

A saga in three chapters

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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This is a tale in three chapters of behind-the-scenes newsroom intrigue and backstabbing. It will tell you something about journalism in this country and the state of one of our flagship newsrooms at the *Sunday Times*. I am not sure exactly *what* it will tell you, but I will leave it up to you to decide.

Chapter 1

Mzilikazi wa Afrika this month published a memoir recounting his adventures as a leading investigative journalist at the *Sunday Times*. Wa Afrika is a respected reporter, having played a key role in taking on police commissioners, ministers, and even presidents without fear or favour, or at least without much of it showing. He has been accused in his time of many terrible things, but never of modesty - and the book reflects this.

The *Sunday Times* ran an extract two weeks ago and their choice is a surprise, because they use a chapter that is as much about their own newspaper as about Wa Afrika. They select his remarkable tale of how the *Sunday Times* in 2011 received and declined to publish the accusations that National Prosecuting Authority head Bulelani Ngcuka had been an apartheid spy. Wa Afrika writes that they had been trying to get the questions that Ngcuka's office had put to Zuma in a corruption investigation. Political reporter Ranjeni Munusamy approached Zuma who said he would give it to them if they also published the Ngcuka allegations. They agreed to publish the allegations if there was sufficient proof. Zuma leaked the questions to them, and immediately blamed Ngcuka for the leak.

They published the questions, but declined to publish the spy allegations, as they had evidence that they were false. Munusamy leaked the story to a rival newspaper, which went to print with them. Munusamy parted ways with the *Sunday Times*.

There were a number of surprises in this account: they were fingering the current president for dishonesty and underhand behaviour; they were naming a source, which breaks a most basic rule of journalism; and on top of it, they were naming the most powerful man in the country as that source.

Chapter 2

Last week, Munusamy laid a complaint with the Press Ombudsman. Wa Afrika's account was entirely fiction, she says. Not only have they behaved badly by naming a source, but they named the wrong source. She did not fly down to KZN to get the document from Zuma, as alleged, but received it in Joburg from someone else. She would never have cooperated with Wa Afrika and the investigative team as the atmosphere in the *Sunday Times* newsroom was so divided and poisonous that it was unthinkable that they would help each other.

And then she adds for good measure that she suspects Wa Afrika's motive for being so vindictive was that at about that time he had asked her for a personal loan, which she had been unable to give.

So now we have two versions of the same event from two senior journalists, who are calling each other liars. Whom does one believe? Neither of these two have impeccable records. Both parted ways with the *Sunday Times* at some stage because of questionable behaviour. Wa Afrika was let go some time back for unethical conduct and rehired some years later. When Munusamy was pushed out of the *Sunday Times*, she went to work for Jacob Zuma (just in case you doubted her affiliations at the time) and then returned to journalism at the *Daily Maverick* and became one of Zuma's sharpest and most consistent critics (as if to prove her independence). To her credit, she has come clean and admitted her earlier mistake; Wa Afrika does not deal with his earlier transgression in his book.

Chapter 3

This part is full of unexpected elements. The *Sunday Times* wrote to the Ombudsman to say they take no responsibility for the extract they ran from Mzilikazi's book. They cannot be expected to fact-check it, they say, and the complaint rightfully belongs with the book publisher, Penguin SA.

This contradicts the most basic legal and ethical principal of editing: that you take responsibility for what you publish, even if it comes from a secondary source. And of course the story is about their senior writer and their own newspaper, so it is odd to claim innocence. The *Sunday Times* is many things, but innocence is not a word that jumps to mind when thinking about them. They chose the extract, they know where the bodies were buried, they knew exactly what they were doing. Or maybe they were under the weather at the time. That is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

Most intriguingly, it seems that they are hanging Wa Afrika out to dry. This is not us, this is him. Don't talk to us, talk to his book publisher, they are saying. At least that is how it seems.

Wa Afrika denies this. Munusamy was following the wrong route in her complaint, he says. They are ready to defend themselves but she must take it to Penguin, not the newspaper. He says the request to Munusamy for a loan came from a phone that he had stopped using some time before because it had been hacked.

Wa Afrika defends the decision to name a source who lied and says he has wanted to do this for many years. But how do you name the source without the permission of the reporter involved, one has to ask?

Denouement

Munusamy writes back to the Ombudsman saying this is ridiculous. The newspaper is responsible for what they publish, and she notes that they did not say anywhere that this story was unchecked and unedited. She asks for the dispute to go to the Press Council for arbitration.

Wa Afrika tells me Munusamy is simply a liar and his colleagues can back that up. He says the information they sought from Zuma was faxed from his lawyers' office. He knows Zuma was the source because Ranjeni had put Zuma on speakerphone during the discussion.

So the saga will continue. No doubt the denouement will involve new layers of intrigue and another round or two of backstabbing. It is not often that the Press Council has to settle a dispute between two journalists and not involving any member of the public.

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Latest:

Press Ombudsman Johan Retief has issued a provisional ruling in the complaint by Ranjeni Munusamy against the *Sunday*

Times and their investigative reporter, Mzilikazi wa Afrika. The Ombudsman said it was reasonable for the newspaper to publish an extract from wa Afrika's book, even if it could not verify the contents. However, it had to either verify the contents or make it clear that these were the author's views and not necessarily those of the paper. In this case, the *Sunday Times* was claiming that the book was the author's views and they should not be held responsible for them. But the newspaper had presented the extract as truth (with the sub-heading, for example, saying the book "reveals the truth behind a story").

This led the Ombudsman to give the newspaper two options. It must either make it clear that they have not verified the contents, and apologise for presenting them as truth; or they must be prepared to prove them.

A final finding would only be made once the *Sunday Times* had responded to these alternatives, he said.

Munusamy had raised two other issues: she said she had not been given a right of reply and Wa Afrika had named a confidential source. The Ombudsman side-stepped both of these. He said it was not normal for a right of reply to be given on a book extract. And he said that since the source had been named in the book, it was already in the public domain.

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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