

# The Steyn Commission: An Annotated Bibliography

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'Press freedom' in South Africa was and remains a contentious issue. It has been the subject of numerous books, articles and political debates. Predictably, the defence of 'press freedom' has been spearheaded by the English language 'Opposition Press' which concerns itself mainly with liberal ideals of 'democracy', 'justice', 'civil liberties', 'individual rights', and so on. The basis of this position is the rejection of the governing National Party policy of apartheid which is seen as both morally and politically indefensible.

A closer analysis of the English language press shows that it does not venture beyond attacking the 'irrationality' of apartheid. In fact, being owned by the white bourgeoisie, it has vested interests in the maintenance of the dominant capitalist hegemony.

The following annotated bibliography is a complete guide to the critical writings on the two Steyn Commission Reports. These articles are categorised in terms of their interpretations on the role of the mass media in South Africa:

Libertarian: This is the classical Western liberal-democratic position within which the English opposition press classifies itself. It places the 'public interest' above that of the government. The press regards itself as a watchdog against the abuse of power by the state and aims to encourage uninhibited debate on public issues.

Structuralist Analyses: This paradigm situates a study of the media within an ideological/cultural/hegemonic matrix. The media are argued to contribute to the reproduction of the relations of production best conducive to the accumulation of capital. The English, Afrikaans and captive black presses are thus seen as the means through which ideological work is disseminated to the various classes and cultures which make up the South African social formation.

Black Consciousness Responses: The reassertion of black cultural dignity is central. It is a protest based 'creative' exclusivity which seeks to stimulate a sense of solidarity among the oppressed black classes. This press is seen as a means of mobilising black political awareness.

## LIBERTARIAN ANALYSES

Du Toit, A. 1982: "The Steyn Commission and the Theory of the Total Onslaught", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 112, No. 1330, pp. 51-54.

The author simply points out the lack of scholarly research and any systemic or critical discussion within the *Report*.

Manoim, I. 1982: "Comment is Free, But Facts are Secret", *The Journalist*, (February), pp. 6-7

This is an attack on the *Report* for its further encroachment on the last vestiges of a 'free press' in South Africa: whether 'press freedom' is debated at all. The author sees the Steyn Commission as limiting the facts which can be used in editorialising.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1982: "But Haven't We Been Through All This Before?: Bashing the Bosses", *The Journalist*, (February), p. 7

Manoim argues that the government may not implement the recommendations of the Steyn Commission, but its purpose is to instill fear into the NPU in order to facilitate self-censorship and disciplinary actions against 'irresponsible' journalists.

Mervis, J. 1982: "The Case for a Free Press", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 112, No. 1330, pp. 62-64.

Mervis expresses concern over the muzzling 'syndrome' which is characteristic of the *Report* in its infringement of the traditional libertarian values of a 'free press'. He sees attempts being made to create a servile lackey press like the Soviet press.

Sparks, A. 1980: "State Co-Opts Press" (An extract of a paper delivered at Rhodes Univ. in 1980), *South African Outlook*, Vol. 110, No. 1308, p. 6.

Although this article does not deal with the second Commission, it offers a brief description of the Nationalist government's attempts to coopt the newspaper industry.

Stuart, K.S. 1980: "The Press in a South African Democracy or Oligarchy?" *Equid Novi*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 95-105

An analysis of the first Steyn Commission relating it to the restrictive legislation which is seen to diminish 'freedom of speech'.

Domisse, E. 1980: "Afrikaans and English Press - The Case of the Goose and the Gander", *Equid Novi*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 118-127

Against the background of the appointment of the second Steyn Commission, Domisse pleads for cooperation between the press and the state. The author claims that press freedom must be accompanied by responsibility. The accent of this article is a subtle attack on the English press whilst portraying the Afrikaans press as an exemplary self-disciplined one. The author seems to sympathise with the government's "punitive" measures against the press.

Stewart, G. 1980: "Serving the Governors", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 110, No. 1308, pp. 2-4.

Surveys the chronology of laws designed to make the press "serve the governors".

\_\_\_\_\_ 1982: "A History of Press Control", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 112, No. 1330, pp. 67-68.

A historical overview of the laws passed during the last 30 years as the government has attempted to secure a compliant press. Causation ignored.

Stewart, G. 1982: "The SA Press and the Steyn Report: A Critical Appraisal", *South Africa International*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 500-507.

A review of the mandate given to the Commission. This paper examines the Commission's premises, content and the proposed legislation. The author also points out the flaws in the construction of the Report, viz., its reasoning, language and conclusions.

Streek, B. 1982: "Of Packs, Pariahs - And Facts", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 112, No. 1330, p. 67

Streek replies to the Commission's attack on his book, *Render Unto Kaiser: A Transkei Dossier*, which is co-authored with Richard Wicksteed. He asserts that the Report has a distinct political bias and is unable to face up to facts.

Zille, H. 1982: "Judging the Judge by His Own Code", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 112, No. 1330, pp. 56-7; 65.

Zille analyses the Report to see whether it can stand the test of its own code of conduct embodying its own criteria of "truth", "objectivity", "accuracy" and "fairness".

1982: "Censorship Without Steyn", *Ibid*, pp. 58 & 60.

An examination of the events leading up to the Steyn Commission. The paper points out a misconception that public pressure can avert the Steyn proposals, thus leaving the press free again. Like Manoim, she argues that even if the Steyn proposals can be averted, the newspapers would be intimidated and self-censorship would arise.

1982: "The Minefield", *Ibid*, p. 59.

Here she likens editing a newspaper to walking through a minefield blindfolded. She distinguishes in chronological order, the major laws that restrict the press in South Africa.

1982: "What Kind of Reporting Would Judge Steyn Like to Keep out of the Newspapers?" *Ibid*, pp. 64-5.

A full story which Judge Steyn objects strongly as indicative of 'commitment journalism with a negative climate-setting effect' is reprinted from the *Sunday Express* of July 12, 1981. No analysis offered.

## STRUCTURALIST ANALYSES

Switzer, L. 1981: "Steyn Commission I: The Press and Total Strategy", *Critical Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 41-45.

Having given evidence to the first Steyn Commission, Switzer provides a background for understanding the ideological and political objectives of the second Commission. He exposes the elaborate facade which has been erected by the Commissioners to justify their allegations against the English press. This facade is argued to create the impression that South Africa is democratic in nature. He concludes that three additional functions will have to be assumed by the press if it is to remain "free" and "independent": (1) it will have to censor the activities of the State's internal and external 'enemies' as defined by the State; (2) the press must sustain and promote a positive image of the State's security and defence agencies; and (3) the press must mobilise public opinion in pursuance of the campaign for Total Strategy.

Tomaselli, K.G. and Tomaselli, R.H. 1982: "Steyn Commission II: How to Separate Out Truth from Fact", *Reality*, pp. 11-15.

These authors contextualise the *Report* within a politico-economic and ideological framework. They systematically demolish the internal logic of the *Report* while simultaneously pointing out how these internal inconsistencies themselves are both rooted and propel an objective structural deformation of reality.

*Work in Progress*, 1982: "The Steyn Report: An Alternative Appraisal", No. 23, pp. 2-7.

This paper claims that little work has been done on the political economy of the South African press and proceeds to offer a somewhat sketchy background. It summarises the main points of the *Report* and discusses its likely consequences. It claims that the Steyn Commission went 'over the top' and isolates the Commission's most sensitive stories: (1) favourable publicity for the ANC; (2) negative reporting on security agencies; (3) news items which suggest the vulnerability of the state; and (4) negative "climate-setting" with regard to the reporting of black grievances.

Lawyers for Human Rights, 1982: *Distrust in Democracy*. A Lawyers for Human Rights Publication, Cape Town.

Alongside the present issue of *Critical Arts*, this 120p monograph is the most extensive analysis of the Steyn Commission. Unlike *Critical Arts* which has concentrated on the politico-economic implications, *Distrust in Democracy* is mainly a legal analysis. Its four authors, however, seem to work within different frameworks, some in a comprehensive libertarian approach, others in a structural paradigm. It discusses at length the concept of "Democracy and Freedom of the Press", "The Nature and Implications of the 'Total Onslaught'", "The Commission's Response to the 'Total Onslaught'" and the implications for "Democratic Values in Deeply Divided Societies Under Stress" -- all by W.H.B. Dean. D.M. Davis, who came under fire from the *Report*, offers a structural analysis in his discussion of the "Historical Context and Significance of the Report", its methodology and how it misunderstood the nature of the four theories of the press the Commission relies on. A. Durbach offers a most useful and original survey of the "Statutory Smokescreen". She avoids clichés and misinformative notions like 'the minefield'. This author brings the list up to date and looks at the way in which the Commission conceptualises what it sees as subversion "calculated to endanger the maintenance of public order. Of the Protection of Information Bill, she comments, "in its present form, [it] could create one of the crudest forms of self-censorship in the history of South Africa's press.

#### BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS RESPONSES

Klaaste, A. 1982: "MWASA and the Steyn Commission", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 112, No. 1330, pp. 54-56.

Klaaste puts forward a case for MWASA defending it from what he perceives as a misconceived attack contained in the *Report*. He states that MWASA cannot be seen as a homogeneous political body/organization whose members are all adherents of Black Consciousness.

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