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The Role of *Vrye Weekblad* in the Struggle Against Apartheid

Abstract

The anti-apartheid Afrikaner newspaper *Vrye Weekblad* was started by editor Max du Preez with the hope of delivering real news, rather than government propaganda, in Afrikaans to those who opposed the apartheid government. However, the newspaper took on much more of a mission when former hit squad commander Dirk Coetzee agreed to publish his tell-all confession, revealing details of the murders of many ANC and anti-apartheid activists, of which he took part as a commander of Vlakplaas.

Key words

Dirk Coetzee, Max du Preez, Jacques Pauw, *Vrye Weekblad*, hit squad, Vlakplaas, Harms Commission, alternative media, alternative press

Introduction

The rule and demise of South Africa's more than 40-year long apartheid regime was documented, whether truthfully or with ulterior motives, by various types of media. The state-run press functioned as a mouthpiece for the apartheid regime, and while read by many, was hardly trusted by those fighting against the government's oppression. As a result, alternative newspapers worked to report the news that the government tried to suppress.

However, an even smaller minority of the press published the truth about the government's oppression in Afrikaans, appealing to the small population of Afrikaners who opposed the Afrikaner-run apartheid regime. Jacques Pauw and Max du Preez were two of these Afrikaner journalists who opposed the apartheid system that their predecessors created and their

contemporaries, for the most part, upheld. The role of alternative newspapers in general in South Africa during the fight to end apartheid was an extremely important one, for they often offered truth to a nation denied knowledge of its government's actions. However, *Vrye Weekblad's* publication of Pauw's article *Bloedspoer von die SAP* ("The South Africa Party's Trail of Blood") was especially groundbreaking because it provided evidence of state-sanctioned hit squads from a founding member himself.

When Max du Preez, an Afrikaner born and raised in the Free State town of Kroonstad, decided to start an alternative Afrikaner newspaper, it was more out of need than want.

'[In 1987] I was loudly lamenting the state of the South African media, especially the Afrikaans newspapers. How would Afrikaners ever know what was really being done in their name by the National Party government if the newspapers did not start telling them? ... There was only one thing one could do: launch a newspaper that would have the idea of an open, non-racial democracy in its credo. In Afrikaans. But that would mean taking on the National Party government and the Afrikaner establishment, and probably getting into trouble with the security forces. It wasn't really feasible. In fact, it was madness' (du Preez, 171).

Given the absence of an alternative (anti-apartheid) newspaper in the Afrikaans language, du Preez felt it was necessary to start his own paper, no matter the challenges such a task would bring.

To start any newspaper under South African apartheid with the motive du Preez had was difficult. Author and reporter Richard Pollak observed in 1981 that 'Trapped between rising black anger on the left and Afrikaner repression on the right, the liberal journalist occupies narrower ground with every passing year' (Pollak 95). Regardless, *Vrye Weekblad* was the result

of du Preez's unhappiness with the state of South Africa's media, specifically the media in Afrikaans, and was 'the first anti-apartheid newspaper in the history of the Afrikaans language' (du Preez 175). Professor Keyan Tomaselli, who has published extensively on the South African media, and P Eric Louw, both academics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, categorise *Vrye Weekblad* as '[part of the] social-democratic independent press,' which fell into line with the progressive presses that 'espoused a national democratic inclusivist approach, which aimed to help build a non-sectarian and non-racial South African nationalism' (Tomaselli and Louw, 6, 10).

From its inception, *Vrye Weekblad* consistently ran stories that opposed the established apartheid government. However, the most important article its editor and journalists ran – and consequent battle they fought – came to Afrikaner journalist Jacques Pauw in the form of Dirk Coetzee. Coetzee was a former Security Police captain who revealed that he had helped to found and lead a government-sanctioned 'hit squad', whose existence the government of the day denied. This hit squad was known as C1 or Vlakplaas, and was responsible for the murders of many ANC members and anti-apartheid activists, including student activist Sizwe Khondile, human rights lawyer [Griffiths Mxenge](#), academic and activist [Ruth First](#), among countless others. Coetzee believed the National Party turned on him after 'a botched kidnapping attempt in Swaziland and the killing of a diamond dealer in Lesotho' (du Preez 213). He felt the government was watching his every move by monitoring his phone calls, and was 'clearly embittered with the security police' (Pauw 16). As a result, Coetzee sought revenge on the police generals he had come to hate by exposing the government's blood-stained secrets; namely, the unit in the South African security police called Vlakplaas (named after the farm outside Pretoria

where they were stationed), of which Coetzee had been founder and captain, whose purpose was to capture and execute political opponents.

Journalist Jacques Pauw had heard of Coetzee's story as early as 1985 (it would not be published in *Vrye Weekblad* until 1989), but could not locate Coetzee or validate the shocking story he shared of a secret government assassination team. However, when Namibian lawyer Anton Lubowski, a good friend of du Preez and Pauw's, was 'shot in the back outside his house' (du Preez 121) in September of 1989, the journalists began the search for Coetzee in order to expose the government arm they knew had to be acting in these murders. They found Coetzee relatively quickly, though he was not as anxious to share his story as he had been a few years earlier.

In 1985, Coetzee had gone to several different newspapers and 'even two members of parliament' (du Preez 213) with his story, wanting to expose the violence he had witnessed and confess the crimes he had committed, but was rejected by all. As du Preez describes in his autobiography, '[No one] would touch it... nothing was done. [Coetzee's story] was dangerous; it went to the core of what apartheid really was' (du Preez, 213). Since that experience, Coetzee had become somewhat more resigned in his quest to reveal the truth.

It is important to note here the role that Pauw and du Preez's Afrikanerness played in their ability to make this article come to fruition. Coetzee had to be convinced to publish his story, and Pauw was able to do so by speaking Coetzee's language and understanding his background. In the case of the *Bloedspoer* article, and the many confessions from policemen and soldiers that followed, du Preez and Pauw's unique positions as anti-NP Afrikaners gave them a journalistic advantage. As du Preez describes,

'Many people found it strange that policemen and soldiers picked Vrye Weekblad, an Afrikaans newspaper, for their confessions. I knew why. As white Afrikaner men, Jacques [Pauw] and I understood where these people came from and what made them do what they did. We were fellow Afrikaners; we not only spoke the same language, we understood the ethnic code of Afrikaners' (du Preez 219).

It is not to say that as Afrikaners their path was simple, for it was not. But their identities as Afrikaners became more important in Coetzee's case, as it seems that only someone with an understanding of his background would have been able to convince him at the time to share his story.

Publishing Coetzee's confession would be no easy feat. Editor du Preez and journalist Pauw went through his story many times, checking time and again that it would hold up under scrutiny and was not embellished. As Professor of Communication Studies Gordon S. Jackson observes, 'The editors of [*Vrye Weekblad*] had experience working in the mainstream press. The result... was that they [would] not allow their reporters to get away with distortion. They [had] too much at stake to risk losing their credibility' (Jackson 56). Coetzee passed their test. But, he required that he be given a safe place out of the country to live before going forward with publishing the article, in anticipation of the government's brutal backlash. *Vrye Weekblad*, a small and barely profitable newspaper at the time, did not have the funds to provide such a requirement, though du Preez and Pauw agreed it was a necessary provision. They turned to the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) for help, and within a few months, plans for Coetzee to be transported to London were arranged via the ANC.

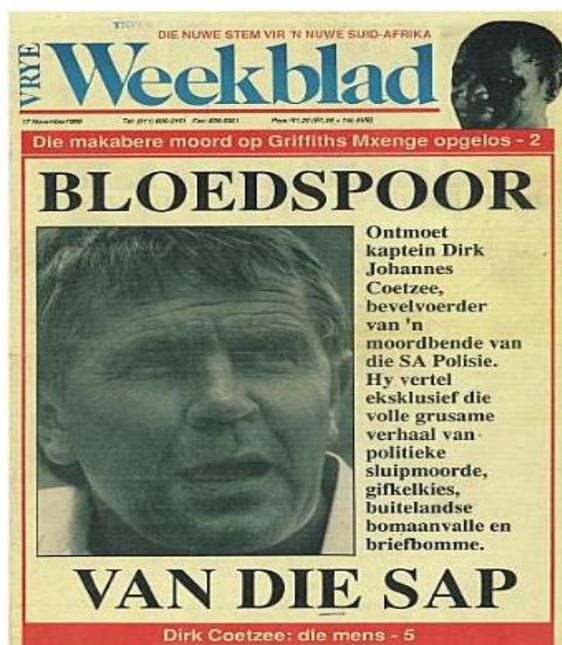
Though Du Preez and Pauw were convinced that taking the necessary measures to protect Coetzee in order to publish his story was the right thing to do, they nonetheless felt a certain

amount of guilt. Du Preez describes Pauw's hesitation to accompany Coetzee to England on the grounds that he felt he was 'helping an apartheid assassin escape justice in South Africa' (du Preez 216). Du Preez's choice of the word "justice" presumably equates retaliation, or at the least a public trial, for the crimes Coetzee had committed. However, the journalists knew that exposing the truth about a government hit squad of the magnitude of Vlakplaas would ultimately bring a greater good to South Africa than their choice to 'punish' Coetzee would. Publishing his words would bring tangible progress towards ending the apartheid regime by shining a light on an appalling part of history that had thus far been left in the dark. As du Preez describes, 'Find the proof [of the government's assassinations], and ordinary people would be forced to look into their hearts and say, "We cannot go along with that"' (du Preez 213). Exposing the horrible truth of government hit-squads was the first step to gaining local and international support against the apartheid regime.

As plans were being arranged with the ANC to get Coetzee to London, the unexpected occurred. Almond Nofemela, a Vlakplaas policeman, revealed the truth about Vlakplaas – the same truth *Vrye Weekblad* was about to publish – to the *Weekly Mail*. Nofemela was 'a black death squad member who had dared to indulge in the freelance killing of a white farmer,' (Bell 11), and was about to be hung on death row for the murder. When his Vlakplaas comrades did not save him, he told all, naming Dirk Coetzee as his police Captain. Du Preez and Pauw were shocked to see their story published first – but relieved that 'all of [Nofemela's] statements supported what Dirk had told us' (du Preez 215).

After Nofemela's confession was released, du Preez and Pauw published their article as quickly as possible. On 17 November 1989, 'Vrye Weekblad published the most important story

in its existence' (du Preez 188). A large photo of Coetzee's face was put on the cover, ensuring that there was no doubt as to who was accusing the state, surrounded by the words "BLOESPOOR" (Trail of Blood) "VAN DIE SAP" (Of the South Africa Party). The description on the cover read, 'Meet Captain Dirk Johannes Coetzee, commander of the SA Police's death squads. He tells the full gruesome story of political assassinations, poisoned cocktails, bomb attacks and letter bombs' (du Preez 188).



(Photograph of *Vrye Weekblad* cover; available at <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BEvC5YiCQAAIvcz.jpg>; Permission: unknown. [Please contribute.](#))

The *Vrye Weekblad* article had many effects. Firstly, it finally confirmed the suspicions that many had held, that the government was complicit in the disappearances and deaths of so many anti-apartheid activists. Though many had long suspected such a tie, reading the confession made by a former Captain of the security police was shocking. Secondly, as 'Coetzee's allegations were simultaneously the lead stories on the front pages of leading British, European and American newspapers' (Pauw 29), the article sparked the outrage of the

international community, and an influx of international support for the anti-apartheid cause. Thirdly, it put *Vrye Weekblad* on the map. This was both a good and bad result for the small alternative newspaper. With attention came both subscribers and scrutiny, but scrutiny from the [National Party](#) government was not of the passive variety. Du Preez and Pauw were sued by the government under the Protection of Information Act, but a judge in London, where the hearings were held at the South African Embassy, found them not guilty. This was a huge victory for the paper, though an appeals court would later overturn the rulings.

After publishing the article, du Preez suggested in *Vrye Weekblad* that the crimes revealed in the *Bloedspoer* article needed to be testified in a public setting. ‘I wrote in my editorial [that accompanied *Bloedspoer*]: “...the absolute minimum which each civilised South African now expects from the government is that a full-fledged commission of inquiry be appointed immediately and that all involved are forced to testify and be questioned in public”’ (du Preez, 217). Instead, they got a commission of inquiry known as the [Harms Commission](#), named after its residing judge Louis Harms, who was appointed by the new state president [FW de Klerk](#). In this commission, the charade continued in public. Murderers denied their involvement, mocked the idea that hit squads existed, and ridiculed Coetzee as mentally unstable. As Coetzee’s lawyer, Peter Harris, describes, despite the fact that serious allegations of a government hit squad were at hand, Judge Harms ‘sees [the commission] as an opportunity to show off... [Harms] loses control and responds loudly [to Coetzee’s story], “That’s a lot of crap”... Coetzee smiles ruefully and shakes his head at the judge’s conduct... The commission [was] a farce... I [was] furious’ (Harris 293 - 294). Du Preez posits that ‘It was their most useful campaign of deception yet... Years later, some of the same characters confessed to the Truth

Commission that they had all colluded to lie' (du Preez, 219). But for the time being, Coetzee and *Vrye Weekblad*'s best efforts could not force the government to desist in denial.

In looking at a broader scope of recent South African history, it is truly incredible to see the 180-degree shift that occurred in government stance in ten years. In 1985, Coetzee, an Afrikaner man and former security captain, wanted to publicly confess the crimes he witnessed and committed as an agent of the apartheid government, and could not find (in the media nor in the government) any platform to do so. Ten years later, in 1995, the [Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act](#) was passed, creating the TRC (Official TRC website). The TRC's mission was to make public the disturbing and, at that point, often unknown, events that had occurred under the apartheid government. Coetzee did testify in front of the TRC, this time confessing to the world what he had originally confessed to *Vrye Weekblad*. He testified for a number of murders, and was granted amnesty for his role in the brutal murder of Griffiths Mxenge (Mail & Guardian 1997).

This shift in mentality – from members of parliament and newspapers refusing to listen to Coetzee's story, to the TRC inviting all stories like his to testify in the public spotlight – in a mere ten years (1985 – 1995) helps one understand why many people were hesitant to support, or were angered by, the TRC's stance that reconciliation was more important than justice in the form of punishment. In her book *Truth and Lies*, photojournalist Jill Edelstein mirrors these sentiments. She says, 'The radical step of putting truth and reconciliation before justice was justified by the belief that finding out the truth was an overriding priority.... [it would] establish a common understanding of the past [that could be used] as a basis to forge a new national identity' (Edelstein 35). The SAHO post on the [TRC Hearing on the Death of Griffith Mxenge](#) quotes Angie Kapelianis as saying that 'truth defeats justice... [as] Dirk Coetzee, Almond

Nofemela and David Tshikalanga get amnesty [for their roles in the death of Griffith Mxenge]'. There is no doubt that despite the platform of the TRC, there was still a strong desire from many South Africans for punishment of those who acted as the government's murderous puppets. However, it was the prevailing sentiment that exposing the history of what had really occurred during the apartheid years would ultimately be more important.

The difficult role of exposing truths suppressed by a militant government regime is exemplified by *Vrye Weekblad*'s publication of *Bloedspoer van die SAP*. Professor of Communication Gordon S. Jackson acknowledged in 1993 that 'the alternative press models key features of what a growing segment of tomorrow's press in South Africa could look like... it will embrace political positions closer to those of the alternative papers than those of the mainstream press' (Jackson 65). [Walter Sisulu](#)'s son, [Zwelakhe](#), editor of the alternative newspaper *New Nation*, said in 1986 that 'The alternative media in this country are in the process of becoming the mainstream media' (Jackson 69).

Du Preez discusses his time at the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation working on the weekly reports covering the TRC as just that: the spirit of the alternative press having a louder voice, through the TRC and the SABC. Through the TRC, du Preez and Pauw's (and so many others') hopes for a louder voice of truth came true, and their mission to uncover the horrific wrongdoings of the apartheid government was expanded exponentially.

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