

# Nonconformist Journalism: The *Vrye Weekblad* (Free Weekly Newspaper) as a form of Afrikaans resistance press in 1980s South Africa

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**Abstract.** Although The *Vrye Weekblad* was not the first nonconformist, alternative newspaper to grace the newspaper stands in South Africa, it was unique in its using Afrikaans – the ‘language of the oppressor’ as its main medium. Throughout its short and turbulent life, it managed to change the image of Afrikaans, deliver superb journalism and contribute significantly to the progressive change that was taking place in 1980s South Africa.

**Keywords:** nonconformist journalism, resistance press, apartheid, Afrikaans press

## 1. Introduction

“We believe... We have contributed to a renewed thinking by Afrikaans speaking people especially. We believe we were part of the catalyst that stimulated debate and brought us where we are today as a country. We believe we have pushed the parameters of press freedom and independence more than any other newspaper in the country.” (own translation)[1]

The above quote by Max du Preez, appeared in the last edition of the *Vrye Weekblad* (Free Weekly Newspaper) in newspaper form. It will serve as an introduction to what the essay’s main focus and theme will be: a look at the *Vrye Weekblad* within the context of the surrounding reality for the press and media in South Africa in the height of the apartheid regime and the significance of its language. One can then evaluate to what extent the newspaper played a role in the renewed thinking of South Africans in the 1980’s apartheid regime and eventual transition to democracy. The responsibility of the newspaper as catalyst to change is of note.

The *Vrye Weekblad*, introduced by Max du Preez as the editor, was the first Afrikaans newspaper of its kind to grace the newspaper stands in South Africa. Before its appearance, the English press was known as the ‘liberal’ newspapers and tended to come closest to a form of semi-resistance, a good example is *The Rand Daily Mail*. The Afrikaans newspapers were seen as the instruments of the government and rarely reported any news that might have placed the government and their activities in a negative light. [2] The government had their methods of putting pressure on the liberal newspapers, these involved subtle warnings and financial implications for those who went ahead, challenging the government. This, in fact, was why the *Vrye Weekblad* had to close down after five short years: it lost an exceptionally expensive court case and was rendered bankrupt. This essay will consider the *Vrye Weekblad* (Free Weekly Newspaper) as a form of resistance press against government policies and events during the 1980’s in South Africa.

## 2. Desperate Times: The Context of Journalism and Pressure on the Media Prior to the *Vrye Weekblad*

The 1980s was a period rife with restrictions, especially for the media, in South Africa. Apartheid was “in full swing”, the jails were full of individuals who were flagged as ‘threats to the government’, there was an ongoing military struggle taking place between Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and

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the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the streets were generally unsafe. [3] Noteworthy clashes between the South African police force and township residents in the near past had sparked the building tension that was nearing its breaking point in the mid- to late 1980s. The declaration of two states of emergency in 1985 and 1986 added a sense of anxiety to the whispers of the possibility of a pending civil war [4]. South Africa was being subjected to international scrutiny after reports of Sharpeville in 1960 and Soweto in 1976 (to name only the two most prominent events) reached the United States and Europe. The nationalist government attempted to curb this flow of information by passing a myriad of laws that restricted the South African press from reporting ‘unflattering’ news under threat of being fined, charged or jailed.

Limitations on press freedom can be traced far back into South Africa’s history. After the National Party (NP) was elected to power in 1948, the state wanted to bring together all Afrikaners by guarding the Afrikaans language from foreign influences as a way of unifying its people. [5] “Afrikaans has always had a dissenting voice in its history of antagonism against, specifically, the British.” writes Deysel when explaining why Afrikaans was supported with so much fervour by state-funded publishing houses, ensuring a “snug relationship” between the mainstream media and the National Party. [6] It is therefore no surprise that the rise of alternative voices was met with negative attention from the authorities. English and black authors had dissimilar publishing opportunities from the Afrikaans authors; black authors were automatically suppressed through the apartheid state and English as a publishing language was yet to be fully accepted. [7]

In the 1950s, although Afrikaans was distributed most belligerently as a vehicle of support for Afrikaner Nationalism, alternative voices emerged – not blatantly disapproving of the state of apartheid at that time – but suggesting alternative options to the apartheid government. This was an “uncomfortably apt description of what was happening in South Africa”. [8] The state viewed these unconventional observations and suggestions as a ‘betrayal’ of the Afrikaner volk and subsequently applied Publication bills on ‘alternative’ material. As a result all publications could be banned if, after being reviewed, the content was found damaging or offensive to the concerns of the state ‘and its citizens’. [9] The Publications and Entertainment Act was of the first censoring laws passed, but numerous restrictive laws were to follow, aimed at ‘protecting’ the interests of the ruling party and in effect becoming the “offspring of political control” more than serving as mere control of publications, films and theatre. [10] Apart from the legislative restrictions implemented against the press, the government also used intimidation and manipulation as a means to control what was being published. [11]

The English press spoke out against the apartheid government at a very early stage, questioning and criticizing factors of the apartheid regime. Liberal’ newspapers that managed to survive into the late 1960s and early 1970s only did so by meticulously picking their way through the multitude of regulations in order to continue printing their stories and lending an alternative voice to the South African media. [12] The nonconformist journalists’ tasks were by no means easy, as news was becoming more and more difficult to attain because of the sources’ fear of getting themselves into trouble, thus making information a very scarce commodity. As a result, there was no certainty for South Africans that the newspapers they read were conveying the truth or informing them of events they needed to know about. [13] The Afrikaans mainstream media was initially silent, often viewed as the puppets of the government by the ‘liberal’ newspapers. [14] Consequently, the Afrikaners themselves were mostly unaware of what was happening behind governmental curtains or were in the habit of turning a blind eye for fear of being reprimanded. Breyten Breytenbach, a South African author who had been tried and convicted for terrorism in 1975 and subsequently fled the country, wrote during his exile that to be an Afrikaner was to have been successfully ‘programmed’ by Die Burger and other media such as state television; journalists, teachers and pastors – all were mere “opinion-spinning spiders”. [15] The need for an alternative Afrikaans newspaper became clear when free-thinking Afrikaners found themselves frustrated with the lack of coverage by the conventional newspapers regarding the various political activities and aspirations. Many alternative journalists perceived the Afrikaners as being isolated from their surrounding social reality. [16]

By the time that the Vrye Weekblad was launched (1988), anti-apartheid movements were widespread and the political climate was rampant with tensions between the press and the government. South Africa was also experiencing pressure from international organizations due to the reports of riots and police brutality. In his book *War of Words: Memoir of a South African Journalist*, serving as an account of his 26 years of

employment at the Rand Daily Mail, Benjamin Pogrand marks the June 1976 Soweto uprising as a turning point for South Africa. He calls it the “beginning of the end for white rule”. [17] The events of that day were reported internationally and the consequences thereof opened up a window of opportunity for alternative newspapers to further their cause. It became clear to the government that the global eye on South Africa was becoming a serious threat to their regime. With the strict laws that had been passed, the press’s job as watchdog was made much more difficult. From the 1960s onwards, the struggle for and against apartheid was increasing in its intensity.

### 3. Enter the Un-Muzzled Muse

Max du Preez was one of a handful of South Africans who attended a meeting in Dakar – this initiative was instigated by the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA) with the aim to organise and facilitate discussions between races and members of different political parties. [18] It was believed that discussion between these two groups in terms of possible negotiated settlements in the future to break the deadlock in politics and repression at that time. Upon his return to South Africa, Du Preez set about the challenging task of organising the launch of an alternative Afrikaans newspaper. It was a undertaking in no way short of extremely challenging. Even in the political climate amidst the whispers of change, pulling off the launch of an independent, progressive newspaper in Afrikaans – the first and only of its kind – was going to be anything but easy. [19] The first undertaking was to find journalists who not only excelled in the investigative journalistic field, but who were also committed to the values of this newspaper and were willing to work for very little money, with high risks involved and with no chance of promotion. [20] When ‘Nasionale Pers’ refused to act as the newspaper’s publishing company, Du Preez and other supporters of the ‘cause’ such as Van Zyl Slabbert (founder of Idasa) and Sampie Terreblanche (professor of economics at Stellenbosch University) founded a new publishing company called ‘Wending Publication Ltd.’. [21] Finances had to be sorted out, advertisements were sought after, the newspaper headquarters had to be fitted with computers, telephones, fax machines, correspondents had to be identified and a bank account had to be opened. [22] All these details consumed the team’s hours to the extent that they did not remember to register the newspaper and only did this after the first edition had already been published (this would result in their first of many clashes with the government). [23] The small team of seven, Karien Norval, Elsabe Wessels, Chris du Plessis, Jacques Pauw, Victor Munnik, Koos Coetzee and Max du Preez himself, worked to publish the first edition of the *Vrye Weekblad* (Free Weekly) as it was decided to be named. [24]

On 4 November 1988, the first edition of *Vrye Weekblad* announced its arrival loud and clear to an unsuspecting public. If the title on the front page: “Mandela, a new era”, did not emphasize the newspapers intentions’ enough, the declaration of their credo did the job. This credo stated, among other things, that Afrikaans speaking people were not children or idiots, but that they had the right to know what was going on in their country and what their leaders and fellow citizens were doing and that Afrikaans needed to be freed from the stigma of being the language of the oppressor. In summary, as stated in the first editorial, the *Vrye Weekblad* was to be free from propaganda, free from ideology, free from inhibitions and manipulation and the credo ended with the final statement ‘read, and decide for yourself’. [25]

What *Vrye Weekblad* lacked or left out during its preparation period regarding the marketing of its arrival or securing enough funding and advertisements, it made up for by the reaction its publication attracted from various citizens and the government itself. The first edition of *Vrye Weekblad* contained no less than ten articles, five photos and a comic relating directly to the African National Congress (ANC) – a banned organisation of which it was illegal to publish information. [26] Though the circulation numbers were initially very low in comparison to other weekly newspapers, the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetzee, at first refused to register the newspaper officially, claiming that the newspaper can be a possible ‘vehicle of conveying the views of unlawful organizations’. [27] However, he eventually did agree to register the *Vrye Weekblad*, for a fee of R30 000 - the normal registration fee being R10. [28] Along with the charges of defamation, court interdicts and criminal charges that followed even before the first year of the *Vrye Weekblad*’s existence had passed, the newspaper received an unexpected reward they had never bargained for – more publicity than they could possibly have received with mere advertisements. Max du Preez, wrote in his memoir of the life of the *Vrye Weekblad*: “Oranje Blanje Blues: ‘n Nostalgiese Trip” that they (the

editorial team) had bargained on the hope that the government would be more careful to merely arrest or ban them because they were Afrikaans. [29] Indeed Albert Grundlingh supports this idea in his article on anti-apartheid social protests in the 1980s by stating that “although they [*Vrye Weekblad*] sought to recast Afrikaner identity in a different mould, they were well aware that the very success of their enterprise depended on their being Afrikaans.” [30] As Hachten and Gifford noted, however, the government had various strategies to curb press freedom and in the *Vrye Weekblad*’s case it consisted of the systematic use of the judicial system and the taking of their scarcest commodity: finances. [31] In the long run it was exactly this factor that led to the eventual closing down of *Vrye Weekblad*. The short life of this newspaper – unique amongst other publications of its time – was a turbulent one. *Vrye Weekblad* was most famous for its revelations on the police Death Squads – popularly known as the ‘Vlakplaas murders’ that involved a training programme for former ANC guerrillas to become assassins for the NP government. [32] Though the newspaper did maintain a healthy balance between politics and culture, the most sensational stories were about the conduct of the security forces: the military and the police and the corruption that existed in high places in the government. [33]

The journalists of the *Vrye Weekblad* entered into a challenging journalistic situation, but a very dangerous one too. During the lifetime of the newspaper, a bomb was planted and detonated in the foyer of the office building in 1990, Max du Preez and Jacques Pauw was detained at gunpoint for several hours by right-wing Afrikaners in the office one night and Du Preez confesses that he regularly had to sleep in different locations and inspect his car for signs of sabotage every morning. [34] In the end what encouraged the journalists of the *Vrye Weekblad* to go on was the knowledge of a duty that they had to perform in order to one day see the South Africa they had started to fight for, become a reality. “It wasn’t that we were very brave,” said Du Preez, “we were very scared about some stuff, but with what we wanted to do we couldn’t say ‘sorry, we can’t use this story, it’s too dangerous’. That was the ethos that we had”. [35] All in all the newspaper was a radical and ‘uncompromisingly critical’ newspaper that broke many rules and spent most of its time drifting between the office and the court.

#### **4. The Significance of Afrikaans as Medium and Impact on Surrounding Newspapers**

The downside to having published a newspaper in Afrikaans, was that it was not accessible to English speakers who did not read the language. Afrikaans was also seen as “language of the oppressor” and initially black readership was nearly non-existent. These numbers did improve after it became clear that the *Vrye Weekblad* was unaffiliated with any governmental or political institutions and even openly and sometimes harshly criticised them. [36] Du Preez explained that there was a sort of “poetic justice to all the evils of apartheid being exposed by Afrikaners themselves, for the truth to be spoken in Afrikaans”. [37] The *Vrye Weekblad* also used an ‘inhibition-less’ style of writing, one they coined as a “skryf soos jy praat” (write-as-you-talk) style. [38] This made the newspaper more accessible to a wider variety of people and though they were sometimes criticized for writing in ‘bad Afrikaans’, the sub-editors of the *Vrye Weekblad* were in fact prominent Afrikaans writers such as Koos Prinsloo, Ryk Hattingh and Ralph Rabie – all men who had been classically trained. [39]

The revelations that the *Vrye Weekblad* published were usually shocking in its content and to the public. Issues like the police death squads and murders often caused outcry and also received international attention. The cases of corruption that the journalists of the *Vrye Weekblad* investigated were of interest to international politics. As a result of all the attention that the articles were getting, the mainstream media were forced to publish follow-up stories in order to avoid a questioning public and maintain their credibility. Connie Faure lists one of the important consequences of investigative journalism to be “a reaction from readers and organisations that can result in social change”. [40]

The journalists of the *Vrye Weekblad* endeavoured to write in Afrikaans, but also in a casual and comfortable Afrikaans. Though they were initially heavily criticized for writing ‘bad Afrikaans’ their style had its benefits too, it showed the Afrikaner in a different light, much removed from the stigmatised Calvinist and conservative idea of the Afrikaans language. The immediate difference between the Afrikaans used in the mainstream media and the Afrikaans used in the *Vrye Weekblad* provided the passer by with a

clear distinction between the two types of press. Du Preez noted that he had hoped that the non-white people would read the newspaper and see that not all Afrikaners were staunch racists, but that the truth could also be written in Afrikaans. [41]

## 5. Conclusion

The establishment of the *Vrye Weekblad* as an alternative newspaper in Afrikaans came during a period where repression of the media by the government was at its worst in South Africa. [42] The newspaper was not just confronted with restriction, but with scepticism and hatred from the right-wing Afrikaners, not to mention the danger the journalists placed themselves in each day. It is safe to say that the *Vrye Weekblad* did indeed deserve credit for the renewed thinking of Afrikaners and its contribution to the political climate of the time, which allowed for progressive changes to take place towards a negotiated democratic future.

The *Vrye Weekblad* not only revealed government corruptions, but also reinvented the Afrikaans language, by adding youthfulness to it that was not there before. The newspaper aimed to restore pride to Afrikaners who had become increasingly silent due to the portrayal of Afrikaners as ‘evil racists’ internationally. Max du Preez explains the essence of the newspaper to him:

“That to me was the whole story of the VWB. It was not just Vlakplaas and torture; it was a new way of thinking for Afrikaners. Our cultural pages were as important as our political pages. We spread the wings of the Afrikaans culture and also introduced them to black culture and international culture. We were trying to say to Afrikaners, and strangely it sounds like a contradiction, ‘you are Africans and you should remain here and you have a job to do here; but at the same time you are world citizens... and should be influenced by all cultures and all political influences’. That was my philosophy and that was what we believed in. That’s what we wanted to portray” [43]

Surely it cannot be disputed that the *Vrye Weekblad* was unique in its style and expression and that it took a great deal of courage for the journalists to work on such a high-risk project, with less than average salaries under immense pressure – all for the sake of nurturing a hope for a democratic government, a future of equality and the projection of the ‘new voice, for the new South Africa’.

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