

Media freedom: on the slippery slope to repression



On June 16, Youth Day, while commemorating the Soweto uprising against oppression in the 1970s, South Africans were facing a new challenge to their hard-earned constitutional democracy. The controversial and hotly debated Protection of Information Bill,¹ better known as the “Secrecy Bill”, is threatening to relegate

South Africa to the shady league of nations with severe restrictions on the media.

The Bill gives any “organ of state”, and, in effect, any public servant through delegation, the power to decide what information must be kept secret. Severe penalties await those who disclose such information. It is widely seen as the ruling party’s attempt to cover up the seemingly endless corruption by public officials (mostly its cadre-deployed appointees).

Opposition to the Bill is wide and strong, including obviously representatives from the media, but also businessmen like Gareth Ackerman (Pick ‘n Pay), and even ANC stalwarts such as Ronnie Kasrills and, more recently, Kader Asmal. Asmal stated that the Constitution, in Section 19, embraced the freedom of the press, and intimated that the Bill would ultimately be found unconstitutional. He urged Government to withdraw the Bill in its entirety.² There is even a campaign against the Bill, the Right2Know initiative,³ openly supported by eminent South Africans such as Desmond Tutu. Mamphele Ramphele, speaking at the August 2010 launch of the Open Society Foundation’s Open Society Monitoring Index, which assesses the degree of openness in South Africa, said: “Citizens could be deprived of information and, ultimately, freedom of expression would be inhibited, if not choked altogether, for fear of the punitive measures the Bill contains.”

One of my lecturers at medical school told me that the best way to promote your private practice is through word-of-mouth advertising. In those days, it meant that patients would say good things about their doctor in the local pub or hairdressing salon. Now, it could involve tweeting on Twitter, or typing messages on the walls of your friends on Facebook. Hundreds of millions of people are networking instantly across the globe through these social media. There is also WikiLeaks, a not-for-profit website service with the goal to bringing “important news and information to the public”.⁴ WikiLeaks allows the public to leak information to its journalists anonymously, through an “electronic dropbox”.

It is ironic that this intended clampdown on press freedom by the Bill comes at a time when the Internet and social media are

enabling such unprecedented openness, to the point where governments were toppled in the Middle East, in countries where there are restrictions on press freedom.

Is it possible, at all, to suppress information in this modern era of fast and open electronic communication? I believe not. The politicians planning this Bill will eventually end up with more problems and embarrassment than they even imagined, through bad publicity. During the Apartheid era, newspapers printed blank blocks with the words “banned” in the place of articles censored by the government. In the modern era, they will simply print a link to WikiLeaks or a similar service, as actually happened when the Icelandic government prevented a TV station from airing a report about bank loans in the wake of the collapse of the economy there in 2008.

Perhaps Mae West hit the nail on the head when she said: “I believe in censorship. I made a fortune out of it.”

Corrupt officials will not like the media when their greed and misuse of the taxpayer’s money are exposed. Politicians will not like the media reports of their abuse of power and distasteful private affairs are made public. Inept police generals will not like the media when their failure to curb the massacre of famers in South Africa is made known. Rather than attempting to restrict the media, our constitutional right to know and to be informed should be defended. As Voltaire so eloquently stated in a letter to a correspondent in 1770: “I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write.”

Having read the account of Google’s experience with censorship in China,⁵ brought about by the Chinese government’s dirty tricks campaign, I am convinced that all South Africans must now stand together with the likes of Desmond Tutu, Kader Asmal, Mamphele Ramphele and Gareth Ackerman and say NO to the Protection of Information Bill. I wish to add my voice in opposition to this Bill and to the way Parliament is being steamrollered to make it law.

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