

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

1950

National Party member of Parliament, AJR van Rhyn calls on the government to set up a commission to investigate the press. He accuses overseas newspapers of sensationalism, misleading people by false reports and inciting public opinion against South Africa

MAR  
1950

The Press Commission is set up with the intention of concentrating control of the press, especially its editorial opinion and comment and presentation of news. The Commission is directed to study 'the adequacy of existing means of self-control and discipline by the press'

1951

DH Ollemans, chairman of the Argus company, proposes a voluntary press council be set up. The suggestion finds little immediate support

1955

Ollemans arranges two informal meetings, attended by representatives of most daily and Sunday paper and several editors. No decision emerges; it is generally felt that any action should await the report of the state's Press Commission

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1957

Apartheid Prime Minister JG Strydom says the English-language press is 'South Africa's greatest enemy'. South African Society of Journalists (SASJ) president MA Johnson warns that a press council might be instituted, and some form of control imposed over journalists who sent reports to newspapers abroad

MAY  
1959

Prime Minister HF Verwoerd blames the economic depression in South Africa on the English press. National Party MP FS Steyn tells the House of Assembly it should be 'treasonable in law' to advocate the overthrow of apartheid

MAR  
1960

Emergency regulations instituted after the Sharpeville massacre include restrictions on reporting so far-reaching that, if interpreted literally, would mean a complete ban on publishing anything relating to turmoil and violence in the country

1961

. Verwoerd blames the English and foreign press for pressure from the United Nations and growing sanctions, and warns the press should 'exercise care and ... keep an eye on each other'

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FEB  
1962

The Press Commission presents the first part of its long-awaited report to Parliament. It comprises two volumes, totaling 700 pages, and 17 appendices running to a further 1 566 pages. This first report says nothing about a Press Council

MAR  
1962

The Newspaper Press Union (NPU) holds a meeting attended by principal papers and magazines as well as editors and representatives of the SASJ which objects strongly to a code of conduct and a Press Board of Reference

MAR  
1962

The NPU agrees to a Board and a code of conduct, but members are not unanimous. Afrikaans papers and the Argus group are supportive, *The Star* arguing 'self-discipline is preferable to state discipline'. The *Rand Daily Mail* however calls it 'surrender by instalment'

APRIL  
1962

The NPU formally accepts its own proposals, its chairman MV Jooste, managing director of Afrikaanse Pers, says 'any suggestion that outside interference or pressure has ... influenced the formulation and contents of the proposed code is quite erroneous'

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1962

Seeking 'continuance of a free press', the Board comprises a chairman and an alternate chairman, both retired judges, and two members, also with alternates, all appointed by the publishers of the newspaper groups

1962-  
1964

The first report of the Board lists six complaints adjudicated. Four are by National Party politicians against the English press. Newspapers are not bound not to use confidential information. Chair HHW de Villiers notes the Board has no inherent powers, which is why it is 'preferable' newspapers work together or face state control

MAY  
1964

The Press Commission presents the second part of its report and deals with control of the press and the Board which 'does not satisfy the ... requirements of a body designed to ... encourage self-control of the press'. It recommends a statutory Press Council

OCT  
1968

The Press Board issues Its second report, with eight complaints adjudicated, all involving political figures or state departments

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1971

SASJ president Roy Rudden declares the Board, 'in its actions and decisions, has done a first-class job'. Delegates, many of whom were opposed to it in 1962 when it was proposed, vote to recognise it

LATE  
1971

Prime Minister BJ Vorster says the press is 'stabbing South Africa in the back'. Interior Minister Theo Gerdener wants the state's proposed press council to be given wider powers, including the right to impose heavy fines on offending newspapers

1972

The Board's third report lists 13 complaints that required adjudication

SEPT  
1973

Vorster announces government will amend the Riotous Assemblies Act to 'deal properly' with anyone 'sowing enmity between the races'. The press is the primary target. Vorster gives the media until January 1974 to 'clean up its house'

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OCT  
1973

. The NPU asks Vorster for a meeting. He refuses, saying he has no option 'but to finalise contemplated legislation and proceed with his plans for a statutory press council

JULY  
1974

The SASJ organises a symposium on press freedom to commemorate a stand taken 150 years earlier by Thomas Pringle and John Fairbairn in support of press freedom. Virtually all major English newspaper editors arrive, but editors of Afrikaans papers do not attend

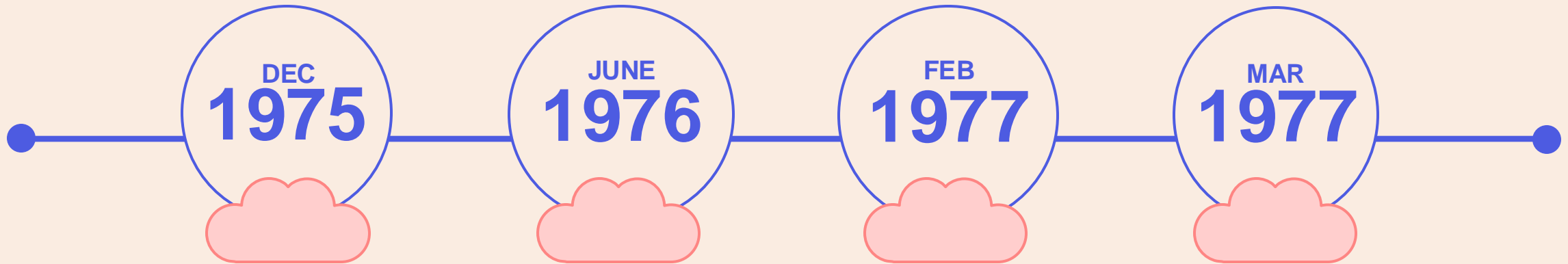
JULY  
1974

MD of the Argus group Leyton Slater, then chair of the NPU, says the NPU will fight any form of state control, but the NPU is secretly negotiating with the government on steps to strengthen its proposed statutory press council

SEPT  
1974

Minister of defence PW Botha threatens to scrap an eight-year-old agreement with the press because some newspapers are leaving blank spaces in reports for which permission to publish had been withheld

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES



. Vorster returns the NPU's amended code, suggesting some changes which are scheduled to be discussed in 1976

The apartheid regime responds with a severe crackdown after the June 16 massacre, rushing through Parliament the Internal Security Act that widens the scope of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, allowing the banning of publications

Vorster insists the NPU accept curbs on the press, giving it copies of proposed laws that would impose direct state control on newspapers. Publishers reject the proposals out of hand and talks break down

Government introduces its Newspaper Press Bill which embodies the Nationalist ideal – a statutory press council, backed by the authority of the state that would administer a code of conduct far beyond restrictions contained in the NPU's revised code

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

MAR  
16  
1977

The bill provides for a press council comprising a chair who should be a judge or a retired judge of the Supreme Court, and up to four other members, half nominated by the state president, the others from a list provided by the NPU. The council would function in much the same way as a court of law

A WEEK OF  
PRESS UNITY

Publication of the bill unites English and Afrikaans newspapers in an unprecedented show of opposition. The *Rand Daily Mail* warns, 'We are all in peril'. BJ Schoeman, a director of Perskor, says the bill is aimed at establishing press censorship

MAR  
23  
1977

A week after the bill is introduced, Vorster meets a deputation from the NPU and the chairmen of the four major newspaper groups. Discussions continue for three days before Vorster announces he is withdrawing the bill and will give the NPU one year to test its new self-disciplinary measures

MAY  
1979

Revision of the Press Board makes it easier to lodge complaints and this results in a much larger volume of cases – almost 400 in two years



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NOV  
**1980**

Botha determines to find a lever to control the press without imposing overt censorship and sets up the Commission of Inquiry into the Mass Media, or the Steyn Commission as it was chaired by Judge MT Steyn. It holds hearings until April 1981

**1981**

The Commission is mandated to 'inquire into and report on the question of whether the conduct of, and the handling of, matters by the mass media meet the needs and interests of the South African community and the demands of the times, and, if not, how they can be improved'

**1981**

A parade of government officials appear before the Commission, calling for new measures, especially a statutory press council and a register of journalists. From its inception, the Commission is controversial. No representative of the press, English or Afrikaans, agrees to serve on it

**1982**

Meanwhile, between May 1981 and September 1982, the 'revised' NPU Press Board, now called a Council, receives 145 complaints – 34 from government. About 25 percent are dismissed and another 65 percent lapse or are settled

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

FEB 1  
1982

The Commission issues its final 1 367-page report, along with draft legislation, to Parliament. A massive outcry follows, especially as it is proposed that journalists be registered and controlled under a Journalists' Act which will enforce the decisions of a statutory press council

1982

The outcry leaves government hesitant to push the bill through the Parliament. The NPU, backed by its Afrikaans newspaper members, holds a series of meetings with key officials, and after months of bargaining, the regime backs off from plans to licence journalists

1982

There is opposition by pro-government Afrikaans newspapers which stand solidly with English papers. NPU newspapers agree to set up a new media council of their own design with powers to reprimand and fine newspapers. A compromise draft law is worked out with the Interior Ministry

JUNE  
11  
1982

Interior Minister Chris Heunis suddenly introduces another press law to make the new media council a statutory body and force all newspapers to submit by joining the NPU. This time, it is also get rightwing Afrikaner newspapers, which are anti-Nationalist, under control

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

JULY  
**1982**

In the face of strong opposition, Heunis withdraws the clause making the body statutory. The final compromise law, passed in the last hours of the parliamentary session, is the Registration of Newspapers Amendment Act No 84 of 1982

**1982**

Key provisions are that the minister of internal affairs can cancel the registration of newspapers if publishers do not subject themselves for disciplinary purposes to the NPU's new media council, 'an independent and voluntary body', but a clause on 'government recognition' causes concern

**1982**

A pattern in press-government relations seems to have been established: the regime savagely criticises the press and then threatens crippling new press controls, but when the NPU agrees to censor itself, the state again backs down

NOV  
**1983**

The major result of the Steyn Commission is the creation of the South African Media Council which replaces the Press Council, retaining virtually unchanged its mode of conduct and power to impose penalties. But for the first time the council includes journalists and members of the public, intends to include 'all races' and covers broadcasting as well

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

1983

The new Council is the result of negotiations between the state, the NPU, the Conference of Editors (representing editors of the major English and Afrikaans papers), and to a limited extent, the SASJ. A key feature is the appointment of a conciliator, similar to today's Public Advocate

1983

The Council reflects the influence of the British Press Council. Its 30 members include a chair, alternate chair, 14 media reps and 14 public reps. Six media reps are nominated by the Conference of Editors, six by the NPU. The SASJ and the Media Workers Association of South Africa (MWASA) may nominate one each.

1983

The SASJ is cautious about the Council as media representation will be dominated by editors and nominees of the NPU, and public reps have a bias towards business and white organisations. The state could also use a critical Council report to ban a newspaper or journalists

MAY 3  
1991

The Windhoek Declaration, a statement of principles for press freedom, is adopted by African newspaper journalists at a UNESCO seminar. The date of the adoption is subsequently declared World Press Freedom Day, the document the first in a series of such declarations around the world

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

1994

On the advent of democracy, the South African media decide at last to pursue an Ombudsman system to enable the public to complain to an independent voluntary self-regulatory body about misdemeanours by newspapers and their journalists

1994

The code of conduct applying to the Press Council is examined by a committee chaired by Professor Kobus van Rooyen and consisting of representatives of media organisations, including trade unions. The code is overhauled clause by clause, those applying to apartheid policies being removed

1994

The draft code that emerges is referred to organisations which sent representatives and is accepted by them. All those bodies, acting for their publications, voluntarily sign to participate in an Ombudsman system under self-regulation

1996

The Ombudsman system is introduced, the new Press Council to be chaired by a retired judge or an advocate, with the power to fine newspapers

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

1996

Administration is in the hands of Ombudsman Ed Linington with oversight by a Press Founding Bodies Committee which consists of representatives of the South African National Editors Forum (Sanef), MWASA, divisions of the Newspaper Association of South Africa and the SASJ

2002

. At its national conference, the ANC resolves to 'change the landscape' of the South African media, its issues concerning white ownership, control and domination of particularly print media, as well as redress for the public when untrue, unfair or damaging stories are wrongly printed

2002

Coming to the end of the first five years in its revamped form, and spurred on by the ANC controversy, the Press Council reviews its operations, constitution, code, complaints procedures and the composition of its constituent bodies

2004

There is an attempt by government to withdraw the exemption of newspapers from the Films and Publications Act 1996. After negotiations by Print Media South Africa (PMSA) and Sanef, the exemption in favour of newspapers under the Ombudsman is retained

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2007

The ANC moots a Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT) as its key Polokwane conference. It is against this backdrop that the structure of the self-regulatory system changes, retaining an Ombudsman and with the additional mandate to defend media freedom

2007

Joe Thlooe is elected South Africa's new press Ombudsman, as the Press Council 'relaunches' in Johannesburg to replace the Press Founding Bodies Committee.

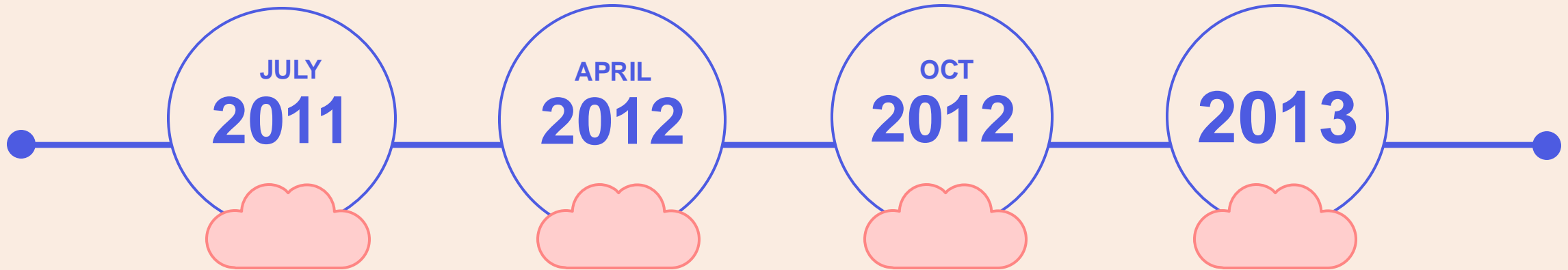
2010

The ANC publishes its MAT discussion document to address perceived transgressions by the media and calls for a parliamentary enquiry into the establishment of such a MAT to which the Press Council would be subservient

2010

The Protection of State Information Bill (POSIB) is compiled to support the MAT. Both documents are presented to Parliament

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES



Media representative bodies Print and Digital Media South Africa, or PDMSA (formerly PMSA), and Sanef establish the Press Freedom Commission (PFC). Chaired by former Chief Justice Pius Langa, this body of nine commissioners from outside the media assess the system of press regulation

The PFC releases its final report detailing its recommendations for the system's revision

The Council releases another report detailing a new code, complaints procedure and constitution, after the PFC report. Significantly, the accountability mechanism moves from being self-regulatory to a system of independent co-regulation involving public and press participation

The ANC publishes resolutions from its national conference in December 2012: acknowledging the changes to the press regulatory system but stipulating the intention of requesting a parliamentary investigation into the desirability of a MAT



# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

2014

The Press Council and other media bodies including Sanef and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) start discussions on establishing a cross-platform media accountability system, which would see online news content included in the jurisdiction of the Press Council

2014

Negotiations between the Press Council and the regulatory wing of the Interactive Advertising Bureau South Africa (IABSA), the umbrella association of online media, result in the Press Council now also covering online media which subscribe to its code

MAR  
2015

The Film and Publications Board (FPB) issues a draft set of regulations on internet content which, among other restrictions, require web users who wish to distribute films, games or certain publications to register with it or face criminal penalties

JULY  
2015

Together with Sanef and the Interactive Advertising Bureau of South Africa (IABSA), the Press Council negotiates the exemption of its members from the FPB regulations in light of the Press Council's expanded system of co-regulation that applies to online content

# PRESS COUNCIL MILESTONES

2015

The ANC has not abandoned the idea of a MAT. Its National General Council renews calls for a parliamentary inquiry into the desirability and feasibility of such a tribunal

2015

The new *Code of Ethics for South African Print and Online Media* expands on and replaces the old code, ensuring content in print, online and on social media, as well as streamed content and user-generated content posted to websites, is covered

2022

The South African Jewish Report is expelled from the Press Council with immediate effect after refusing to obey rulings from the acting Press Ombud and the Chair of Appeals, Judge Bernard Ngoepe. This is the first time a member has been expelled

APRIL  
2023

The Press Council, Sanef, the Association of Independent Publishers, Media Monitoring Africa, the Forum of Community Journalists and SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition – the ‘presenting parties’ – make a joint submission on the draft Terms of Reference for the Competition Commission’s Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (MDPMI)

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MAY  
2023

The Press Council launches the FAIR campaign on the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day, endorsing Factual, Accountable, Independent and Responsible journalism

AUG  
2023

A Johannesburg High Court judge says a litigant approaching the urgent court should explain why they have not pursued faster remedies through the Press Council, particularly where they threatened to do so. The case before the court was an urgent application brought against News24 and Network 24

MAR  
2024

The 'presenting parties' make joint oral submission to Competition Commission's Market Inquiry

MAY  
2024

The Press Council brings together members of press and media councils for the inaugural African Media Councils Meeting. A result of this first-ever conference of its kind is the formation of the Network of Independent Media Councils in Africa (NIMCA)