

# For media magnates too much democracy is not a good thing

By [Bryan Rostron](#)

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It is an odd fact that standards that are vital to hiring a reporter do not apply to those who actually buy newspaper or TV companies. Yet most media barons, notably Rupert Murdoch, have used newspapers for political propaganda or to pursue vendettas. One press magnate I worked for was a colossal crook. My grandfather had worked for another who was clinically insane.



(Image extracted from the [Sanef website](#))

Some press tycoons begin with virtuous intentions. Most, though, are soon seduced by the temptation to plant stories favourable to their business interests or kill articles detrimental to their political influence. South Africa is no different. Once it was the Randlords who owned leading newspapers. Why? They had the power and the money.

But is this a good enough yardstick in the 21st century?

Times have changed. The means of news production has been revolutionised and, crucially in South Africa, a democracy established - yet the basic qualification for press ownership remains the same: power and money. This has been brought into sharp focus by the contentious firing of the highly respected editor of the Cape Times, Alide Dasnois, by the chair of Sekunjalo Investment Holdings, the company that recently obtained a controlling share of Independent Newspapers.

When questioned about how he has begun to wield his power, the Sekunjalo executive chair responded with allegations of conspiracy. Iqbal Survé even claimed he had it on "high authority" the Mail & Guardian might be financed by the US Central Intelligence Agency. A junior reporter would not get away with that kind of unsubstantiated smear. However, as elsewhere in the world, there is a different standard of veracity for newspaper owners.

## Which version of events does one believe?

As is well known, Survé removed the editor of the Cape Times the very morning that she had prominently published the public protector's damning report about the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries awarding an R800m tender to Sekunjalo. Survé was furious. However, he has since provided opposing explanations for this firing.

At short notice, over its front page of the public protector's report, the Cape Times had placed an acclaimed "wraparound" commemorating Nelson Mandela's death. Survé, however, said this was "an affront to the dignity of Madiba and a disservice to our readers". Differently, and more insistently, he also claimed the sudden axing was a purely commercial decision - though a new editor had to "abscond" from another company in order to be parachuted into the Cape Times.

In journalism, if not in Survé's other businesses, timing is everything. It is also crucial to credibility. If you fire someone within hours of their having mightily displeased you, people will draw conclusions. Many readers of the Cape Times have drawn precisely that inference. Survé, however, calls such conclusions "a concerted public campaign of lies and distortion".

So before I am also denounced as being part of this huge, amorphous conspiracy I should point out that I have argued all these points about media ownership before, highlighting the unfitness of so many British and US press tycoons, particularly the most powerful of all, Murdoch. Last year, in the Cape Times, I pointed out that recent UK press barons have included: the late Robert Maxwell (Daily Mirror, a fraudster and thief), Conrad Black (Daily Telegraph, a convicted felon) and Richard Desmond (The Express, who made his fortune from pornography). Murdoch is, of course, the undisputed cockerel of this unsavoury roost.

## **Dispute**

Closer to home, the recent history of the Independent group is not wonderful. It was bought by Tony O'Reilly, a friend of Mandela. For years, O'Reilly, then his son, sucked profits out of their South African papers to bolster losses back home. When Gavin O'Reilly left Independent News & Media, there was a rancorous dispute with fellow shareholder Denis O'Brien, an Irish telecoms billionaire. In the article in the Cape Times (3 May 2012), I pointed out that an Irish government tribunal concluded in 1996 that O'Brien, a tax exile, had paid large sums to the then Irish communications minister to influence bidding for a cellphone licence.

So this not about political affiliation or pigment. It about the principle of media ownership.

My grandfather, Lewis Rose Macleod, was the second editor of the Sunday Times (1907-1910) and later editor of the Rand Daily Mail (1924-1941). Both papers were potent voices for big business. Recently, I found a yellowing contract from 1910 for Macleod to start a new newspaper, the sole stipulation for which was "to generally support" the policies of Dr Jameson (of the famous raid). Between 1916 and 1924 at the Daily Mail, my grandfather worked with Lord Northcliffe, the greatest and certainly maddest of all British press barons (he also owned The Times). Northcliffe used his power to both promote and bring down politicians. For a perceived slight, he used his newspapers to persecute ordinary individuals until they were bankrupt. In his last years, Northcliffe was paranoid. My grandfather once spent a day riding round London in a taxi trying to calm His Lordship down.

## **Mad as a hatter**

My father, Frank Rostron, worked on The Star before becoming a sports writer for the Daily Express. In 1949, its proprietor, Lord Beaverbrook, shocked a British royal commission with his candour, declaring: "I run the Daily Express purely for the purpose of making propaganda." The notoriously malevolent Beaverbrook also used the then huge circulation of the Express to promote his bizarre whims: that men, for example, must wear only bowler hats.

I once worked at the Daily Mirror for Maxwell. When he began promoting himself in the paper, circulation dived. But after he plunged from his luxury yacht (probably suicide, as his swindles were about to be exposed), there was a brief, glorious interlude when we had no owner. The editor challenged us: "Let's show that the lunatics can run the asylum!" For a short while, the circulation soared and the Mirror again became the biggest-selling tabloid.

This freedom was soon curbed. The banks that had foolishly lent Maxwell money put in a squad of former Murdoch apparatchiks. To placate public opinion, the new bosses made promises about editorial independence, all of which were broken in less than a month. Dozens of staff were sacked, including the team that answered readers' letters. Sub-editors were instructed to "make up" letters for publication. Circulation plummeted. More than 100,000 readers were lost in three months. The new directors awarded themselves huge share options.

## **Sacked - for telling the truth**

At the Mirror, I worked on a weekly investigative column with the late Paul Foot (in 2000, in addition to his many other awards, voted Journalist of the Decade). Paul decided he could not expose malpractice elsewhere and ignore skulduggery before his own eyes. We wrote a column exposing in irrefutable detail all these shady dealings. The editor refused to publish it. So, after a sympathetic former editor had secretly laid out the page in its usual format under the headline "Look in the Mirror!", we distributed copies outside the Mirror's front entrance.

Paul resigned; I was sacked. Nevertheless, this was a career highlight. We told the truth. The simple, unfortunate fact is that, in the end, most newspaper proprietors have other priorities.

There are, however, newspapers that do not have owners. The Guardian, for example, is run by a trust. Journalists vote for the editor. The (now) former Cape Times editor, Dasnois, originally proposed a large staff shareholding when the Independent group came up for sale. She had, I believe, exactly the right idea.

But for some people, alas often media magnates, too much democracy is not a good thing.

Source: Business Day, via I-Net Bridge

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bryan Rostron is a freelance journalist and author.

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