

# The Press—its deeds and misdeeds

*A report of a talk delivered to the Transvaal Region by Mr Benjamin Pogrund,  
Assistant Editor of the Rand Daily Mail.*

SOME months ago the following letter, written by a Black Sash member, Barbara Waite, appeared in the Rand Daily Mail under the heading "Press nurtures public apathy".

"With reference to your rather sneering and superior attitude in your leader (August 4) with regard to public apathy surrounding detentions without trial, I feel the Press is entirely to blame. The way you present the facts is abominable.

"On July 30 you published a minute account on an inside page concerning the removal of Gaby van Rensburg from her home in Coronationville on July 17, and about her friend Belinda a week or two previously.

"Publicity is the *ONLY* protection these two young women have — the law is no protection in this country.

"You certainly did not trace her as missing, the information was fed to you by the Black Sash.

"There was absolutely nothing in your miserable little account to convey her terror before she was detained. There was nothing to arouse any public sympathy for or indignation on behalf of her elderly parents, who are utterly distraught.

"Her father is desperately ill but he is being given no reason for the removal of his only child. They are heartbroken, terrified and completely intimidated — so much so that they fear even to consult a lawyer.

"There is no indication of the relentless intimidation of these ex-pupils of Coronationville High School by the Security Police since Republic Day last year.

"You nurture and encourage public apathy. Perhaps if Gaby and Belinda were White students at Wits, with homes in the Northern suburbs, you would consider the matter warranted a front-page story."

Mr Pogrund said the writer of the leader was particularly upset by the criticism, as he had written it from the heart and had had no intention of appearing "sneering and superior" — (which goes to show how the means of communication fail even when employed by professionals).

While concurring that there was no defence of the way in which the story was run, Mr Pogrund indicated that there is a very big step between obtaining information and publishing it.

Facts have to be established, which is a major problem. On an issue such as detention it is difficult to persuade people to talk. They are frightened. Nor are the police forthcoming.

In reply to Mrs Waite's implied demand that the Press should run propaganda material in order to elicit sympathy, Mr Pogrund pointed out that, while it might be a political decision to highlight any particular news item, it is passing the buck unfairly to the Press to expect them to solicit sympathy-rousing news.

It is very difficult to continue to run stories on detentions, because the longer something goes on the less newsworthy it is.

It is no longer an event and people switch off. This is the hard reality of the news.

However, Mr Pogrund admitted that the letter had focused attention on the role of a newspaper in a community, and he remarked that this was a matter of particular interest to the Black Sash for whom publicity for its various causes was of great importance.

He pointed out that there are two types of newspapers. There are propaganda papers such as those to be found in authoritarian states or those with a very particular and narrow viewpoint such as some of the Nationalist papers, which were now changing, and those with a particular stance which yet try to provide the broadest possible spectrum of news, such as the Rand Daily Mail.

However space is limited, and an enormous mass of news has to be distilled.

Relativity is the essence of news. There is relativity in magnitude — the importance of one item of news in relation to another.

There is geographical relativity — items of news change in importance in relation to where the particular newspaper is sited.

There is relativity in individual attitudes of those who sort the news — a matter of differing priorities.

And there is relativity of the context in which events are occurring which might give certain items an edge over others.

A discussion of the function of newspapers poses an interesting question: who should be entitled to decide what readers should know and to pass value judgements in editorials? In theory it is illogical for the Press to be privately held and profit-making. Ideally it should be in state hands, but in practice this creates devastating problems.

The Press functions best when it is privately owned. A better, more rounded picture of events is presented, although personal prejudices still intrude. This is inevitable, for people are involved. There is no satisfactory definition of "objectivity" — that word that dogs the footsteps of every journalist and causes much agonising.

Mr Pogrund preferred the word "dispassionate" though he found himself hard-pressed to define that too.

The Rand Daily Mail attempts to control the personal prejudices of its staff members through the creation of a series of filters through which the news is processed. There are always people looking over other people's shoulders, so that there is a constant attempt to maintain balance at all times.

News selection is a matter of professional training, and experience provides an awareness of what is news and what is not. There is a deliberate intention to put forward news that will sell papers — a very necessary approach if a paper is to survive, particularly in South Africa with its small reading public. But obviously this is not the only type of news that a paper will publish.

In this country newspapers must be all things to all men and editors must walk a tightrope in an effort to keep all types of readers satisfied.

Press people suffer constant anxiety about whether they are really in touch with the public; with what they want; with trends of thought, while at the same time having to consider whether a newspaper must follow or lead.

It is part of the community it serves, and must be careful about getting too far ahead of its readers.

There are constant tensions on a newspaper — good, inter-active tensions between newspaper people which help to maintain an even keel. As different influences are brought to bear a newspaper will veer around to some extent. In addition there is the plethora of laws restricting what the Press may publish, and the pressures from the Government which arise from time to time.

Newspapers like a first-class mix of politics, crises, crimes, rapes, disaster — these are what sell — and of course all these matters taken together reflect existence.

All newspapers have their own special interests. The Rand Daily Mail is particularly concerned with such matters as poverty, wages, the

pass laws and other allied topics, and this influences its choice of material in the news and feature articles.

Mr Louis Luyt's recent attempt to gain control of SAAN has served to remind the public of the importance of a free Press, imperfect though the Press may be.

The tensions and anxieties aroused by this attempt caused newspaper people to wonder whether the Rand Daily Mail was worthwhile preserving and whether it can achieve enough, and the feeling was very strong that it was still meaningful. The public will surely endorse that feeling.

● *Barbara Waite's letter is published here by kind permission of the Rand Daily Mail.*

## Two portraits of rural South Africa

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formation regarding health matters will be given to the community by means of personal contact and through lectures and demonstrations.

Patients attend Monday to Wednesday from 8 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. Patients are also visited in Ginsberg Location, Kingwilliamstown, a few kilometres away from the clinic on Thursday afternoons, and at Ugwenya-Middledrift on Friday mornings.

Water was a major problem and initial expense was involved in prospecting for water, which fortunately after much searching was struck near the site and piping laid on in time for construction to start on schedule.

The Zanempilo Clinic is a significant step taken by a Black voluntary agency and it is hoped that it will be followed by other similar projects. Like all other voluntary organisations the clinic is heavily dependant on grants and donations for its work.

Zanempilo is a splendid example of dedicated community work and all those concerned are to be congratulated on succeeding in achieving a project which will benefit many of the poor and destitute Black people in those areas.

## Rocklands Beach

ON a hot summer Sunday afternoon I lie upon this little beach

Children and parents dip in and out the sea, others enjoy a picnic tea.

Yachts and speedboats passing by, gulls awheeling in the sky.

I should be thankful and serene, enjoying the beauty of this scene

But my mind is a turmoil of despair — why me down here those up there?

Where well-dressed dark people line the rails and longingly upon us gaze.

You men who enact our laws — pause.

How would it be if your children and you lined those walls?

And they ask, "Why can't we go down, Daddy?"

What would your answer be?

"RSB"