



## **Democracy in the Post-Truth Era – a Namibian Case Study**

Presentation at a University of Cape Town (UCT) Distinguished Speaker Series Event

Windhoek, Namibia

November 16, 2018

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In 1974, while at UCT, I ran onto the muddy and rain-soaked rugby-field at Newlands in Cape Town with a few fellow students to protest against apartheid. The occasion was a game between the British Lions and a Southern Universities team, from which black players had been excluded. Shortly after we ran onto the pitch unfurling as we did a banner which read ‘We are playing with apartheid’, the police and spectators waded in, beating the handful of demonstrators indiscriminately. The game was brought to a halt after which some of us managed to flee, one or two were detained, a fellow woman militant had to be hospitalised and a photographer for the Cape Times was badly beaten.

The protest was the sequel to the Student Representative Council (SRC) rescinding a decision which banned UCT players from taking part in the game. Horrified when this was later confirmed by a mass meeting of students, about 11 of us decided to take to the field to make our contempt known for what we saw as capitulation by our university, its SRC and student body to right-wing forces.

It was an historic event in that it was the first-ever political protest on a sportsfield in South Africa. Although the demo was widely condemned by police and officialdom it got substantial media coverage as it fuelled controversy and led to more relaxed sports policies. A black player was chosen for the next match of the Springboks against the visiting British Lions.

I mention this incident for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it was my baptism of fire in political protest which served to intensify my opposition to apartheid, and my determination to try and do something about it. This would culminate, after graduation, in me taking up a post as a journalist in Namibia. Here I would continue to campaign against the injustices under South African colonial occupation of a country then known as South West Africa until we achieved Independence in 1990. In the process, I sought to expose to the world, through journalism, a people’s suffering under a draconian regime, and to wield my pen for change. Secondly, this demo and others reinforced my still strongly held belief that people have to stand up and be counted when it comes to injustice of any kind, no matter the discomfort or sacrifice this may involve. Thirdly, it must be said, that because much of my time was spent on anti-apartheid activities while I was at university, I wasn’t the best of students and so I don’t stand before you today representing the pinnacle of academic achievement.

In the deeply unequal place which was southern Africa at the time, it was important to join hands with those struggling for truth in the face of apartheid propaganda and deception, and of the options available to me then, I chose print as the medium through which to advocate for change.

Let me say from the outset that I don't believe history has given good journalism a fair shake for its role in speaking truth to power over the decades both in our own, and in a global context. Neither is there sufficient public acknowledgement for the role of brave journalists the world over trying to create open and democratic societies through their work, although much of the time this comes at great personal sacrifice. I'm sure I don't have to tell you of the growing numbers of news scribes who are harassed, jailed and even killed simply for doing their job. And once upon a time, in a pre-digital and mobile world, newspapers were just about all there was to inform people as to what was happening, especially under authoritarian regimes which largely controlled what people read, viewed or listened to.

But those were days, writes Michael Bagraim in the Daily Maverick, when the newsrooms of dailies had an extensive reporting staff, made up of seasoned journalists with decades of experience, and standards were generally high. For a while in time, newspapers were a good business model sustained mainly through advertising support and sales to a lesser extent. But with the onset of the digital revolution, the appeal of print began to wane, and cost-cutting soon became a reality.

As the internet era dawned, there was great hope that this almost infinite resource would not only help deepen democracy, but that it would also help sustain good journalism.

Initially, it looked like this may happen. Here was a medium which gave access and expression to millions of people, and had the potential to be a vehicle for change in the world. Social media played a critical role in mobilizing and empowering voices in what was called the Arab Spring; and later hashtag activism became more prominent in #BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo movement which sprung up among women protesting sexual harassment mainly in the US.

And while social media still has the capacity to make a difference – and examples abound of its potential for good – its positive role has increasingly been overshadowed by what's been termed 'the real evil' of these platforms in fomenting the proliferation and spread of disinformation, hate speech, bullying and abuse. It's arguably also led to what some have termed the dumbing down of a world in which many don't read anymore.

Most traditional media, newspapers in particular, which engage in serious journalism, have in place checks and balances. These aren't always perfect, but there are processes and procedures and fact-checking of stories done prior to publishing and dissemination. There's generally adherence to a code of ethical conduct, and recognition of the need to themselves be accountable and subject to oversight, self-regulation being the preferred option.

Not so social media. While it gave millions a voice they'd never had before, there were no filters. People flocked to these sites even while the Facebooks and other social media giants insisted they were platforms and not publishers, and refused to take responsibility for content published, no matter whether this took the form of hate speech, revenge porn or election manipulation. As a result of public exposes of FB's role in the spread of disinformation, with a NYT article this week highlighting its failures, among others the accusation that it helped animate ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar, of late they're making some effort to clean up and take down hate speech. FB CEO Mark Zuckerberg has also acknowledged problems with the news feed algorithms in terms of which sensational and provocative posts get the most engagement and plans to fix it. But it may be too little and too late.

A recent BBC online article entitled ‘What we’ve learned about fake news in Africa’ underscores how disinformation erodes trust through undermining legitimate news. As an aside: I personally detest the phrase ‘fake news’ and prefer to call such content out for what it truly represents, whether it be lies, disinformation, propaganda, and so on. It’s a term that’s been popularised by US President Donald Trump to suit his own agenda which aims to discredit mainstream journalism with this label. In turn, his scathing attacks embolden other authoritarian leaders to follow suit in pouncing on real journalists and falsely scapegoat them for the failures of social media.

It has become apparent in what someone has called the current information disorder, that many, especially the youth, don’t know what’s real anymore. Studies have shown that many agree that the threat of so-called fake news had made them distrust the credibility of ANY news. Those polled also admitted to not being circumspect when it came to sharing posts, thus often themselves contributing to the spread of disinformation.

The BBC neatly summed up the reasons why disinformation erodes trust, and these include the following: it builds and feeds on community divisions; it threatens the notion of truth; it is toxic for mainstream media; it makes citizens less able to make decisions based on facts; it fuels hate speech; can and does lead to violence and even death; and most importantly for the topic under discussion this evening, it distorts democratic processes.

A Politico article entitled ‘The Long and Brutal History of Fake News’, laments the fact that digital has decimated the trend of the traditional, independent-minded press which could expose disinformation and help citizens understand not only that which is fake but also that which is potentially deadly. It is inevitable that as real news recedes, disinformation will grow, and so journalists need to consistently raise the bar of reporting standards and keep close to their communities to try and offset this dangerous movement.

Social media is, undoubtedly, the main culprit in the rise of post-truth content, but it is by no means the only one. Many, perhaps most governments, try to control and manage the flow of information to the people through state-owned news; and politicians who purposely keep secrets or withhold essential facts adds to the barrage of bias, lies and half-truths that deny citizens what they need to be informed.

There was a time, in the 80s and 90s in southern Africa, when people in countries dominated by government-controlled media, including but not confined to the apartheid regime, turned their backs on these obvious propaganda efforts. Most welcomed and embraced the new independent publications bravely fighting for free speech and independent media and taking on hostile regimes to counter their influence. The people wanted the truth, and they supported those they recognised as the truth-tellers in media. These were the days when The Namibian was not only sold out, but also sought after, and newspapers like it gave positive impetus on our continent towards a more free, diverse, independent and pluralistic media as advocated by African journalists in the 1991 Windhoek Declaration.

Fast forward to 2018 and against the background of the decline of the traditional press, it is social media which has won advertising revenue as well as the full and undivided attention of now largely uncritical and often gullible audiences wanting to be entertained rather than informed.

Guardian editor-in-chief Katherine Viner lays some of the blame for this on the rise of clickbait, articles of dubious factual content designed to be widely shared. She said that

“chasing down cheap clicks at the expense of accuracy and veracity” undermines the value of journalism and truth telling. David Mikkelson, co founder of the fact-checking site snopes.com describes the introduction of social media and fake sites as a turning point, saying “I’m not sure I’d call it a post-truth age but ... there’s been an opening of the sluice gate and everything is pouring through. The bilge keeps coming faster than you can pump”.

This at the same time that the free press, widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of democracy, began to experience severe setbacks. Where once they’d been up against mainly authoritarian governments, intent on controlling the means to information and threatening free speech and journalism speaking truth to power, now came constraints of a different kind, including issues of economic sustainability. The attention of audiences had gone elsewhere.

There is a risk that some traditional media, in their efforts to remain relevant, lower their standards to compete with the popular appeal of social media, at worst joining the feeding frenzy. Their vulnerability has made it easier for those with agendas of their own to ‘plant’ stories, and the recent Sunday Times debacle, where reporters fell hook, line and sinker for an elaborate plot to discredit the SA Revenue Service and the Hawks investigative unit, is a case in point. Although the Sunday Times later apologized for their reporting gone wrong, in the minds of many, the damage had already been done.

Failures like these are used to give weight to those campaigning against the press, and calling their credentials into question.

We need to remind ourselves that these are exceptions rather than the rule, and focus instead on the many examples where journalism has made positive difference to societies, even helping to topple corrupt leaders, such as President Jacob Zuma in South Africa, through incisive investigative reporting.

But as journalism battled with its own demons, including rising levels of public distrust, and tried to save itself, both online and offline, came another threat from an unexpected quarter, this time in the form of what I would call the Trump factor in the United States.

It is something of an irony that one of the countries in the world where truth is most in danger, is in the so-called leader of the free world, where Trump’s attacks on journalists as the “enemy of the people” have fuelled distrust and even hatred of journalists. And if we accept that news and information are an inherent part of the fabric of democracy, then the fabric of that democracy is in tatters. So says a report by the Knight Foundation entitled The Expanding News Desert, and which shines a light on the disappearance of local newspapers in America. There, they report that at least 1800 newspapers have disappeared since 2004 and the number of reporters covering local news has dropped by half.

In the belief that informed and engaged citizens are vital to healthy democracy, the historic role of journalism – informing, nurturing and improving communities – is more vitally important than ever before in the digital age. The good news, according to the Knight report, is that more than 500 digital news outlets have sprung up in the US, filling part of the void left by newspapers. Many were founded by investigative journalists who wanted their public service mission to continue. There’s also positivity in the phenomenon of growing cross border collaborations of investigative journalists through exposes like the recent Panama Papers exposing how the rich of the world are using offshore tax havens – which are making people sit up and take notice - and this

cooperative trend is being echoed in southern Africa and other parts of the world.

Some downside to the news innovations in the US, again according to the Knight Foundation, is that they're taking place in urban areas and wealthier communities, while information continues to dry up in rural parts. "The residents of America's emerging news deserts are often its most vulnerable citizens. They are generally poorer, older and less educated than the average American", the report notes. We are facing a similar problem in Namibia where access and choices of medium are more available to city dwellers than they are in more remote villages and communities, and who are those most in need of information.

I couldn't help wonder, as I read the report, if lack of access to information in rural areas of the US didn't in part account for Trump's mainly white right-wing support base which swears blind allegiance to the President no matter how many times he is called out for lies and the emotive untruths and prejudice that underscore his populist rhetoric. It speaks volumes about both him and his followers that he can make the statement he did that "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters". The situation is likely mirrored in more marginalized communities in Namibia and elsewhere, whose political gullibility comes as a result of their exclusion from the mainstream.

It is some consolation that there are increasing numbers of people fighting back against Trump and those to whom facts don't matter, and perhaps the results of the recent mid-term elections show that there is hope that Americans will wise up to the fact that they are being duped, and roll back the tide of ignorance and its threats to democracy.

This is a time, as Joyce Barnathan of the International Centre for Journalists, said recently, "when the powerful are deliberately undermining the important role journalists play in society". And right in the forefront is the US President, who regularly attacks and labels the press as "fake news". While it is nothing new that journalism has to fight back against authoritarian leaders in the world who revile the probing eye of a critical media, it is nevertheless currently facing unprecedented levels of vitriol on a global scale.

Barnathan adds: "Whatever we are trying to achieve in society – better governance, a cleaner environment, elevating the lives of the poorest – it takes a journalist to expose the problems and help us find solutions".

Rachel Jolley, writing in the autumn 2018 edition of Index on Censorship magazine, speaks of the importance of protecting public access to information and the need to challenge incorrect facts. Journalists constantly battle to find trustworthy sources of information as governments balk at the release of verifiable data. Worse still, she says, "officials use smear tactics to undermine reporters reputations so their accurate journalism is not believed". If facts didn't make a difference, she argues, then governments would have no reason to restrict access.

While Namibia enjoys a mostly free media environment, it is nevertheless susceptible to the global forces brought about by the digital age. One of the main factors inhibiting participatory democracy is an uninformed population. Recognising this, a local coalition of civil society groups, Action Namibia, has been lobbying for an Access to Information law to ensure that citizens get the facts they need to make good decisions about their lives, but government is dragging its feet. There's little doubt that quality journalism would also be empowered through such a law which would compel the release of information erroneously seen by government as the property of the state.

Although newspapers in Namibia enjoyed a period of respite as the downturn began here years after the demise of newspapers abroad, the effects have begun to be felt with the growth of the internet and as more and more Namibians go online, mainly through mobile access.

In a fairly recent interaction with youth, I posed the question as to where they accessed their news and information. With a show of hands the overwhelming majority indicated that Facebook was their first port of call, followed by Twitter and WhatsApp, with print and radio trailing the field. It gave me a glimmer of hope when I asked them which they trusted most, and they had no hesitation in naming print while admitting to skepticism about what they acknowledged was a predominance of disinformation on most social media sites.

Unfortunately many in Namibia and other countries in Africa, mainly, although not only in rural areas, see Facebook as synonymous with the internet, and believe everything that is written there is true.

The group I addressed were somewhat lukewarm when I suggested that youth would be better informed if they were more selective about their news and information sources, and reduced their appetite for gossip and infotainment, they could make more of a difference in society. But they grudgingly agreed that they should help to ensure the youth were better educated and more discerning about their choices, and that media literacy needed to be prioritized.

Project Information Literacy in the US is not without hope for the habits of online youth. Trends show there's a desire among them for more structure and integrity amid the chaos. Most agreed news was important in a democracy and following it was a civic responsibility. A fraction of them were diligent about credibility and evaluation of information, some going as far as to compare stories from different news sites to separate the real from the fake.

But worryingly, it seems that significant numbers of Namibians, who once turned their backs on propaganda in our colonial past, are now prepared to ignore facts, even to accept obvious lies willingly.

Disinformation is freely shared on social media, most notably Facebook and Whatsapp, but so too has political hate speech, tribalism and racism found resonance on these platforms. It hasn't happened here yet, but in countries like Mexico, India and Nigeria, innocent people have been killed after viral rumours falsely linked them to reports of child abductions, among others. News24 have just done an investigation which named a Unisa employee and his sister who had created disinformation news sites, among them Mzansistories, with links to Facebook, designed to divide South Africans and exacerbate racial tensions. In Namibia a regular 'breaking news' post spreads potentially harmful disinformation designed to discredit political opponents, which includes the President and his family.

Several African governments don't need excuses to stifle rights and freedoms, but under the pretext of tackling online abuse politicians are quick to threaten cybersecurity regulation, even switching off the internet to silence criticism. Our police chief recently went as far as to call for 15 year prison sentences for those guilty of posting racist or tribalist content on social media.

In truth many would not object if hate speech or false content was removed from the internet, but government regulation is a slippery slope which carries with it the risks that politicians would soon make use of the opportunity in order to target political opponents and stifle public criticism.

But what does the phrase post-truth mean and does it really have resonance here at home? Among others, it is described as appeals to emotion and personal belief rather than objective facts in shaping public opinion. John Keane of the University of Sydney says that ‘post truth’ is more complicated than simply being the opposite of truth. It has hybrid qualities and combines different elements in ways that defy expectations and confuse its recipients. It includes old fashioned lying, when people, and especially politicians, wilfully say things they know not to be true; but also what Keane describes as “bullshit”, which largely displaces and nullifies concerns about veracity. It is hot air, and verbal garbage and that which is in plain bad taste. Post truth content is designed to attract and distract public attention and interrupt the noise of conventional politics and public life, with nonsense, jokes and boasting. There is, he adds, dog whistling – a term the Urban dictionary describes as a fairly innocuous statement designed to trigger indoctrinated bigotry and hatred without being recognised by outsiders as hateful speech.

“In the hands of the powerful, or those bent on climbing the ladders of power over others” says Keane, “the post-truth phenomenon functions as a new weapon of political manipulation”. ‘Gaslighting’ is the term used as a weapon of the will to power, the organized effort by public figures to mess with citizens’ identities, to deploy lies, buffoonery and silence for the purpose of sowing doubt and confusion. By disorienting and destabilizing people, they harness their self-doubt, ruin their capacity to make judgements and to drive them into submission.

Post truth examples abound in public life. Trump uses gaslighting techniques with great frequency. The Saudi regime first blatantly lied about then tried to cover up the brutal killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in their consulate in Istanbul, and the whole truth about his death still hasn’t been revealed many weeks later. It is astounding that the world hasn’t yet demanded an independent international investigation rather than a stage-managed process by the Saudis.

Thomas Cizauskas of flickr said “lying in politics isn’t new, but digital decadence is”. The merging and melding of text, sound and image, the advent of cheap copying and the growing ease of networked information spreading across vast distances in real time are powerful drivers of post-truth decadence. New techniques and communication tools enable the production of materials, their rapid circulation and absorption into the body politics of democracy.

Fake content, including images and video, can and have been used to sway elections. It’s conceivable that targeted fake content helped elect Donald Trump in the first place. Perhaps we haven’t reached that level of sophistication in Namibia yet, which is why it is important that readers and social media users in particular, wise up to spotting disinformation, cross-check news and information before they pass it on, and journalism has a key role in exposing the fraud.

A recently published review by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University suggests that contrary to the common assumption that the web was making society more democratic because most people could now access information, news and knowledge more freely via the internet, the opposite may be true.

So how do we turn back the tide, and persuade people that facts matter? How do we convince most that an out-of-control social media not only affects the quality of our democracy, but also puts reputable information sources, in the form of quality journalism, under further threat? How do we bring them to the realization that it their own responsibility to ensure that information is solid and verifiable comes from reputable sources, before they consume and onpass?

Many would suggest media literacy as one of the answers. Training people from a young age about the dangers of disinformation and how to protect themselves and others against it. Fact-checking groups have also become one of the remedies, and mainstream media itself needs to take on this role to continue to help dispel and disprove harmful rumour, gossip and innuendo through excellent reporting.

A Commission set up by Reporters without Borders recently released an International Declaration on Information and Democracy which attempts to establish democratic guarantees for the global information and communication space and what it calls the ‘common good of humankind’. The guarantees for the freedom, independence and pluralism, as well as reliability of information, come at a time when the public space has been globalized, digitised and destabilised. The Declaration aims to mobilise those who are committed to defending a free and pluralistic public space which is essential for democracy.

It includes a ‘right to (reliable) information’, and an urging that those who contribute in the communication space must respect basic principles, among others by promoting trustworthy information.

Importantly, the Declaration affirms the social function of journalism, one which justifies special efforts to ensure its financial viability to be a ‘trusted third party’ for societies.

Meanwhile, the challenge ahead for all who make use of the social media space, is to get back to the good old days when facts mattered more than the appeal of the superficial and the fake and to support those who make it their life work to keep us well informed. There’s a unique and indispensable role for quality journalism in all of this. I read recently an adaptation of the famous quote of Pastor Martin Niemoller at the height of Nazi occupation, when he exhorted people to stand up even for those they don’t agree with. And it goes as follows “and then they came for the journalists, and we don’t know what happened after that”.

But all is not lost. Figuratively speaking, we need to run onto a few more muddy rugby fields and make a united stand to rescue society from the destructive forces of disinformation, lies and propaganda. To continue to speak truth to power. To aim to build democracies through empowered citizens, because the poor, powerless, and humiliated masses are most susceptible to the appeal of populist demagogues and authoritarians ready to exploit their plight. The pursuit of truth comes at a price, and we must be willing to pay it in order to withstand the triumph of dishonesty.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: ***Truth is the property of no individual, but is the treasure of all men. Let us guard it well.***

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