the 1980s, affirms this characterization of the alternative press when she writes, “I often look back at work I did 20 years ago and admit quite
readily that I was a propagandist… Most of our articles were biased and one-sided” (Rossouw 30).

The degree to which journalists were essentially pro-ANC activists was underlined by one journalist in the 1980s: “If confronted with a policeman wounded in a shootout with ANC fighters, he said, it was the role and duty of a progressive journalist to finish the policeman off” (Kruger 25). It makes sense, then, that journalists would face a conflict of interest when deciding whether to criticize the ANC — and possibly endanger the fight for democracy as a result.

Journalists’ fears of obstructing the march toward democracy in South Africa ended with the 1994 election, only to be replaced with confusion about what would become of the anti-apartheid publications and their journalists. The ANC’s relationship with the media in the years leading up to 1994, however, foreshadowed a tension that would only grow as the fledgling democracy found its bearings.

As early as 1990, when then-President F.W. de Klerk lifted the bans on the ANC and political leaders, overseas funding, which had been the primary driver of alternative newspaper publication, began to dry up (Chuma 2016; Lloyd 2013; Switzer 2000: xii; Mpofu 1996: 2). As Louw and Tomaselli explain, “The pressure was on the West to end the funding of the alternatives. Overseas funding would henceforth be channeled into ‘development’ or education instead” (Louw and Tomaselli 1991: 225).

In 1994, Irish business tycoon Tony O’Reilly effectively purchased Argus Newspapers, the country’s largest newspaper group at the time, renaming it Independent News & Media South Africa (INMSA). The Sowetan, a paper well-known for its willingness to criticize the ANC, was bought by New African Investments Limited (NAIL), a consortium of black businessmen headed by Nelson and Winnie Mandela’s personal physician, and became essentially a pro-ANC newspaper. The New
Nation, one of the most prominent anti-apartheid publications, was bought by the Sowetan but only lasted for two years.

By 2000, the only formerly anti-apartheid news organizations that remained and had not been swallowed up by media conglomerates were the East Cape News Agencies, renamed East Cape News, and the Weekly Mail, which only survived due to an investment by the Guardian Media Group of London, which renamed the paper the Mail & Guardian (Kruger 2004: 19).

As newspaper ownership was changing, so were the demographics of newsrooms, which had been predominantly run by white editors. By 2000, out of 30 editors of the most widely-read daily and weekly newspapers, 12 were black (Kruger 2004: 20). Journalists from defunct anti-apartheid newspapers filtered into mainstream newsrooms. Black Economic Empowerment policies and collaboration among black entrepreneurs facilitated transfers of media ownership, such as the ANC Secretary General Cyril Ramaphosa’s assuming control of Times Media Limited, the purchase of the Sowetan by NAIL, and the shift of SABC station ownership to mostly black business interests (Kruger 2004: 19, Tomaselli 2011: 135, Kanter 2004: 300).

Unfortunately, transforming the racial demographics of South Africa’s newsrooms proved a slow process, and meanwhile, tensions were flaring between the press and the ANC. In 1999, when investigative journalist Mzilikazi wa Afrika wrote a story about the then-Director-General of Home Affairs Albert Mokoena illegally profiting from fake ID documents, Mokoena asked him, “Why are you doing this to your own brothers just to please your white bosses?” (Mzilikazi 38). Black journalists who were critical of the ANC were accused of hampering national progress and black empowerment, as they had been prior to democracy, while white journalists who did so were accused of racism and resisting democratic change (Harber 83, Wasserman 2010: 573).
This phenomenon came to a head in 1999 when the Human Rights Commission received complaints of racism levied against the *Mail & Guardian* and the *Sunday Times*, which resulted in an inquiry into whether the media was perpetuating racism (Harber 83). The most significant aspect of the inquiry was the HRC’s announcement, later withdrawn, that news editors would be subpoenaed as part of the inquiry, which was “a move reminiscent of the strong-arm tactics used by the apartheid government to compel journalists to reveal their sources” (Kruger 2004: 23). In fact, Section 205 of the South African constitution allows journalists to be subpoenaed in civil cases to reveal documents, tapes or photographs; if the journalist refuses, they can be sentenced to two to five years in prison. The South African Constitutional Court has ruled that this section is not unconstitutional, and it has “in the past been used to force journalists to reveal the identities of confidential sources” (Brand 2011: 50).

Through the early 2000s, as the news media continued to report on “the constant flow of information hostile to the ANC which was to become the staple of the independent media,” the hostility of the ANC toward the media increased (Southall 2013: 205). ANC Youth League President Julius Malema said the media was “dangerous to the revolution.” An ANC newsletter in the early 2000s accused a negative article about then-President Thabo Mbeki as being based on African stereotypes and suggested the writer must be white, rather than black as the newspaper claimed (Wasserman 125). In 2001, eleven black professionals and business leaders published an advertisement in the *Sunday Times* that claimed the media had launched a “perceptible and increasingly strident campaign against black people in powerful positions” (Fourie 2002: 30). Also in 2001, the ANC announced it planned to start its own newspaper — another echo of the apartheid government, which owned its own newspaper, *The Star* — because “the South African media and
the foreign media were too critical of the government and focused only on the negative aspects of
the government and its policies” (Fourie 2002: 29).

ANC officials’ criticisms of and reactions to the media are similar to how other new
democratic regimes approach their relationship with the press. In post-colonial contexts, especially
in developing countries, Voltmer and Wasserman explain that “the attempt of the media to take on a
more independent and probing stance, which corresponds with the notion of a watchdog function
of the press, is often regarded as a threat to national unity and as undermining trust in a new
government” (Voltmer and Wasserman 2014: 182).

Though post-apartheid South Africa is structured democratically, the ANC has been the
dominant force in politics since 1994, which as Voltmer and Wasserman argue, causes the press to
see itself as the primary challenger of the ANC’s hegemonic rule and investigative, “watchdog”
journalism as its *modus operandi*. Because the ANC is seen as the political movement that freed South
Africa from apartheid’s grip, they explain, “Especially for Black journalists who have been part of
the anti-apartheid movement, this role can cause painful conflicts of loyalty” (Voltmer and
Wasserman 2014: 187). Albert Mokoena’s comment to Mzilikazi wa Afrika played on the sense of
his loyalty to his black African “brothers.” Mbeki was well-known for racialized critiques of the
media, such as when he accused journalists in 2003 of not being well-enough informed about Africa,
saying, “I am, of course, proceeding from the assumption that you were African before you became
journalists and that despite your profession, you are still Africans” (Wasserman 2011: 122).

Harber sympathizes with ANC officials’ feelings that they have been betrayed by their own
people and their sensitivity to accusations of corruption, because the expectations of the
post-apartheid government have been so high. The apartheid government was unabashedly corrupt,
while the new government was expected to be “squeaky clean,” even though it was made up of people who had previously been exiled, imprisoned, and denied their rights to education and political participation (Harber 2004: 83). After the democratic transition, the South African press was the first to challenge these embattled activists and politicians, partially due to the familiarity of “the defensive, combative posture that journalists had adopted for their survival during the 1980s” (Harber 2004: 80). The ANC sees these challenges as unfair considering the mess it inherited in 1994.

The interference of the modern South African government in the press has not, however, been limited to idle commentary. It has included many attempts to pass legislation targeting journalists. As of 2005, Reporters Without Borders ranked South Africa 31st in the world for press freedom, but by 2007 it had dropped down to 43rd and in 2016 was ranked 39th. In 2010, Freedom House changed its ranking of South Africa’s press freedom from “Free” to “Partly Free,” a change that has persisted through 2016. In its report, Freedom House cited legal, economic and political barriers to press freedom (“South Africa Freedom of the Press” 2016).

Most proposed legislation in South Africa that attempts to curb press freedom does so under the guise of protecting national security, a strategic relic of the apartheid era, when journalists were harassed and jailed for supposedly damaging the national interest. One such example is the Protection of State Information Bill, also termed the Secrecy Bill, which came before Parliament for the first time in 2008 and was resubmitted in 2010 after much criticism. If the Secrecy Bill were to become law, documents containing state information could be classified as “confidential,” “secret,” or “top secret,” and anyone found in possession of such documents without permission could be imprisoned for between three and twenty-five years (Daniels 2012: 54, Southall 2013: 208). Pallo
Jordan, then chair of the communications subcommittee of the ANC national executive committee, said of the Bill, “There is no country that has no secrets. The purpose of the Bill is to protect the secrets of this country” (“Pallo Jordan” 2010). However, it was unclear what types of information the Bill could be applied to, since it offered only broad definitions of vague terms like “national interest” and “state security.” Southall argues that the ANC “was determined to use as expansive a definition of national security as it could get away with in order to narrow the scope for exposure of corruption and incompetence in government” (Southall 2013: 210).

Criticism of the Bill was overwhelming among activists and members of the press, who feared it would create self-censorship among news media similar to the apartheid years, when journalists were living under constant threat of prosecution. Thousands of people signed a petition objecting to the Bill, and the nonprofit Right2Know launched a campaign with the support of 400 social movements and organizations (Southall 2013: 209). Jonathan Shapiro, the famous South African cartoonist, included a nod to the controversy in one of his panels:

(Shapiro 2010)
The Secrecy Bill was debated for three years until it was finally passed by Parliament in 2013 despite continued public opposition. It was amended to include provisions that would protect people who leaked information deemed crucial to the public interest and that restricted which government agencies could classify material (‘South Africa ‘secrecy bill’...’ 2013). In a surprising turn of events, however, President Jacob Zuma refrained from signing the bill for five months before finally sending it back to Parliament because it did not pass “constitutional muster” (Smith 2013).

Zuma himself has made headlines by filing defamation lawsuits against journalists and, particularly, political cartoonists such as Shapiro. South African defamation law differs from American media law in that it does not require the defamatory claim to be false; journalists can be prosecuted for defamation based solely on negligence, even if they did not know the information was inaccurate or intend to cause harm. Further, defamation claims can be made against anyone who shared the information or played a part in its publication, even without endorsing it (Brand 2011: 54-59). Though defamation cases take place in civil, rather than criminal, court, legal expenses and settlement claims can intimidate journalists into submission. Zuma filed 14 defamation claims totaling more than $7 million between 2006 and 2010 against various news organizations, such as Rapport, the Sunday Sun, the Star, the Citizen, and Shapiro, though Zuma eventually dropped all of these cases without settling, citing “a broader agenda of reconciliation and nationbuilding” (Lloyd 2013: 25, Hu 2013).

Prominent members of the ANC have both proposed and promoted other legislation that would limit press freedom. One example is the media appeals tribunal, proposed by an ANC discussion paper in 2010. The paper was based on a resolution previously approved by the ANC
that stated press freedom is not an absolute right and instead should be limited according to individuals’ rights to privacy and human dignity (Dlamini 2015). The tribunal would be an additional method for individuals to report wrongdoings of the press, as opposed to reporting to the Press Ombudsman or filing a lawsuit. Journalists would be accountable to Parliament and could be given prison sentences or fines if found guilty of misconduct. The concept is ominously similar to the apartheid government's threats to institute a press council to review journalists’ conduct, as well as the actual institution of commissions that did review and evaluate journalistic material.

A flurry of controversy accompanied the tribunal proposal, which was met with revealing statements by ANC officials attempting to explain it. As justification for the tribunal, Zuma argued that the press tramples on human rights, invades people’s privacy and “must behave like everybody else” (Daniels 2012: 5). When the proposal for the tribunal was criticized by members of the press as being an attack on press freedom, ANC spokesman Jackson Mthembu said, “If you have to go to prison, let it be. If you pay millions for defamation, let it be. If journalists have to be fired because they don’t contribute to the South Africa we want, let it be” (5). The ANC’s Minister for Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, also defended the tribunal, making the bold claim that the ANC had “no opposition other than the bourgeois media” and, in a separate statement, “We have a huge liberal offensive against our democracy… the print media is the biggest perpetrator of this liberal thinking” (Daniels 2012: 56, Kruger 2010, “Nzimande warns” 2010). Again, Zuma demonstrates a view of press freedom that does not value complete and open access to information, while Mthembu implies journalists should be contributing to the ANC’s vision of the national interest, and Nzimande accuses the media of being out of touch with, even a threat to, the South African people. This point of view extends to ANC members in regional governments, as well — in
2010, Nelson Mandela District ANC Chairman Nceba Faku called on his supporters to burn down the offices of the *Eastern Province Herald* after the newspaper published a story about a scam he was involved in (Solomon 2011). In 2010, Pallo Jordan perhaps expressed the ANC’s frustrations with the media best when he said, “When you read our print media you never get a sense that this country is moving from an authoritarian state to democracy” (Daniels 2012: 7, Matlala 2010). The ANC feared being compared to the fascist apartheid state and in retaliation attempted to use the tactics of the apartheid state, such as criminally prosecuting journalists, to repress the media.

That same year, in 2010, media studies expert Herman Wasserman interviewed South African journalists as part of a study, which concluded that “pressures on freedom of speech and of the press now took a more subtle form,” characterized by “‘bullying’ or ‘heavy-handedness’ on the part of politicians, especially towards black journalists, who were expected to ‘toe the line’ or contribute to ‘nation building’” (Wasserman 2010: 573). That conclusion is strikingly reminiscent of Thami Mazwai’s aforementioned 1991 speech about ANC activists’ treatment of journalists, telling them to “toe the line or else” (Mazwai 1991: 11).

Another critical element in the ANC’s national security-driven limits on the media is the National Key Points Act, passed by the apartheid government in 1980. The law protects areas designated as being of national strategic importance by prohibiting the release of information regarding these sites, such as details of their layout, security measures enacted at the sites, and any incidents that have occurred at the sites. The National Key Points Act has not been amended since apartheid, and according to the Freedom House 2015 report on press freedom in South Africa, 17 new sites were added to the list of Key Points in 2014, bringing the total number to 204. Furthermore, the ANC refused to release a list of the Key Points until 2015, drawing criticism from
news organizations and activists (De Wet 2015). The Freedom House report explains that “Journalists risked unknowingly performing investigations or taking photographs at a national key point, for which they could be arrested,” and ANC officials could halt media investigations by declaring new Key Points. One such example is Nkandla, President Zuma’s private home, which was declared a National Key Point in 2010. Nkandla became a national scandal because more than R200 million in taxpayer money was spent on the property, despite stipulations in the National Key Points Act that security for National Key Points not be funded by the state. An investigative journalism firm, amaBhungane, requested documents in 2013 that the firm finally acquired in 2016, revealing that Zuma had known the details of the project all along, had asked for details about the property to be made confidential and had been warned he should be responsible for Nkandla’s security costs (Thamm 2016).

The comparison to be made here between the ANC and the apartheid government is that the latter also forbade journalists to cover incidents that occurred in designated areas, though the practice was much more widespread and racialized, preventing journalists “from reporting on black political leaders or parties or even from covering important political and social developments if they occurred in zones designated as black living areas” (Hadland 2007: 10). Ironically, the ANC actually shared testimony during a 1997 Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing about the private sector during apartheid, calling the National Key Points Act “the privatisation of repression” and “another network of collaboration between the apartheid security forces and the private sector,” suggesting it contributed to “the militarisation of South African security companies” (“ANC Submission” 1997). Considering the present ANC government has invoked the National Key Points
Act to protect President Zuma’s assets, it appears the ANC has some internal conflict over what constitutes an abuse of power.

Other notable legislation that can be used to limit the press includes the Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 1993, the Defence Act of 1957 and the Prisons Act of 1959, all still on the books in South Africa since the era of apartheid. The Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction Act “gives the state the right to withhold information if the relevant minister deems it in the interest of the country” (Louw 2005: 127). The Defence Act prohibits journalists from releasing information about “the composition, movements, or dispositions” of the South African Defence Force and authorizes the president to impose censorship in a state of war (O’Malley). The Prisons Act makes reporting on prison conditions illegal without authorization (O’Malley). These acts have not been used against the press but give the state the right to censor material if that should ever be deemed necessary.

The ANC’s approach to the media does differ drastically from the apartheid government’s in that the ANC does not, like the apartheid government, actually employ many of the statutes that could be used to criminalize journalism. While the party has often loudly aired grievances against the press, as previously shown, the ANC does not seek to ruin the media’s credibility outside of South Africa as the previous government did to “enforce the ideology of apartheid” through propaganda (Fourie 2002: 33). Most aforementioned legislation to limit press freedom has only been used in the context of apparently empty threats against the media. However, threats themselves can have a chilling effect, intimidating journalists who might fear criminal prosecution if they launch any major criticism of the ANC.
There have been some isolated cases of physical force used against journalists, as well as the arrest of journalists, which does not generally involve the ANC but does involve the South African Police Force (SAPS). In January 2014, freelance photojournalist Michael Tshele was shot and killed by police while covering a protest, the first journalist killed since 1994 (Freedom House 2015). Police arrested a reporter for the *Daily Sun*, a tabloid, in January 2014 and held him in detention for five hours after he photographed them receiving bribes (Freedom House 2015, “Police assault” 2014). Another *Daily Sun* reporter was detained by police after he photographed them with the intention to publish their insensitive remarks about a badly injured assault victim (Freedom House 2015). At a pro-Zuma ANC event, one of Zuma’s bodyguards forcibly deleted photos from a reporter’s phone (Freedom House 2015, “SANEF condemns” 2014). Though the ANC cannot be held responsible for these incidents, the attitude of the South African police toward the press is telling of the violence and intimidation journalists often face.

One press-friendly piece of legislation under the ANC is the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), passed in 2000. The act was meant to implement the constitution’s promise of access to information held by the state as well as any information held by other persons that is required to exercise or protect constitutional rights. While the act was being debated and revised, it was controversial. Richard Calland, a South African law expert, writes, “Between 1995 and 2000 the Bill vanished for long periods into the nether regions of the executive, to emerge, months later, with further reductions to its overall reach” (Calland 2001: 5).

The problem with PAIA as it is currently written is that there are several criteria under which information requests can be refused, and the appeal process is lengthy. According to Freedom House, between August 2012 and July 2013, only 16 percent of PAIA applications were met with
full disclosure of information. Furthermore, there are multiple other pieces of legislation dealing with access to information and press freedom that are more restrictive than PAIA. One is the Protection of Personal Information Act, which limits how companies and organizations can share individuals’ personal information. Another is the Protection from Harassment Act, which provides legal recourse when individuals feel they are being harassed but can be used by powerful individuals against members of the press. Calland describes how public servants, who are aware of these restrictive laws as well as PAIA, might choose to err on the side of caution when responding to an information request to avoid risking disciplinary action. He cites incidents in 2006 and 2007 when several public servants were disciplined for providing information to the media, even though they had been doing so in accordance with the Protected Disclosures Act (Calland 2001: 7).

Whether it is a conscious political strategy or a consequence of being a young democracy, the ANC has made innumerable contradictory statements about the importance and the role of the press, as well as taken actions that seem to contradict its position on the function of the press in a democracy as outlined by the South African Constitution. Media experts and lawyers have spent immeasurable time and resources attempting to parse out the ANC’s position on the press, how journalists can avoid breaking the law or being sued, and how much of a threat proposed legislation such as the Protection of State Information (Secrecy) Bill and the media appeals tribunal are. With such constant tension between public officials and journalists, attention is drawn away from the real source of the press’s failings: insufficient funding.
CHAPTER IV: Profits, the Press, and the Public

The ANC has been highly critical of the South African press for inaccuracies and sensationalized headlines, but so have average South African citizens, and the claims are not unfounded. Ownership change, employee turnover, financial struggles, new technologies, and a lack of training opportunities for journalists have coalesced to erode the quality of journalism in South Africa as well as ordinary South Africans’ trust in the news media.

The first few years of democracy in South Africa were tough on the press. Radical anti-apartheid publications were going bankrupt while mainstream publications were scrambling to hire more black journalists and editors. Many journalists with decades of experience, predominantly white males, either left journalism or left South Africa altogether (Harber 2004: 85). In trying to gain black readership, newspapers lost white readers. Total daily newspaper circulation declined by 11 percent in just a year and a half between June 1994 and December 1995 (Hadland 2007: 11). Though literacy rates had increased 20 percent between 1991 and 1995, there was no accompanying spike in newspaper sales (Berger 2003: 4). Media sectors that did expand in this period were those that appealed to the upper- and upper-middle classes, such as English-language magazines and online media offerings (15).

As newspapers struggled financially, newsroom staffs got younger and less well-trained. At INMSA, the major media conglomerate controlled by Tony O’Reilly, “The reduction of labour costs was done in two ways: by offering generous retrenchment packages to senior staffers and by replacing leaving seniors with juniors” (Hadland 2007: 158). A 2002 skills audit of news organizations by the South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF) quoted SANEF Chairperson Mathatha Tsedu as saying “One of the biggest problems facing the (media) industry is the
juniorisation of the journalistic skills base” (Steyn 2002: 1). The skills audit found that journalists
with less than five years’ experience made up half the workforce, and that they lacked skills in
reporting, interviewing, grammar and punctuation, and writing. A 2005 audit found that 53 percent
of reporters did not have a bachelor’s degree, and 39 percent of reporters communicated in a
language that was not native to them (Steyn 2005: 31).

Perhaps due to a lack of skills and experience among new journalists in this period, mistakes
were common in the press, and frustration abounded from the ANC, the media community, and the
public. Dave Mullany, editor of Scope Magazine, a publication once banned by the apartheid state,
called the cadre of young reporters “eager but hopelessly unskilled and shamefully untrained
juveniles” who “work for starvation wages and are treated like expendable cannon fodder by
uncaring media managers and moguls” (Marais 2015: 7).

In fact, it is true that the South African press is run by “media managers and moguls” —
South Africa has one of the most concentrated media environments in the world. Four media
groups dominate the South African newspaper industry. They are Media24, which publishes more
than 50 newspaper titles; Caxton, which publishes more than 80; and Independent News & Media
South Africa (INMSA), which publishes a third of South African newspapers and more than half of
those in English. The fourth group is Times Media Group, formerly Avusa, which along with INM
grew from a close relationship to the mining industry in South Africa, which gave the companies
much of their initial funding (Angelopulo and Potgieter 2016).

According to a study of media concentration worldwide by Eli Noam and the International
Media Concentration Collaboration, South Africa’s news media was the fourth-most concentrated of
30 major countries included in the study. That measurement was based on the attention the average
South African pays to various news production companies combined with South Africa’s Herfindahl index (HHI), a standardized measure of industry competition, with higher numbers meaning a less competitive industry. South Africa’s attention-weighted HHI was 4,137, compared to the world average of 3,006 and the U.S.’s 828. South Africa’s measurement was much lower, however, than the most-concentrated countries, China (9,181) and Egypt (7,310) (Noam 2016).

In the increasingly non-competitive environment surrounding South African consumers of news, members of the public have felt newspapers did not respond to their needs and were often inaccurate. A series of seminar discussions in 2005 organized by Idasa, the African Democracy Institute, to evaluate relations between the media and municipalities revealed that “Municipal roleplayers felt the media were preoccupied with negative reporting and often blamed the municipality for problems beyond its control” (“Municipal Journalism” 2005: 21). Furthermore, “citizens felt the local media were not providing them with enough relevant or useful information about municipal issues” (Davidson 2010: 40).

The disconnect between South African media and the South African people in the early days of democracy was further complicated by a significant lack of access to news in poor, rural areas. A 2002 report by the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa found that only 39 percent of South Africans had access to a newspaper and only 7 percent had access to the Internet. In rural areas, only 2 percent of people had access to the Internet (Human Sciences Research Council 2002).

Today, according to the South African Audience Research Foundation, only about 31 percent of South African adults read a daily newspaper (Lloyd 2013: 10). Overall circulation of daily newspapers in South Africa has declined by 5.5 percent annually since 2008 (Jordaan 2015: 23). Most newspapers cater to a relatively wealthy class of urban elites, with only three of the major
newspapers publishing in isiZulu, the most widely-spoken language in South Africa (Lloyd 10).

Newspaper distribution targets urban centers and neglects rural areas (Lloyd 2013, Wasserman and Garman 2012: 11, Gumede 2014). In a survey, Garman and Wasserman found that young people in rural areas have a clear “sense of being beyond the urban metropoles and therefore beyond the news and attention of journalists” (Garman and Wasserman 2014: 11). Access to the Internet has improved but as of 2015, only 53.5 percent of households had at least one member with some form of access to the Internet, while only 10 percent of households had Internet access in the home (“General Household Survey” 2016: 14–56).

The majority of South Africans do not have disposable income to spend on media subscriptions. According to the World Bank, as of 2010, 53.8 percent of South Africans were living below the national poverty line, which is R779 — about $100 — per month. A study funded by the Research Project on Employment, Income Distribution and Inclusive Growth found that 10 percent of South Africans own between 90 percent and 95 percent of all assets in the country, making South Africa one of the most unequal societies in the world (Orthofer 2016: 1). William Gumede, chair of South Africa’s Democracy Works, explains that it’s unsurprising for major news media to ignore the rural poor because despite the changing demographics of newsrooms, class is still crucially important in South Africa:

“The issues of the advantaged – whether black or white – still get the lion’s share of media coverage, while the poor in the townships and rural areas are out of sight… The pressure to remain profitable can result in increasingly urban, consumer-focused media, with a declining concern for the voiceless – who cannot pay.” (Gumede 2014: 8)

Declining circulation and revenues among South African newspapers have led PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), an international consulting firm located in London, to project that
declines in advertising and circulation revenues in the print sector will be “a drag on the market” for the media and entertainment industry in South Africa through 2020 (“Entertainment” 2016: 41). According to a 2016 PwC report, newspaper revenues have remained stagnant around $724 million USD annually since 2011, showing negative growth from 2013 to 2014 and from 2015 to 2016 and projected to continue declining until reaching $643 million USD in 2020 (40). Print advertising revenues, meanwhile, have declined steadily from about $518 million USD in 2013 to $480 million USD in 2016 (41).

Among the “big four” media companies, Media24 reported a loss of about $9,568,000 USD in 2015 but a profit of $8,282,000 USD in 2016 (‘Annual results’ 2016). Caxton reported a 13.3 percent decline in profits in 2017, from about $40,428,000 USD reported for the 2015-2016 fiscal year ending in March 2016 to about $35,049,000 USD for the 2016-2017 fiscal year ending in March 2017 (Cairns 2017). INMSA, now owned by Sekunjalo Investments, grew its share of the South African newspaper market by 3 percent for dailies and 1 percent for weeklies in 2016 but also laid off 72 of its 500 journalists in the same year (“Independent Media” 2016, Pressly 2016). Finally, according to the most recent available data, Times Media Group reported a profit of about $8,041,000 USD in the second half of 2014, down 79 percent from about $38,434,000 USD in 2013 (‘Unaudited’ 2015).

The concentration of news media access in urban centers is inextricably linked to the financial struggles of the media, particularly the print media. Ann Crotty, a financial journalist who worked for 18 years at an INMSA publication, said in 2013 that the company adopted a practice of “relentless cost-cutting” that made proper coverage of rural areas impossible and “has also sent our circulations spinning downwards as readers inevitably refuse to pay rising prices for newspapers
whose quality can no longer be guaranteed” (Crotty 2013). Crotty quit *Business Day* after 18 years because she felt INMSA journalists were being encouraged to write for the media group’s owners, not its readers. Crotty said in an interview, “When you have four major media players, you’re likely to find that they all report on similar issues in similar ways. Nuance is hard to find” (Tshabalala 2014).

Furthermore, despite South Africa’s Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBB-EE) program in place since 2003, research presented at the 2011 parliamentary hearings into the transformation of print media in South Africa found that only 14 percent of the press is black-owned (Lloyd 2013: 12, Da Silva 2011, Kholwane 2011, Malila 2014: 12), echoing complaints from journalists in the early ‘90s that white interests ruled the press. This was despite changing demographic figures, with 65 percent of print editors being black compared to 7 percent in 1994 (Lloyd 2013: 12). Following the 2011 hearings, major newspapers responded by forming a Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team (PDMTTT), which published a report in 2013 reiterating that the status of black management and control of the media was “dismal” and “the print and digital media ownership scenario of the major players has hardly been dented by transformation” (“Report” 2013: 17). However, the PDMTTT pointed out that there had been significant transformation among community and small commercial publishers (18).

Unfortunately, small community papers and newsletters, which could theoretically fill the news gap in rural areas, are dwarfed by INMSA and other members of the “big four,” which have exclusive contracts with major advertisers (De Waal 2013). A public hearing of the Transformation Task Team of Print and Digital Media SA in 2013 publicized the grievances of several small black publishers, who said the massive media groups established small publications to compete with
independent publishers and, by virtue of their size, could charge much less for advertising. The
editor of a Zulu-language paper owned by Media24, one of the “big four,” said the parent
company’s redirection of resources toward its failing English-language publications caused his
paper’s circulation to drop by 46 percent in 2012 (Mdluli 2013).

The close relationship between these four companies and their advertisers also has
implications for news content in major English-language publications, because the companies are
essentially beholden to the interests of their advertisers, who fund their products. In 2013, INMSA
fired the editor of the Cape Times newspaper, Alide Dasnois, after she published a story about the
illegal award of an $800 million tender by the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to the
company Sekunjalo Consortium. The public protector had written a report condemning the tender.
It turns out that Sekunjalo Consortium is the primary shareholder of INMSA. Eventually, INMSA
reached a settlement with Dasnois and issued her a public apology. Like any other corporation,
INMSA’s actions had been motivated primarily by profit — ethics came second.

Apart from its legal meddling in the South African press, the ANC has also played a role in
manipulating the press through advertising. When the Sunday Times in 2007 criticized the Minister of
Health’s supposed alcoholism, the ANC’s Minister of the Presidency, Essop Pahad, threatened to
retract its considerable advertising in the paper (Southall 2013: 205, Wasserman 2010: 576). Though
there was no formal boycott of the paper, the Sunday Times lost millions in revenue and had to lay off
journalists and other staff, and its advertising suffered until Pahad left his position (“African Media
Barometer” 2013: 44). Shortly thereafter, the Makana municipality in the Eastern Cape withdrew its
advertising from the Grocott’s Mail community paper when it published a critical article about missing
tax dollars in the municipality. Small community newspapers such as Grocott’s are more susceptible to
financial threats by the government because they depend heavily on state and municipal advertising to survive. In 2015, Helen Zille, a politician from the Democratic Alliance, South Africa’s second-largest political party, defended the Western Cape municipal government’s decision to end its subscription to the *Cape Times*, citing “the ongoing decline in the quality of reporting” (“African Media Barometer” 2013: 44). South African government officials’ use of advertising to manipulate the media might not be of such concern if newspapers were financially stable.

Not all media sectors in South Africa are in dire financial straits, however. Tabloid and radio journalism, which are both consumed at high rates in townships and rural areas, have been the two sectors to succeed consistently — even explosively — since 1994.

Between 2004 and 2014, community radio listenership doubled (Duncan 2014: 24). As early as 2002, radio was more accessible to South Africans than any other medium, reaching 86 percent of people compared to 61 percent for television news and 39 percent for newspapers (Human Sciences Research Council 2002). This is thanks to the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act of 1993, which aimed to promote diversity and shift media ownership to historically disadvantaged groups by licensing small community radio stations. According to John Matisonn, a founding member of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) established by the act, “Within a year, South Africa had one of the widest ranges of views on air of any country in the world — perhaps the widest” (Matisonn 320). In 2000, the IBA was replaced by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). By 2007, South Africa had 152 community radio stations licensed through the IBA and ICASA (Girard 2007: 15). As of 2013, the number had grown to more than 200 community radio stations and 20 commercial radio stations (Lloyd 2013: 13). Unlike cell phones and, to a lesser extent, televisions, radios are cheap, widely available and can connect to a signal
almost anywhere in South Africa. Furthermore, radio is accessible to people who are illiterate and cannot read a newspaper, and community radio stations are likely to broadcast in their local African languages for listeners who do not speak English. From April to December of 2016, 76 percent of South Africans tuned into the radio daily, while 93 percent tuned in at least once weekly (“BRC RAM” 2017).

Community radio stations can also get financial support from the Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA), created through an act of Parliament in 2002 specifically to support historically disadvantaged communities that are not adequately served by the mainstream media. The MDDA is funded partially by Parliament and partially by international donors, providing about 60 percent of its $760,000 annual funding to community radio stations (Girard 2007: 51).

Community radio is not a perfect solution to South Africa’s ailing media, though. Like the large media companies, Brett Davidson of ICASA writes, radio stations also compromise community involvement for financial survival and have poorly-trained staff. Because an even lower proportion of radio journalists are formally trained, the stations often copy the approach and format of their larger commercial counterparts (Davidson 2010: 38). Also, reporters for radio adopt the sensationalized, conflict-driven reporting tactics of print newspapers, sometimes alienating local governments and at the same time appealing only to municipal officials and police for quotes and information. One study found that most community radio stations “overly rely on stories generated by newspapers or what is termed ‘ripping-and-reading’” (Megwa 2007: 346). Like the major newspapers, which as demonstrated earlier often sacrifice quality content due to financial limitations, so does community radio.
Another sector of the South African media that has grown exponentially is the tabloid newspapers. The *Daily Sun*, a tabloid, is in fact the largest newspaper in South Africa, with a circulation of about 181,000 copies per day and a daily readership of about 4.7 million (“Daily Sun” 2016). In its first year of publication in 2002, the *Daily Sun* grew its circulation by 228 percent.

Between 2002 and 2007, while the *Sowetan* and the *Star’s* circulation remained stagnant between 100,000 and 200,000, the *Daily Sun’s* circulation spiked from about 60,000 in December 2002 to about 500,000 by June 2007 (Joubert 2009: 20). Its sales had such a negative impact on the *Sowetan*, a previously anti-apartheid newspaper, that the editor of the *Sowetan* stepped down. In the years following the *Daily Sun’s* appearance on the media scene, major newspapers and media figures widely acknowledged the market potential and unprecedented success of the tabloids; in 2005, the topic was hotly debated at an annual general meeting of SANEF (Harrison 2005, Berger 2005).

The tabloid phenomenon did not take off without controversy over the tabloids’ coverage of questionably accurate, sensational stories and the real motivation behind the sudden appearance of newspapers specifically targeting South Africa’s black lower classes. It is important to understand that unlike tabloids in the U.S., South African tabloids in addition to their sensational eye-grabbing headlines also address issues facing South Africans in poor township and rural areas, such as racism and police violence. However, critics have noted the tabloids’ exploitation of readers’ superstitions around witchcraft and their fascination with the scandalous, grisly and grotesque. Activist Dale McKinley complained that the tabloids draw attention away from news that is important to poorer readers: “They know that a headline ‘Man has sex with goat’ will sell. What won’t sell is a headline that actually says ‘5000 evictions took place in the last month in Mamelodi because people have lost their jobs’” (Wasserman 2010: 29).
South African journalists have also noted that tabloid newspapers are “owned by conglomerates that have identified the Black working class as a lucrative market segment” (Wasserman 2010: 29). In short, prior to 1994 the black working class in South Africa was not an accessible market, but buying power has increased substantially among the lower classes in South Africa since democratization. The *Daily Sun* is owned by Naspers, a massive, international, mostly white-owned South African media company that began as a mouthpiece of the apartheid regime. Considering the *Daily Sun’s* status as South Africa’s best-selling newspaper, clearly targeting this market has benefited Naspers and other major conglomerates. Therefore, some see the tabloids as just another way to exploit the black working class by participating in the “mystification” of poverty rather than investigating how the conditions of the working class are tied to larger social, political and policy phenomena. Many stories in the tabloid papers are written as features that highlight a particularly odd, surprising or scandalous instance rather than a wider theme.

However, Wasserman notes that this personalization creates an intimacy and interactivity between the tabloids and their communities that does not exist with “quality” newspapers. He writes, “Stories about crime, drugs, and social problems that beset their communities are covered in-depth, extensively, and from a personalized perspective rather than as merely social pathologies marked by race and class or as formal economic and political issues” (Wasserman 2010: 35). In fact, tabloids are so trusted by their surrounding communities in some areas that residents have called the paper’s editors before they called the police to report a crime. A 2009 study of the *Daily Sun’s* success found that it could be attributed to the paper’s conversational, not overly serious style; its accessibility to readers without a college education; its wide spectrum of news and features that appeal to everyone; its responsiveness and relevance to its audience and their everyday lives; and its
sense of social responsibility through initiatives such as “Mr. FixIt,” a free service that assists readers with home repairs (Joubert 2009: 178).

The drawback of the tabloids’ connection to their readers is that this does not translate to policy change or action in the same way that major newspapers can effect change; the tabloids are not taken as seriously. As Garman and Wasserman point out, the tabloids “provide an opportunity for the previously marginalised black working class to gain visibility in the media but these newspapers are not impacting policy debates or influencing mainstream media news agendas” (Wasserman and Garman 2012: 12). The same could be said for community radio stations, which do not generally garner national attention.

One crucial connection to be made between the success of community radio and the success of tabloids is that they are accessible — not only are they cheap, but they are driven by what their local listeners and readers want, not the interests of elites or owners. Members of the South African working class seem to appreciate news that speaks to them in their language and from their frame of reference, rather than in the voice and from the perspective of highly-educated, wealthy elites living in South Africa’s urban centers.

An important consideration in the accessibility of modern South African media is social media and “citizen journalism.” Twitter has played a pivotal role in the development and reporting of student protests at South African universities, for example. The problem with social media and online journalism in general in South Africa is that the vast majority of South Africans still do not have consistent access to the Internet (as mentioned previously, only about 53.5 percent of South African households had access to the Internet in 2015). Of those who do have some access, half access the Internet exclusively through their phones. At most, one in five South Africans uses social
media (Friedman 2013). Marenet Jordaan, an academic at Stellenbosch University who focuses on
digital journalism, writes of social media, “These media might be fast growing and increasingly 
reaching rural areas, but they cannot yet be seen as the media of the masses in this country” (Jordaan 
2015: 26).

The problem with social media not being accessible to the majority of South Africans is that 
youth are the biggest users of social media and see social media platforms as more relevant to them 
than newspapers. A study by Anthea Garman and Herman Wasserman, which conducted focus 
groups with ten groups of young people from both poor and rich areas of the Eastern Cape, found 
that young people see radio and newspapers as being for “the previous generation,” while social 
media and the Internet provided them “better relevant news” (Garman and Wasserman 2014: 12).
There is a generational gap in access to smartphone devices and social media — one survey of rural 
areas in the Eastern Cape found that cell phone access was “almost universal” among young people 
in those areas despite low rates nationwide (Dalvit 2014: 82).

Young people and older generations have one thing in common, though — they feel the 
major newspapers in South Africa don’t meet their needs. Among the young people they 
interviewed, Garman and Wasserman found a sense of “disengagement,” an overwhelming 
hopelessness that they had no way to enter or affect the political process in South Africa. In fact, in 
the respondents’ minds, the mainstream media is “much like the political process, a large and 
complex entity in which those with power pay very little attention to them” (Garman and 
Wasserman 2014: 14). Wasserman puts this unfortunate mirroring between the ANC government 
and the media succinctly in another publication, where he writes, “The media, their claims to 
independence notwithstanding, are seen to be aligned with government in privileging an elite
discourse associated with neoliberal economic policies,” and “centralized government with disregard for the poor” (Wasserman 2010: 584). Judging by the shift in reader- and listnership from major newspapers to tabloids and radio stations, this disengagement with both press and government is felt among multiple generations of South Africans.

One notable but isolated organization has attempted to bridge the divide between South Africa’s middle-class, urbanized elite and its rural poor in terms of news. GroundUp News, an online-only, independent news publication in Cape Town, was founded in 2012 and survives on private grant funding totaling $225,805 USD in 2015, $299,851 USD in 2016 and $84,400 USD so far in 2017. Its aim is to report on happenings primarily in the townships and rural areas of South Africa that mainstream publications don’t have the desire, resources or time to cover. Examples of stories GroundUp covers are poor conditions in rural schools, failures by municipalities to relocate people who are displaced for some reason or another, protests around issues like housing and education and struggles fought by individuals in difficult circumstances. GroundUp stories are frequently republished by larger publications with a wider circulation, such as the Daily Maverick in Cape Town.

Reporters who work for the publication are intentionally hired from the townships, even if they are not formally trained in journalism, since they are connected to and familiar with township communities and the issues they face.

In a case study on GroundUp as an example of where the alternative print media in South Africa are heading, Wallace Chuma writes:

“The GroundUp initiative should arguably be seen as an attempt to fill the gap left by both the tabloids and the mainstream press, namely sustained, in-depth reporting of issues that affect poor communities… The location of GroundUp outside of the state and outside corporate hierarchies is significant in that it allows the agency, in principle, to probe issues with relative autonomy.” (Chuma 2015)
The problem with a publication like *GroundUp* is that though it covers what goes on in the townships, many township residents do not have easy — or any — access to it since it is published exclusively online. Furthermore, all three editors on *GroundUp’s* staff, who determine which stories are worthy of publishing and often direct the topics that are covered, are white. Because *GroundUp* is the only news publication of its kind and has only been around for five years, its impact on the media landscape in general is difficult to measure.

On the whole, South Africa’s major print media players have failed to turn the tide of declining readership. Beholden to the demands of corporate owners, journalists are helpless to negate the effects of staff cuts and the reduction of distribution to urban areas. Perhaps one of the most telling takeaways from the current state of South African media is that the only publications succeeding are those that, unlike the mainstream press, have appealed to the country’s massive, neglected population of people who live near or at poverty levels, do not speak English as much as they do native African languages and live in communities that remain largely insular, ignored by the South African political machine. Naspers made a uniquely wise decision among media conglomerates when it invested in *The Daily Sun*; others planning to invest in the future of the South African press would be wise to follow suit.
CHAPTER V: Discussion and Conclusion

Since the historic election of 1994, South Africa has been embroiled in an identity crisis that seems unlikely to end anytime soon. The ANC is clearly insecure about its handling of the shaky transition to democracy, which has hit roadblocks like government corruption and overreach that hearken back to the apartheid era. The most vocal critics of those roadblocks, unsurprisingly, have been members of the press, creating a constant tug-of-war between journalists and the ANC that has ironically resulted in even more criticism by the press of the ANC’s attempts at censorship. This tension has been a consistent topic of national conversation and debate.

Meanwhile, most South Africans are left out of political posturing, intellectual debate and conversations about South Africa’s future altogether. These are the rural poor, of whom many don’t have — or want — access to South African news giants such as the Daily Maverick, the Mail & Guardian and others. While media experts discuss the digitization of news, most South Africans don’t have consistent access to the Internet even through a phone. Instead, these huge swaths of people are turning to local journalism, in the form of community radio and small independent tabloids, and larger publications that are more accessible to them in both tone and content, like The Daily Sun. Youth, meanwhile, gather the information they need from social media and the Internet, rather than paying for the newspapers to which their parents subscribe.

The national preoccupation with press censorship is of course important, but the debate over the role of the press in South Africa and what constitutes the right to freedom of the press continues to drag on with no concrete resolution, detracting attention from other challenges facing the media. ANC leadership continues to use the supposed failures of the press as a distraction from the party’s own inefficiencies, failures and corruption, in the name of the “national interest” and
democratic progress. The legal rights to information that journalists and the public have remain unclear due to conflicting legislation on the subject. While journalists and news organizations have been consumed with these issues, they, along with the ANC, have only become further alienated from the South African public. As a result, profits have plummeted, talented journalists have left the newsroom, and quality has suffered — so readership continues to deteriorate, and this downward cycle continues.

There are some shining examples of innovation and growth in the news media that deserve attention, specifically the radio and tabloid sector and truly independent, small publications like *GroundUp* and local township newspapers. However, these sectors are still lacking in proper journalistic training and resources due to the major conglomerates’ monopoly on advertising and general underinvestment in community journalism.

Initiatives like the MDDA, which is the sole supporter of many of these small, self-starting publications, are vital. The MDDA should be more well-funded, but the “big four” media companies should also realize the potential of publications that respond and cater directly to rural, lower-income readers.

For its part, the ANC should expand its definition of press freedom if it hopes to launch South Africa into the ranks of the most developed and progressive countries in the world. Considering how little the party has budged on the topic since 1994, though, South Africa’s only way forward for a thriving press and politically active public might just be a shift in political power.
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