

Space for independent, critical media is under siege



By [Anton Harber](#)

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Senior journalist Tony Weaver faced a company disciplinary hearing because he questioned why his newspaper, the *Cape Times*, cut an advertiser's logo out of a photograph of a shooting in a supermarket.

The shooting was widely reported last week along with - quite naturally - the details of where it happened. But the *Cape Times* editors reportedly decided to crop out the logo because it would hurt "our biggest advertiser".

Weaver says that when he raised concerns at a heads of department meeting the next day, asking for policy clarity on such matters, he was charged with gross insubordination/disrespect.

In effect, he faces possible dismissal for trying to make the newspaper pay attention to the Press Code, which bars the willful distortion of a news photograph, particularly for commercial benefit.

It tells you a lot about a newsroom if insubordination is a crime. I can think of many cases of where journalists should be charged with gross subordination. But then some editors and managers want compliant journalists rather than those who have a view and are prepared to argue it - in other words, show the qualities to make good journalism. Ethical journalism begins with newsroom debate on the rules, so suppressing a questioning journalist is a critical moment in the decline of ethical rules and professional practices.

Under siege

This case is one of many in recent times that indicate that the space for independent, critical media is under siege. Newsrooms are facing a combination of financial difficulty and pressure from the ruling party, its allies and state institutions, which are subsidising friendly media and becoming increasingly hostile to those who ask hard questions.

It emerged last week as the result of a boardroom battle that e.tv editors have shareholders and directors wanting them to cover the government in a way that smooths their lobbying for regulatory favours. Sadly, the reputation of e.tv was badly compromised when it emerged that the government may have paid for a series of mushy news pieces about its infrastructure programme. Viewers were not told that these poor pieces of journalism were advertising.

Weaver is one of many journalists being pushed out of the Independent group as part of what is presented as a transformation drive. A number of those are left-leaning and have struggle histories, but have shown reluctance to fall into line.

The purchase of Independent by government groupie Iqbal Survé's consortium was done with backing by state pension funds and Chinese investors, brokered by African National Congress leaders. *The New Age* newspaper sells very few copies but is propped up by state departments and parastatals sponsoring events at exaggerated prices.

Changing tack

The South African Broadcasting Corporation's upper ranks have long been captured by the ruling party, and the only remaining question is which faction of the party holds sway at any time. Fortunately, I hear that there are some strong people in the middle ranks who are resisting interference and politically motivated orders from above. This is the greatest hope: it has always been individuals asserting their agency in newsrooms that has protected journalism from the ravages of interfering owners, shareholders and officials.

It appears that the government has changed tack in dealing with media it has long felt were too critical. Rather than threatening the big stick of media tribunals and "secrecy bills", they have switched to using their clout and resources to back - and even subsidise - owners and editors they consider friendly, and isolate those considered less friendly. It is a more subtle, insidious and probably effective approach.

They are helped by the tough economic climate, in which falling newspaper circulation and advertising make media particularly vulnerable to pressure and eager for any advertising or sponsorship they can find. Playing out at the *Cape Times* is a combination of financial pressures and a new leadership that puts less value on journalistic independence. The overall effect is likely to be less watchdog journalism.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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