

The Burden of Bearing Witness: South African Journalism, Corruption and the Case for a Protected Fourth Estate

Heather Robertson

Editor: *Daily Maverick* and *DM168*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v48i1.7475>

1. Introduction

In 1954, journalist Henry Nxumalo broke a shop window to get himself arrested so that he could report first-hand on prison abuse. Inside, he was kicked and thrashed every day and called a ‘kaffir’ (Nxumalo, 1954, as cited in Harber 2017).

Nxumalo was stabbed to death in 1957 on his way to meet a source as part of his investigation into an illegal abortion racket. His murderer was never found. South Africa’s pioneer of watchdog investigative journalism paid the ultimate sacrifice for exposing the corrupt and powerful.

Despite great personal damage to their lives, families, relationships and mental health, generations of South African journalists have followed in Nxumalo’s footsteps, unearthing human rights abuses, the theft of public resources, naming the people responsible and supplying the evidentiary foundations for commissions of inquiry, prosecutions and occasionally resignations and dismissals.

I have worked in several South African newsrooms since I started as a cub reporter at the anti-apartheid movement-funded *South* newspaper in the early nineties. I reported on horrors like the Boipatong massacre (17 June 1992) at *The Sunday Times* during the days of talks about talks that led to the short-lived euphoria of South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994, and again from 2000–2010, covering South Africa’s national descent into kleptocracy. I witnessed and led a team of journalists who were threatened with being chased into the sea for our coverage of the 2011 local government elections when I was editor of *The Herald* in Port Elizabeth. I now work at *Daily Maverick* as online Day editor and editor of the weekly newspaper *DM168*.

Over 30 years at the coalface of journalism has given me a sobering perspective on my profession’s role as the Fourth Estate. This essay examines the pivotal role of Henry Nxumalo’s successors in exposing corruption from the dying days of apartheid to over three decades of democracy, and the internal flaws and external threats that weaken the watchdog function. The central question it addresses is:

What does the media’s role in combating corruption mean for anti-corruption policies and strategies with respect to improved access, accountability and transparency of the state?

2. Investigative journalism as the first line of accountability

2.1. The 1970s: Muldergate scandal

One of the most far-reaching investigations of the apartheid era was the Muldergate scandal (broke out in 1977), which exposed a clandestine psychological warfare and propaganda operation orchestrated by South Africa’s Department of Information under Minister Connie Mulder and Secretary Eschel Rhodie, approved by Prime Minister BJ Vorster. Between ZAR64 million and ZAR72 million was laundered from the state’s defence budget to buy international influence, including a failed US\$11.3 million bid to purchase *The Washington Star*, and to secretly fund *The Citizen*, a state-controlled newspaper fronted by millionaire Louis Luyt to counter the anti-apartheid *Rand Daily Mail*.

It was the dogged investigation by *Rand Daily Mail* journalists Mervyn Rees, Kitt Katzen and Chris Day that exposed this secret propaganda machine. Adrian Hadland (2005) quoting then *Rand Daily Mail* editor Alistair Sparks recounts that, beyond toppling President BJ Vorster and his heir apparent, Connie Mulder, the scandal ‘shattered the image of leadership in the eyes of the traditionally patriarchal Nationalist folk’ with ‘new tensions and cracks appearing’ as ‘a new leadership... [moved] in a more reformist direction’ (Sparks, cited in Hadland 2005, 133). As Sparks put it: ‘Surely, in a country where the press and the judiciary can still beat the odds to expose a massive government scandal and bring down the most powerful political figures, there must still be hope for the forces of peaceful change’ (Sparks, as cited in Hadland 2005, 133). It was also a foundational demonstration that transparency forced by journalism when the state refused to provide it, is itself an anti-corruption instrument.



2.2. *The 1980s: Death squads and dirty tricks*

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, as the apartheid state resorted to violent repression that no propaganda could perfume, the Afrikaans-language *Vrye Weekblad* and the *Weekly Mail* published investigations that remain landmarks of South African public interest journalism. In 1989, *Weekly Mail* journalist Ivor Powell's interview with death-row prisoner Almond Nofomela and Max du Preez and Jacques Pauw's *Vrye Weekblad* exposé of Dirk Coetzee and the Vlakplaas hit squads, gave the country its first documented account of state-sanctioned assassination. These exposés triggered the Harms Commission (1990), and broader revelations before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998) proving that accountability journalism does not merely report on consequences, it creates them.

2.3. *2003: The arms deal and the Hefer Commission*

It was columnist and former *City Press* editor Mondli Makhanya who said the arms deal was the moment our young democracy lost its innocence (Makhanya 2020). Among the first of many arms deal investigations was *The Sunday Times*' exposure by journalists Jessica Bezuidenhout, Mzilikazi wa Afrika, and André Jurgens of the African National Congress (ANC) MP Tony Yengeni's failure to declare a 47 per cent discount on a luxury Mercedes-Benz, from the director of an arms manufacturer while he was chairman of parliament's joint standing committee on defence that led to his conviction and sentencing for fraud in 2003 and a four-month imprisonment in 2006. The support of Yengeni by senior ANC leaders as he entered the prison gates and the celebration of Yengeni's release from prison with an ox slaughter in a Western Cape township previewed the cultural acceptance of corruption in the governing party that was coming.

That loss of innocence was cemented by the Hefer Commission, appointed by President Thabo Mbeki to investigate allegations published in the *City Press* by my then-*Sunday Times* colleague Ranjeni Munusamy, that National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) head Bulelani Ngcuka who was investigating then deputy president Jacob Zuma for arms deal corruption had been an apartheid spy, called Agent RS452.

I was at the *Sunday Times* editorial meeting in September 2003 where editor Mathatha Tsedu heard arguments for and against publishing the story. Tsedu agreed with most of us that it lacked credible evidence and decided not to publish. Munusamy proceeded to take it to *City Press* editor Vusi Mona, who published it.

Journalism scholar Guy Berger's analysis of the incident is unsparing towards the perceived hypocrisy of the journalism profession in terms of political partisanship and uneven treatment of those who break the journalistic code of ethics.

While Mona received wholesale opprobrium from the journalistic fraternity and never returned to the industry, Munusamy, after being suspended from the *The Sunday Times*, was soon rehired by *Business Day*, *This Day* and several other publications, including the *Daily Maverick*, and again, at *The Sunday Times*, at a later stage. Despite her insistence on her non-partisanship, Munusamy also became a spokesperson for the pro-Zuma camp (Berger 2008). While Berger reflected that Munusamy justified her pushing for publication of the unproved allegations against Ngcuka by arguing that it was ethically questionable that *The Sunday Times* had pursued the allegations against Zuma, and not to run those against Ngcuka, Berger interrogates this, stating:

Where questions could be asked, however, was in regard to her extraordinary pushing for publication (and more, of a story whose key claim lacked clear proof), whether she had taken any precautions against being used, and whether her story was in the public interest and not only in the interests of the Zuma camp (Berger 2008, 5).

The allegation that Ngcuka was a spy was rejected by Judge Hefer and proved untrue when Venessa Brereton, a human rights lawyer from Port Elizabeth, confessed that she was Agent RS452. Nonetheless, Ngcuka's career ended, and the Scorpions anti-corruption unit was disbanded in 2009 after Zuma won the ANC presidency at Polokwane. Ultimately, whether unwitting or not, whatever the motive, be it personal or political, the Hefer Commission showed that when journalism is captured by political factions it does not hold power to account. Rather, it serves it.

2.4. *2012: The Marikana Massacre*

On 16 August 2012, South African Police Service officers opened fire on striking platinum miners at Lonmin's mine near Rustenburg, killing 34 people. Most mainstream press repeated the police spokesman's self-defence narrative without speaking to the miners. It took photographer Greg Marinovich and Professor Kate Alexander to return to the killing field and document what really happened at Small *Koppie*, where seventeen miners were shot at close range (Marinovich 2012). Their findings were confirmed by the Farlam Commission. To

date, no police officer has been successfully prosecuted. The toll on Marinovich and Alexander was severe. Alexander's offices were broken into, electric fences were cut, laptops were stolen and Dropbox data was stolen (Davis 2022). Marinovich moved his family to the United States after being awarded a Harvard fellowship in 2013 (Davis 2022). This is the price paid by those who tell the truth about what the state does when no one is watching.

2.5. 2017: *The Gupta Leaks*

The Gupta Leaks, comprising more than 200 000 emails, published from June 2017 by *amaBhungane*, *Daily Maverick* and *News24*, documented in granular detail how the Gupta family and their political allies systematically looted Eskom, Transnet and the Passenger Rail Agency (amaBhungane 2017). At *Daily Maverick*, Susan Comrie and Pauli van Wyk's six-part McKinsey Dossier established the specific mechanism by which McKinsey and Gupta-linked Trillian had stripped ZAR1.6 billion from Eskom (Comrie and Van Wyk 2017). The Zondo Commission's 6 000 pages of findings were substantially built on this evidentiary record. McKinsey repaid ZAR870 million to Transnet. The two whistleblowers who first leaked the emails, dubbed John and Stan, to protect their identities, fled South Africa and remain in exile. As Van Wyk put it: 'An extraordinary return on investment to our investigative journalism donors' (Van Wyk, as cited in 2021). When investigative journalism that follows the money trail of the corrupt is followed up by law enforcement, it benefits the fiscus by MDIF returning plundered public funds and serves every tax-paying citizen.

2.6. 2020–2026: *An unhealthy state*

Today, accountability remains partial. No major Gupta convictions, no extradition, no prosecution for the Marikana massacre. The twenty-first-century version of apartheid's hit squads turns its weapons, guns, social media chatbots, paid influencers on those who raise the red flags of corruption. Jeff Wicks' reporting on the assassination of Babita Deokaran, shot twelve times outside her home on 23 August 2021, showed the lethal stakes of exposing Covid-19 personal protection equipment (PPE) procurement fraud at Tembisa Hospital worth approximately ZAR850 million (Wicks 2026).

Investigative reporting by Mark Heywood and *Maverick Citizen* showed that Covid-19 corruption extended beyond PPE contracts to inflated school sanitisation spending, irregular procurement and the costly, delayed Gauteng field-hospital programme, evidence of how emergency measures created new channels for waste and patronage (Heywood 2020).

The Special Investigating Unit's (SIU) later recovery efforts showed that some of this reporting did translate into consequences. After a 2022 special tribunal judgment set aside ZAR431 million in Gauteng Department of Education school-sanitation contracts, service providers and individuals linked to Chachulani Group Investment Holdings agreed to repay ZAR25 million of the ZAR40 million they had received (SIU 2026).

3. Threats to the watchdog

3.1. *Watching the watchdogs: Internal failures*

Journalism's watchdog role is severely undermined when the profession succumbs to ethical lapses, personal biases and institutional capture. The South African Revenue Services (SARS) Rogue Unit affair is the starkest example. Between 2014 and 2016, the *Sunday Times* published false allegations that SARS operated an illegal intelligence unit spying on politicians, relying on politically compromised sources (Cowan 2020). Senior officials Ivan Pillay and Johann van Loggerenberg were suspended; the institution's capacity to pursue Zuma-aligned figures was dismantled. The Press Ombudsman found the reporting 'inaccurate, misleading, and unfair' and ordered a full retraction and apology (Press Council of South Africa 2015). SARS publicly apologised to those it had wronged (SARS 2022). Investigative journalist Pearlle Joubert resigned from *The Sunday Times* in 2015, saying she was 'not willing to be party to practices...which I verily believed to have been unethical and immoral' (Joubert, as cited in *The Media Online* 2015).

In February 2021, *Daily Maverick* published a column by Jacques Pauw, co-founder of the *Vrye Weekblad*, exposé of apartheid's death squads, describing his wrongful arrest at a Cape Town restaurant. CCTV footage at the V&A Waterfront contradicted his account. *Daily Maverick* associate editor Richard Poplak's forensic correction, published under the instruction to 'first, correct; then retract; then apologise; then tell the truth', established that the restaurant had not called the police (Poplak 2021). Pauw attributed his mis-recollection to intoxication. *Daily Maverick* retracted. As the late radio host and commentator Eusebius McKaiser observed: 'If Jacques wasn't white

and male, responses to his drunken lies would very likely NOT treat this as a morally or ethically “complex” situation’ (McKaiser 2021, cited in Feketah 2021, original emphasis). *Daily Maverick*’s willingness to correct the record publicly was the right response. Applying the same standard regardless of a journalist’s celebrity or race is the permanent obligation.

Finally, the watchdog function is brought into disrepute when oversight bodies are perceived to protect their own. The South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF), the body who represents editors and upholds editorial standards was accused of avoiding launching an inquiry into former *Sunday World* and *Sunday Times* editor Makhudo Sefara after former *GroundUp*’s editor Nathan Geffen and veteran journalist Anton Harber had raised concerns about *Sunday World* receiving funds from the National Lotteries Commission (NLC) for advertising.

Sefara was appointed editor of the *Sunday Times* by Arena in 2024, and elected SANEF chair in February 2025. In April 2026, Sefara stepped aside as chair after being named in a SIU statement linking him to a 2018 lottery grant of ZAR1.5 million paid by the NLC to Todi Media, of which ZAR550 000 was passed to Unscripted Communications, a company solely owned by Sefara, for organising a one-day media training workshop attended by fewer than 50 people. Sefara was placed on special leave from *The Sunday Times* by Arena around the same time (Geffen 2026).

An independent inquiry commissioned by SANEF, conducted by advocate Ofentse Motlhasedi dated 30 June 2026, cleared Sefara of breaching SANEF’s code of conduct, however, Motlhasedi found that neither SANEF’s constitution nor its code of conduct expressly obliged members to disclose outside financial interests, and recommended that future nominees for senior SANEF positions be required to do so (Geffen 2026).

Although the legal maxim “innocent until proven guilty” must be respected, a press freedom body cannot credibly demand accountability from the state while appearing unable, or unwilling, to hold its own to account.

That tension was sharpened rather than resolved by the SIU’s public rebuttal, which accused SANEF of misrepresenting its position: SANEF’s statement, the SIU said, ‘gives the impression that the SIU has exonerated Sefara as a beneficiary of NLC funds. This is not a reflection of the letter sent to his lawyers’ (Geffen 2026). The SIU noted that while Sefara’s company Unscripted Communications was never itself a subject of its investigation, the grant money had nonetheless been traced into Sefara’s business and personal bank accounts.

At its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 4 July 2026, SANEF sought to clarify that its earlier statement had referred only to the outcome of its own internal inquiry, and had not claimed that the SIU had cleared Sefara. The same AGM statement conceded a more troubling finding: SANEF’s own inquiry had established that Sefara was in fact made aware, a few days before the training, that the funding came from the NLC and that he had ‘repeatedly told the organisation that he was not aware’ of this. The AGM described the matter as ‘deeply regrettable’ (SANEF 2026). In response, the newly elected leadership resolved to strengthen SANEF’s ethical codes by reviewing its disclosure policy, requiring all members of council and management committee to declare business interests and financial activities upfront and on an ongoing basis (SANEF 2026).

3.2. *Misogyny: The coordinated silencing of women journalists*

One of the fiercest threats to accountability journalism is the sexualised, coordinated abuse of women journalists, designed not to persuade, but to intimidate, discredit and drive them out of public life. According to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation study cited by United Nations (UN) Women, 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence, and one in four has received threats of physical harm (UN Women 2025). Kgomo Modise of *Eyewitness News* described how, after criticising extrajudicial killings during the Senzo Meyiwa trial, a troll pulled childhood photographs from her Facebook account and coupled them with threats of sexual violence against her and her underage niece (Modise cited in UN Women 2025). The documented result is self-censorship. Women journalists retreat from public commentary and withdraw from the public space their work requires (UN Women 2025). As William Bird of *Media Monitoring Africa* argues, these attacks are not random cruelty, but a disinformation strategy designed to silence reporting that powerful people want silenced (Bird 2022).

Jacob Zuma’s legal team launched a private prosecution against *News24* legal journalist Karyn Maughan in September 2022 following her reporting on Zuma’s medical condition, one of at least twelve legal actions Zuma had launched against journalists (Media Defence 2023; Singh 2023). On 7 June 2023, the Pietermaritzburg High Court unanimously ruled the prosecution an abuse of process, holding that media freedom exists for the public’s benefit (CPJ 2023). That ruling should not have been necessary. The fact that it was is a measure of how far powerful men will go to stop a woman journalist from doing her job.

3.3. *The platform oligopoly and the hollowing out of the industry*

The threats to journalism as a watchdog are not just political, they are also deeply structural as the business models that support journalism are consistently disrupted by global Big Tech companies like Meta, Google, TikTok and X, OpenAI and other artificial intelligence (AI) platforms which have harvested South African and global news media content and advertising revenue while rewarding outrage, hate and tribalism over sober accountability (Roper 2025). The impact of this advertising revenue loss and digitisation has led to a journalism jobs bloodbath (Daniels 2020). In 2024, *Media24* closed *City Press* and other titles; *Daily Maverick* made its first-ever staff cuts and the South African public broadcaster projected a ZAR590 million loss.

South Africa's interest in local news, on the other hand, stands at 60 per cent, the highest of any country surveyed in the Reuters Annual Digital Journalism report (Roper 2025). The demand is there, however, the business model to supply it has been systematically destroyed. The biggest tragedy is that the municipal beat where most everyday corruption operates is now almost entirely unwatched.

The damage caused by social media and AI tech platforms is, however, not just economic. With no need to abide by ethical codes of conduct that the South African news media abides by through membership of the Press Council and Broadcast Complaints Commission of SA, the platforms monetise misinformation, polarising emotion and unverified AI slop that has dangerous real-life repercussions.

The July 2021 unrest, for example, which killed more than 350 people and caused an estimated ZAR50 billion in damage, was substantially fuelled by coordinated WhatsApp and Twitter campaigns by politically connected actors who understood the power of algorithmic amplification (Moyo 2024).

4. What this means for anti-corruption policy

The evidence above is not merely a history of journalism. It is an argument for structural reform. The media can only fulfil its role of improving state access, accountability and transparency if three categories of policy change are enacted and enforced.

First, as Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa (PPLAAF) (2026) recommends, access to information must become enforceable, not aspirational. South Africa's Promotion of Access to Information Act (RSA 2000) has been consistently undermined by non-compliance and slow enforcement. Freedom of information frameworks must be extended to cover state-owned enterprises, entities receiving public funds and procurement processes precisely where the Gupta Leaks, and the NLC Lotto scandal unfolded. States must mandate the proactive publication of asset disclosures, public budgets, procurement procedures, beneficial ownership registers and lobbying records in accessible digital formats. Without genuine access rights, investigative journalism is forced to rely on whistleblowers who face lethal consequences, as Babita Deokaran and the Gupta Leaks sources, John and Stan, demonstrate.

Second, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) urges that whistleblowers and journalists must be legally and physically protected, not merely rhetorically. The (RSA 2000a) has repeatedly failed those it was designed to protect. A revised framework must include judicial oversight of whistleblower identities, criminalisation of source exposure and mandatory physical security assessments for journalists under threat. Strategic Law against Public Participation (SLAPP) suits, of the kind Jacob Zuma deployed against Karyn Maughan across twelve separate actions, must be specifically legislated against (Media Defence 2023). Crimes against journalists and whistleblowers must not go unpunished. No police officer has been prosecuted for the Marikana massacre, and Babita Deokaran was murdered because the state failed to protect a witness whose testimony it needed. These are not separate problems; they are the same problem, wearing different clothes.

Third, the platform oligopoly must be treated as a democratic emergency, not a market inconvenience. The Competition Commission's two-year investigation into how search engines, social media platforms and AI firms affect the sustainability of South Africa's news media, that is, the Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (Competition Commission South Africa 2025; Markovitz 2025a) culminated in a final settlement that still leaves journalism financially vulnerable.

As Markovitz (2025b) observes, it means 'South Africa will therefore have multiple, purpose-specific media and journalism funds rather than a unified national mechanism'. Any platform may vary or discontinue a remedy on just twenty days' written notice (Markovitz 2025b), meaning even the ZAR688 million Google settlement remains contingent on continued corporate goodwill rather than legal obligation. What must be supported is SANEF's proposed Journalism Fund SA, envisaged on a multi-stakeholder governance model (Markovitz 2025b). Markovitz notes that the Commission stops short of directing any platform funding to support the Press Council or the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa, leaving these self-regulatory bodies financially unsupported despite the settlement's reliance on them for its own legitimacy (Markovitz 2025a, 2025b).

The Forum on Information and Democracy's Working Group on the Sustainability of Journalism (Padania et al. 2021) notes that if governments committed just 0.1 per cent of GDP to journalism sustainability, the resulting global total would run into the tens of billions of US dollars annually. Read against South Africa's Commission settlement, in which even the ZAR688 million Google package remains a voluntary, revocable arrangement, this suggests the missing piece is not capacity, but a legislative mandate.

There are also other initiatives that could make a difference. The government could save journalism jobs by incentivising ethical journalism that acts as a watchdog against corruption on behalf of citizens by creating tax exemptions for media houses that are bona fide members of the South African Press Council, just as it does for churches, which are not disrupted by the tech oligopolies and make huge tax-exempt profits.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation needs to be run as a public broadcaster in the public interest. Its financial stabilisation and insulation from political control is urgent, as it is the primary source of news for tens of millions of South Africans who cannot access online journalism.

Finally, the algorithmic amplification of disinformation that fuelled the July 2021 unrest and ongoing xenophobic mobilisation today, must be addressed through content moderation regulation with enforceable standards and genuine consequences for platforms that choose violent hate-bait over truth.

5. Conclusion

Henry Nxumalo broke a shop window in 1954 to get the story. He was kicked and thrashed for it, published what he found and was murdered three years later on his way to meet another source. Seventy years on, Babita Deokaran was shot twelve times outside her home, because she had offered to testify about Covid PPE fraud. The Gupta Leaks sources, John and Stan, are living in exile because they gave journalism the evidence it needed to hold state capture to account. A *Daily Maverick* colleague, Rebecca Davis, spent eight months documenting Social Development Minister Sisisi Tolashe's corruption (Davis 2025; April–May 2026). Davis filed eight stories and watched the Minister get fired by the President on 13 May this year.

In each case, the act was the same: submitting the evidence, following it wherever it goes and bearing the consequences.

These stories answer the central question this essay has addressed. The media's role in combating corruption is not supplementary to anti-corruption policy, it is one of its essential preconditions. The Muldergate scandal that shifted the apartheid state toward reform was driven by journalism, not by parliamentary oversight. The Zondo Commission that documented the full scale of state capture was built on an evidentiary record assembled by journalists, not by prosecutors. The ministers, officials and corporations that repaid public funds did so because journalism made the alternative, continued concealment, impossible. Transparency enforced by journalism is the mechanism through which accountability becomes real.

Improved access, accountability and transparency of the state require more than policy documents. They require enforceable access-to-information laws, physical and legal protections for those who use them, a funded and independent press free from both political control and platform capture and a journalism profession rigorous enough to hold itself to the same standard it demands of everyone else.

Henry Nxumalo broke a shop window to get the story. We, his successors, are still breaking windows. We are not done yet.

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