

Go ahead: pass the Protection of Information Bill

 By Daryl Ilbury

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Much has been said in the media about the proposed ravages of the Protection of Information Bill; enough, I think I can safely say, to spread fear among those who truly cherish freedom of expression.

In fact, so immense has been the upheaval of opposition - to the point that it is becoming quite repetitive - that I've yet to hear a voice from the media supporting it. So let me be the maverick, and suggest why enacting the Protection of Information Bill might actually be a good thing for the freedom of the press.



Great clarity of thought

Age has been a fickle mistress with my memory, but she has allowed me to remember with distinct clarity the time I flirted with lecturing journalism, and, specifically, a moment when I lost complete hope but was awarded great clarity of thought.

It was about three weeks into my first semester with first year students when I sensed a worrying disconnect in the class, a failure to embrace the central psychological precepts of journalism.

I had given them an assignment to identify a particular piece of journalism that resonated with them, and then to bring it to class and explain why. I was then going to open it up to the rest of the class and encourage debate around the merits of each story or article.

Only a handful of the class embraced the task; the others seemed disinterested. The reason, I discovered after requesting a display of hands, was that only those who had completed the task were actually interested in becoming journalists; the rest thought the course would be an appropriate stepping stone into securing a position as an SABC TV presenter. I walked out of the class and off the course.

Both remote and meritorious

This story highlights why journalists have earned a position in our society that is both remote and meritorious. Like certain breeds of dogs, journalists are genetically predisposed to dig. It is ingrained into their very organic fibre; and is why they will never stop.

Come what may, they will dig, and in doing so they will get to the bottom of a story. In the process they will disrupt the seemingly carefully structured landscape on the surface. Exerting any brutal discipline on them is fruitless. A rolled up newspaper doesn't scare journalists; it inspires them.



But they don't dig in an ill-disciplined way. They are governed by an almost inveterate respect for globally ascribed and regulated moral guidelines that channel and direct their responsibility. Should a journalist break these guidelines they are excommunicated from the corps, and dispatched to that murky quadrant of degenerative reporting - writing press releases for the Government.

Hands already tied

Essentially, and this is critical for the proponents and supporters of the Protection of Information Bill to understand, the hands of journalists in this country are already tied. Like a scientific theory, before any journalist's story appears in the press, it has to be scrutinised, validated and challenged by legions of their peers. Journalists don't write what they want to;

they write what they're allowed to.

Now imagine what would happen if this legion of diggers was forced underground; because that is exactly what will happen if the Protection of Information Bill is passed into law: we'd have, ironically, a completely unfettered horde of newshounds, frothing at the jaws, let loose to dig where they please without fear of constraint or retribution.

And how would this be possible? Through the vast, enterprising and unconstrained network of new media.

I learned of the arrest of Mzikazi wa Afrika and then trailed the bizarre chain of events that followed via Twitter and links to independent websites and blogs, mostly unattached to any formal media titles. Many of these were based overseas and therefore beyond the control of the South African government. They were manned by seasoned journalists, all driven by the insatiable need to dig and uncover the truth.

Truth came mobile

I didn't need to go and pick up a single newspaper; the truth came to my mobile phone.

Now imagine that stream of uninhibited and unrestrained information making its way to millions of mobile phone users in South Africa.

Should Parliament enact the Protection of Information Bill, and a media tribunal threaten to exert control over the press, it will, ironically, free up journalists. They will go underground, as it were, and, armed with passion, deliberation and a noble pursuit of the truth, write exactly what they want. They will, in effect, become the Rebel Alliance against the ANC's tyrannical Galactic Empire.

So, ANC, go ahead and make our day. Push through the Protection of Information Bill, and, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Marcus Antonius, we shall cry "havoc" and let slip the dogs of war.

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