

C Faure

## Investigative journalism as a democratic practice: a *Mail & Guardian* case study (2002-2003)

"If you have bad news, it is better to report it. It is trying to hide it that causes problems."  
(M&G 30 Apr 2004:6)

### *ABSTRACT*

The theme of this article is investigative journalism and the importance of this particular type of journalism for upholding democratic practices. By giving a theoretical foundation and by using a case study, the author shows that investigative journalism plays an important role in furthering democratic ideals and in bringing about change in society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Investigative journalism as a democratic practice: a *Mail & Guardian* case study (2002–2003)" explores the view that investigative journalism and democracy have a symbiotic relationship. This relationship serves to make the public sensitive about, and aware of, injustices and undemocratic practices, and it could, ultimately, contribute significantly to the process of democratic consolidation.

Practical examples of investigative journalism in South Africa are used to illustrate the theoretical discourse. The focus is on investigations done by the *Mail & Guardian* (*M&G*) (2002–2003), which are mirrored against earlier research undertaken by investigative journalists from the *Vrye Weekblad* (*VWB*) (1988–1993). A case study of a randomly selected investigation published in the *Mail & Guardian* is based on a model that guides the identification and analysis of investigative journalism. Finally, the article offers a set of specific conclusions about the role of the *M&G* and investigative journalism in general, and how investigative journalism should be understood and appraised in a democratic context.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The debate on investigative journalism is a wide and ongoing one. It is conducted in many formats, including the Internet (cf. *Journalism with an ...*2002; Global investigative journalism 2004); at conferences (cf. *Investigative journalists to ...*2005; *Global Investigative journalism ...*2005); in scholarly publications and newspaper columns; in other media; and in more popular (non-academic) publications in which journalists describe their experiences (cf. Pauw, 1991; Du Preez, 2003). This study is, however, inspired by specific case studies of investigative journalism. These case studies were conducted on investigations undertaken by a well-known and controversial Afrikaans alternative or independent newspaper, the *VWB* (Faure, 1993; 1995; 1997). The case studies of *VWB* (1988–1993) and many other case studies have shown and emphasised the importance of investigative journalism in establishing and furthering a democratic society, and preserving its values (Protest, et al., 1991; 2001).

The *VWB* (1988–1993) was selected as a case study in the 1990s primarily because of its editorial policy, which emphasised "freedom" – the freedom to say to the Afrikaner: "read and decide for yourself" (*VWB* 4 Nov 1988). The *VWB*'s motto to "hide nothing" also paved the way for meaningful investigative journalism (*VWB* 4 Nov 1988).

The author has similar reasons for selecting the *M&G* (2002–2003) as a case study. Although the social and political stances of the *VWB* and the *M&G* differ quite drastically (the *VWB* fought for a democratic order, while the *M&G* fights to preserve that order), the *M&G* is also known as a critical newspaper that does not hesitate to address injustices and wrongful behaviour. The *M&G* has built on the tradition of its predecessor, the *Weekly Mail*, which acquired a reputation in the last years of apartheid as a critical and investigative newspaper that exposed corruption during the apartheid regime. Furthermore, the *M&G*'s new editor, Ferial Haffajee, regards investigative journalism as the core of the

newspaper's policy, like Howard Barrell and Mondli Makhanya, two of the *M&G*'s previous editors (*M&G* 16 Jan 2004).

The reasons why the *M&G* is selected as a case study do not imply that other South African newspapers are not involved in critical and investigative journalism; this means rather that the *M&G* focuses on those qualities that epitomise critical reporting – the *M&G* is thus a logical choice for research on this topic (*M&G* 31 May 2002; 27 Sep 2002; 31 Jan 2003; 4 Apr 2003; 19 Sep 2003; 7 Nov 2003; 16 Jan 2004; 30 Jan 2004).

### 3. 'INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM' IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

According to debates in academic literature, investigative journalism focuses on the failures or shortcomings in a social system. These failures or shortcomings are often caused and side-stepped by the rich, those in authority and the corrupt. The aim of investigative journalism is to look past the conventionally acceptable and the interpretation of events offered by conventional reporting or by authorities and other powerful institutions, and to call upon the reader's sense of justice and moral values (De Burgh, 2000; Weinberg, 1996; Northmore, 1996; Mencher, 2003; *Global investigative journalism* 2004).

According to De Burgh (2000:3), investigative journalism is "a social phenomenon and a fine tradition, usually being strangled by those in authority". The *VWB*, was for example, often charged in terms of the media emergency regulations and the Internal Security Act 74 of 1982 (*VWB* 11 Nov 1988; 10 Mar 1989; 23 Jun 1989; 27 Oct 1989; 2 Dec 1989). Harassment and libel cases were the order of the day. Instances of harassment and the various court cases were widely publicised in the press and viewed as valuable test cases for press freedom in South Africa (*The Citizen* 6 Dec 1988; 14 Feb 1989; 21 Oct 1989; *The Pretoria News* 22 Jun 1989; *Business Day* 26 Jan 1989; 22 Jun 1989; *Sowetan* 22 Jun 1989; *Beeld* 26 Jan 1989; *The Star* 26 Jan 1989).

Investigative journalism is not conventional journalism and the practice is associated with numerous issues and questions. Because the effects of investigative journalism can be far reaching, the issue of objectivity becomes very important (De Burgh 2000:36, 74). The same applies to accuracy and balance (Waisbord, 1996;1997; Willwerth, 2001). In conventional reporting, the journalist reports on events and comments on matters of interest. The journalist attempts to assimilate the information as objectively as possible by giving the various role players a chance to express their views. This process must be carried out in a balanced and accurate way (Mencher, 2003; Itule & Anderson, 2003). It is primarily a clinical reporting of events. The role of investigative journalists is, by contrast, "an affirmative obligation to make news themselves ... when rooting out corruption" (Kosicki, 1993:10).

Investigative journalism is a distinctive form of journalism that differs from conventional journalism in a number of ways (Protess, et al.,1991, 2001; De Burgh, 2000; Northmore, 1996). One reason for this is that the information is not generally easily available since it is often consciously kept secret by the role players. The problem is that errors can creep in quite easily, often with disastrous consequences for the newspaper (e.g. libel cases

and problems with credibility) and for the role players (e.g. losing face and dismissal). Additional problems include time and finances. The process of conducting an investigation takes time and money – sometimes months of intensive research to find answers. According to De Burgh (2000:7), an investigation can drain or even ruin a newspaper financially. When a newspaper genuinely regards investigative journalism as a priority, the weight of social responsibility will generally be heavy. This will naturally also link up with matters such as the newspaper's policy and its reputation as being critical and socially responsible (Ronning, 2002; Oosthuizen, 2002; Retief, 2002). Such a newspaper looks past superficial events and takes society and the reader's interests to heart by ferreting out corruption and wrongful behaviour on the part of the authorities.

Definitions of investigative journalism sometimes emphasise the aim of investigative journalism and the consequences it has for society (Protest, et al., 1991; 2001). Protest et al. (1991:4) define investigative journalism as “the journalism of outrage”. According to them, journalists attempt “to provoke outrage in their reports” which can, for example, lead to “corrective policy actions”. Other definitions again emphasise a combination of the techniques (Willnat & Weaver, 1998; Beem, 1999) and the aims of investigative journalism. Those areas that are emphasised time and again are the exposure of wrongful actions, human rights and that the status quo (or parts thereof) must be changed. In other words, investigative journalism is about getting to the truth (Willwerth, 2001; Waisbord, 1996; 1997), about disclosing actions that are kept secret when it is in the public's best interests to know about them. It is to do with injustice and wrongful actions committed by public figures, which are often covered up.

The following definition is based on various other definitions and characteristics of investigative journalism (Faure, 1997:3):

#### Investigative journalism

- is a distinctive journalism practice that thrives on confidentiality
- is characterised by a unique news gathering process
- when published, discloses abuses of human rights and interests
- may cause a reaction in readers and authorities
- may lead to changes in public policy and eventually social change

It is clear from the literature on investigative journalism that the overarching aim of investigative journalism – rectifying injustices and correcting improper or wrongful behaviour – is directly linked to the value and significance of democracy and its ideals (Mikela, 2001; Steenveld, 2002; Gunaratne, 2002:345). The following can be emphasised in this regard:

- Safeguarding the right to know (an important condition for a democracy)
- The importance of media freedom (for the preservation of a democracy)
- The importance of a credible media (functional in a democracy)
- Preventing an established (democratic) order from being undermined

The role of watchdogs should be highly regarded in all democracies, as it brings about transparency in the public domain. It is not just the media that fulfils this role through its investigative journalists; rather, there are numerous other professions or institutions that fulfil this role, such as the police, accountants, the legal system, commissions of enquiry, law makers, musicians and poets. Investigative journalists, however, embrace all of the above, because they also investigate all official watchdogs that are involved in corruption (including the media). Take a look, for example, at the *M&G*'s report of 5 March 2004 entitled "Who guards the guards?". Sam Sole (*M&G* 5 Mar 2004:6) writes that the *M&G* investigation "has exposed two highly placed lawyers who appear to have been on the run from their past for more than five years". The question is, though, whether the media can exercise a real and identifiable influence – do these investigations have clearly defined consequences and do they lead to clearly defined changes?

Although it is often difficult to identify direct cause/effect links, it is not impossible. Poor taste content, for example, is often linked to a bigger readership, greater viability and larger profits (De Fleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975:170). It is also possible to determine the effects of specific messages. The numerous case studies of Protess et al. (1991; 2001) identify specific consequences for each example of investigative journalism. Case studies and research on investigative journalism in the *VWB* also clearly showed the direct and indirect effects of those investigations – some effects eventually led to changes in public policy and social change in South Africa (Faure, 1995; 1997:2). Examples of the investigations include:

- Corrupt speculation with community houses (*VWB* 18 Nov 1988:3)
- Corruption, mismanagement and squandering of money by the SABC's "educational programming" section (*VWB* 11 Aug 1989:1)
- The existence of politically motivated murder gangs in the South African security police (*VWB* 17 Nov 1989:1)
- The close link between a prominent Stellenbosch academic and his research institute with the security community (*VWB* 2 Feb 1990:1)
- Cold-blooded and planned terrorism by right-wing groups (*VWB* 22 Jun 1990:1)
- Film producers' secret propaganda films for the SANDF and the security police (*VWB* 2 Aug 1991:4)
- The existence of a secret "third force" (*VWB* 30 Oct 1992:1)
- The existence of Apla's deadly "workshops" (*VWB* 19 Feb 1993:1)

Although media coverage is sometimes necessary because, without it, an issue might never be exposed, it is not always an adequate factor for change. It is generally part of a dynamic agenda-building process that is characterised by a variety of interactions "between the media, public and policy agenda" (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991; Lang & Lang, 1981).

#### 4. INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND THE AGENDA-BUILDING PERSPECTIVE

An important theoretical perspective in terms of which newspaper content can be analysed, is the well-known agenda-setting theory. The hypothesis of McCombs and Shaw (1972) that people think and talk about those matters that are emphasised in the media and that these matters frequently become issues and form part of the public agenda is still relevant today. The media thus plays an important role in forming perceptions about reality and about how important or unimportant some events become (Weaver, McCombs & Spellman, 1975; Severin & Tankard, 1988). The theory was developed further and adapted by, for example, the development of the agenda-building theory (Lang & Lang, 1981). This theory is believed to be appropriate for research and the content analysis of investigative journalism reports. According to the agenda-building theory, the context of agenda setting is taken into account when determining the effects thereof. This includes circumstances such as (Lang & Lang, 1981; Severin & Tankard, 1988; Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991; Protes, et al., 1991; Northmore, 1996; De Burgh, 2000; Waisbord, 1996; 1997; Willwerth, 2001; Aucoin, 1995):

- Whether media attention is necessary to expose an issue (it is often necessary but not always an adequate condition)
- Whether there is enough continuity to retain attention
- Whether the issue is far removed or close to the readers' normal lives
- Whether the issue is placed in perspective (eg "corruption" as a symptom of far-reaching political corruption)
- The placing of the report (e.g. front page articles are seen to contain important information) and the vocabulary used by the media (e.g. "scandal" has negative connotations)
- The links with secondary symbols (e.g. "We live in a democracy and it is in the public's best interests to expose these facts")
- Opinions by well-known and credible sources
- The credibility of the specific newspaper that undertook the investigation

It is clear from the above that investigative journalism does not originate and develop in a social vacuum. Gatekeepers, external regulators and other factors influence the agenda-building process. The so-called overflow effect to other media is also important for the eventual consequences of an investigation (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991:33-36). Investigations can thus have a chain reaction within the media; they are particularly effective when they place new issues on the public agenda.

#### 5. INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN THE *M&G*

Since investigative journalism does not generally form part of daily news coverage, the universe for the research was not limited to a random sample – all the editions of the *M&G* (2002-2003) formed part of the research. Out of a total of 101 editions, 20 cases of investigative journalism were identified according to a model that gives direction to the qualitative content analysis of investigative journalism. Follow-up reports on investigations also include those found in the 2004 editions.

The model below is derived from academic literature on definitions, descriptions and characteristics of investigative journalism, involving the following seven elements: (see Addendum A for a description of the elements used in the model):

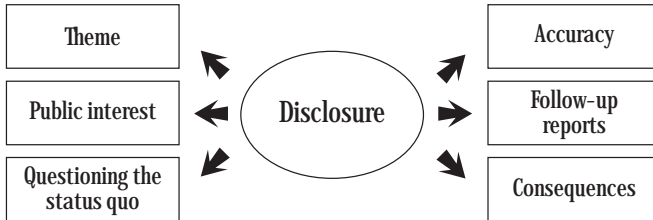


Figure 1: A model for the qualitative content analysis of investigative journalism

“Disclosure” is the most important part of the model. The remaining elements are of equal importance. Most of the “disclosures” identified in the *M&G* deal with some form of corruption, which is linked to political role players. The global theme is corruption in the form of conflicting interests and the mismanagement of public funds. Here are some examples of this corruption:

- The Minister of Minerals and Energy buys a traditional diamond tiara at an unbelievably low price from a prominent diamond dealer. This diamond dealer is a prominent member of the state's diamond board (*M&G* 25 Jan 2002).
- The head of Spoomet buys property at a fraction of its value and then gets Spoomet to renovate it using public funds (*M&G* 3 May 2002).
- Fraud, corruption and mismanagement result in the suspension of a poverty alleviation project in Gauteng (*M&G* 25 Oct 2002).
- The head of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), a government body responsible for air traffic safety, is also a director and shareholder of a private company that tenders and benefits from CAA contracts (*M&G* 29 Nov 2002).
- Corruption by members of the South African Maritime Authority (SAMSA) (*M&G* 24 Jan 2003).
- The “influence-for-shares scandal” by highly placed members of the ANC (*M&G* 14 Feb 2003:1).
- The concealment of private interests by the Minister of Defence, Mosiuoa Lekota (*M&G* 16 May 2003).
- Mpumalanga's Minister of Public Works receives R1 million from a private company that has contracts with his department (*M&G* 31 Oct 2003).

When confronted about conflicts of interest, highly placed politicians generally answer that their business is conducted in their private capacity. In the *M&G*'s editorial comment entitled “One comrade, one company”, the editor criticises this attitude as pure nonsense (*M&G* 5 Mar 2004:32):

Business leaders are not lining up to do business with them [public officials] because of their acumen with a balance sheet, or knowledge of the oil industry, or ability to run a mine. Their attraction lies in their tantalising proximity to power; in their perceived ability to swing a tender; in their knowledge of how the ANC works and thinks; in their ability to get a feisty policy softened.

In addition to the fact that readers were made aware of these problems, a number of direct consequences were identified in most cases. Direct consequences can be divided into the following categories:

- Official actions (legal follow-up actions, such as actions by the Scorpions, which lead to arrests and court cases) (*M&G* 10 May 2002; 20 Feb 2004)
- Problems for individuals (public figures are reprimanded or commissions of enquiry are appointed; public figures lose face; they may be demoted or be dismissed; a combination of the above-mentioned may also be used) (*M&G* 10 Oct 2003)
- Consequences for the newspaper that initiated the investigation (e.g. an award for the journalist) (*M&G* 19 Sept 2003; 26 Sept 2003) or a libel case against the newspaper (*M&G* 27 Feb 2004).

The following is a case study of a randomly selected investigation conducted by the *M&G*. The model used to direct the qualitative content analysis was developed and applied to research pertaining to the *VWB* (Faure 1995; 1997).

Publication:	<i>M&amp;G</i> 31 October 2003:1
Headline:	"The dirtiest politician in SA?"
Investigative journalists:	Matuma Letsoalo and Wisani wa ka Ngobeni ( <i>M&amp;G</i> )

### 5.1 Disclosure

Mpumalanga's Minister of Public Works, Steve Mabona, received R1 million from a private company that has contracts with his department.

### 5.2 Theme

On the front page, under the heading "The dirtiest politician in SA?", *M&G* readers are made immediately aware of possible corruption by a government official. The importance that the newspaper attributes to the story is emphasised by the large heading and the large photograph three-quarter of a page) of the subject on the front page. The question mark in the heading raises the question of whether or not the newspaper believes there is a dirtier politician in South Africa. It can, however, also be argued that the *M&G*'s investigation has not yet provided real answers. The possibility of corruption is emphasised in this way.

Although the people in question attempted to stop the publication of this story by asking for a court interdict, the first three pages of this edition are dedicated to the exposure. The reader is made aware that Mabona received R1 million within three days of the contract

being awarded to Walter Senoka, the head of Positioning Corporate Underwriters and Insurance Consultants (PCUIC). Mabona and the others involved deny that this payment was a "kickback" and assert that it was for private purposes. They used words such as "lawful transaction", "nothing irregular", "[nothing] corrupt" and "unlawful" to protest their innocence. Mabona's explanations, however, merely led to more critical questions by the *M&G*. The *M&G* refers, among other things, to various conflicting utterances by the people in question. The result of this development is that the R6,6 million transaction between the PCUIC and the Department will now be officially investigated. In another report in this edition, the *M&G* gives Mabona a chance to tell his story in his own words.

### 5.3 Public interest

The public must be made aware that government contracts are often awarded in a corrupt manner by public officials in positions of power. The *M&G* (31 Oct 2004:2) writes that even if the transactions were private, "conflict-of-interest questions remain about his [Mabona] engaging privately with a man [Senoka] whose company [PCUIC] had business from his department".

Furthermore, Judge Eberhard Bertelsmann dismissed, with costs, the attempt to obtain an interdict against the *M&G* to prevent the publication of this information. The Judge found that "even if information relied on by the *M&G* had been of 'tainted' origin, which was not proven, that would have been outweighed by the public's right to know" (*M&G* 31 Oct 2003:3).

### 5.4 Questioning the status quo

The *M&G* is seriously questioning and addressing the idea that government officials seem to believe that their conflicts of interest are acceptable and of a private nature. (Public officials, in this case Steve Mabona, contravene their own laws, rules and regulations, which befit the democratic order that they helped to create.)

### 5.5 Accuracy

It appears from the various reports that the *M&G* made a serious attempt to provide a balanced and accurate account of their investigation. They approached various relevant sources for comments, including Mabona. Mabona gave his account in a comprehensive report and included comments from his attorney, Phatudi Maponya. Furthermore, the existence and receipt of payment by the attorney's firm, Stan Fanaroff & Associates, was confirmed. Mike Makweya made a statement under oath and other (court) documents were made available to the *M&G*.

### 5.6 Follow-up reports

Follow-up reports appeared in eight additional editions of the *M&G* (7 Nov 2003; 14 Nov 2003; 21 Nov 2003; 5 Dec 2003; 9 Jan 2004; 16 Jan 2004; 20 Feb 2004; 18 Jun 2004; 9 Jul 2004). Follow-up reports also appeared in other newspapers, such as *The City Press* (30

Nov 2003; 7 Dec 2003); *Sowetan* (19 Dec 2003), *The Star* (19 Dec 2003) and *Beeld* (20 Dec 2003).

Although the *M&G* was prohibited by means of a court interdict from publishing any further follow-up reports about the PCUIC – because, according to those concerned, there was insufficient time to answer the *M&G*'s questions (*M&G* 7 Nov 2003:3) – the *M&G* looked elsewhere to find proof of Mabona's corruption. The reader is made aware of, among other things, family business connections who benefit from Mabona's official position and that the *M&G* regards the matter as serious enough to include it as headline news once again. The message is clear: "The dust is not going to settle" and Mabona should take responsibility for his actions.

In the *M&G*'s follow-up reports (14 Nov 2003), it was reported that the interdict that prevented the *M&G* from reporting further on the transactions between Mabona and Senoko had been lifted. Despite the *M&G*'s proof of corruption and warrants of arrest for Walter Senoko, Mike Makweya (head of the PCUIC) and William Mthombothi (the executive head of Mpumalanga's Department of Public Works), Mabona still denies any involvement. The *M&G*'s questions to Mabona still remain unanswered. His explanations are generally "riddled with inconsistencies" (*M&G* 21 Nov 2003:4). In a further news report, the *M&G* questions, for various reasons, the neutrality or impartiality of official investigations (*M&G* 21 Nov 2003:4). In all the following follow-up articles, the reader is made aware of the continuing Mabona saga and the fact that the three main players (Senoko, Makweya and Mthombothi) have been formally charged with fraud. Mabona still denies any wrongdoing.

According to the *M&G* (9 Jan 2004:6), the official handling of Mabona's involvement leaves a lot to be desired. The *M&G* writes as follows in this regard:

- "The 'exoneration' of Mpumalanga's public works minister is ... based on a flimsy and insubstantial investigation ... the probe ignored glaring facts, which even an artful whitewash cannot disregard."
- "Reading the report, we wondered how its conclusions – that Mabona did not benefit – could have been reached credibly."
- "The only witnesses who made submissions to the [investigative] team were Mabona and his officials – hardly a balanced investigation."
- "What is needed is a tougher ministerial code and more effective mechanisms to prevent a replay of the Mabona affair."

The result of these complaints was that Mabona's department was once again investigated, this time by the province's Auditor-General, Douglas Maphiri. Maphiri confirmed that the investigation would look at all the questions posed by the *M&G* (*M&G* 16 Jan 2004:10).

In another edition (20 Feb 2004), it was reported that Mabona's head of department, William Mthombothi, had appeared in a Pretoria regional court on charges of fraud. Mabona still denies any involvement.

Lastly, the reader is made aware that until the April 2004 election, Mabona was still a minister responsible for the Department. Since then, however, his post has been scaled down to that of "ordinary member of legislature" (*M&G* 18 Jun 2004:6). The authorities have stepped in, but there are still many questions that remain unanswered.

### 5.7 Consequences

There are a number of direct consequences that have resulted from the investigation, namely:

- The use of court interdicts in an attempt to prohibit the publication of original and follow-up information
- The continued denial of any involvement by the people in question
- Various official actions such as the appointment of commissions of enquiry and arrests
- Court cases
- Continued criticism by the *M&G*'s investigative team of discrepancies in official actions

An awareness of injustices and wrongful actions can lead to action, that is, action in the form of investigations (e.g. government departments). Investigative journalism can easily serve as a catalyst for change in these departments.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

To draw general conclusions from a single case study is generally risky, as it touches on the well-known shortcomings of induction. Case studies can also not conclusively verify general statements, but they can conclusively refute or falsify general statements (Popper, 1959). The general findings of the *M&G* case study are, however, reinforced by similar findings in the *VWB* case study (Faure, 1995; 1997). In this sense, similar findings in a series of case studies may contribute and support tentative generalisations about the impact and consequences of investigative journalism in democratic societies.

Certain general and similar findings from the present and previous case studies provide an indication of the importance that the world of media attaches to investigative journalism. The following findings are relevant here:

- A disclosure will always make the headlines and so too will many follow-up reports. These reports are often accompanied by photographs of the people in question as well as editorial comment in the same or follow-up editions.
- Headlines and related reports on investigations are often characterised by colourful language that aims to shock or draw attention (e.g. "The dirtiest politician in SA?" [*M&G* 31 Oct 2003]; "... the dirty empire" [*M&G* 7 Nov 2003]; and "Oh dear, minister, you fibbed" [*M&G* 14 Nov 2003]).
- Follow-up reports generally refer to the original disclosure and are written by the journalists who first exposed the problem.
- New revelations lead to further investigations of people or institutions by the newspaper responsible for the investigation and/or by other newspapers that follow the example.

The British newspaper, the *Guardian*, for example, was responsible for the "original" disclosure of the Inkatha scandal. The *VWB* and the *Weekly Mail* followed up this story with their own investigations (*VWB* 9 Aug 1991; Faure 1995, 1997). Another example refers to the Mabona scandal. The *M&G* (7 Nov 2003) conducted further investigations into his activities (after a court interdict prevented them from publishing any further details of their original disclosure).

It is thus possible to talk about a ripple effect or a wave action – the media accept that a particular type of corruption is prevalent and they investigate it further. Official steps are often taken after such reports are repeatedly published.

There are, however, also important differences between the present and the previous case studies. These differences can be traced back to the different contexts (e.g. unbending external regulations within which the media once had to function) (Hachten & Giffard, 1984; Jackson, 1993; Tyson, 1993). The former South African government merely paid lip service to press freedom. It claimed to be placing a high premium on press freedom, while simultaneously forcing the press to control itself and become the victim of self-censorship. When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, not only did the political system change, but the press was also affected in a positive way.

However, authorities do not generally like investigations by the media, but they tolerate them as part of media practice in a democracy. It is interesting to note in this regard that investigations are even encouraged in some circles these days. Compare the following in this regard: no *VWB* journalist was given any media award, but the opposite is true for *M&G* journalists. Some newspapers even warned their freelance journalists not to write for the *VWB* (*VWB* 18 Nov 1988; 25 Nov 1988). The social and political climate of the time meant that investigations (focusing primarily on politically motivated actions) were strongly condemned by the authorities of the time and, where possible, authorities reprimanded journalists and newspapers. In recent years, however, *M&G* journalists have received regular awards for various distinctive journalism categories – a previous editor of the *M&G* referred to them as the "*M&G*'s award-winning streak" (*M&G* 11 Apr 2003:2).

Wisani wa ka Ngobeni, Sam Sole, Matuma Letsoalo and Stefaans Brummer were all nominated and received awards for their investigations into the scandals of Jacob Zuma, Steve Mabona, Mosiuoa Lekota, Trevor Abrahams and the illegal purchase of Saddam Hussein's oil (*M&G* 11 Apr 2003; 19 Sep 03; 26 Sep 2003; 12 Mar 2004; 25 Jun 2004). (Compare recent awards by Mondi Newspaper Awards, Vodacom Journalist of the Year Awards, and the CNN African Journalist of the Year Awards.)

The presentation of awards to investigative journalists reinforces the idea that this journalism practice – which pursues democratic ideals – is highly rated in media circles. A previous editor of the *M&G*, Mondli Makhanya, stated in this regard: "We seek to deepen democratic values and promote an open Society" (*M&G* 19 Sep 2003:3). Remarks by the judges of these awards emphasise the importance of "research, perseverance and persistence in exposing cases of fraud and corruption" (*M&G* 11 Apr 2003:2).

### 6.1 Résumé

Finally, the effects of investigative journalism must be seen as part of a process. Various factors influence it, such as the confidentiality of an investigation, the reliability of sources, the reaction of other media, and official actions and reactions. This process can be depicted graphically as follows:

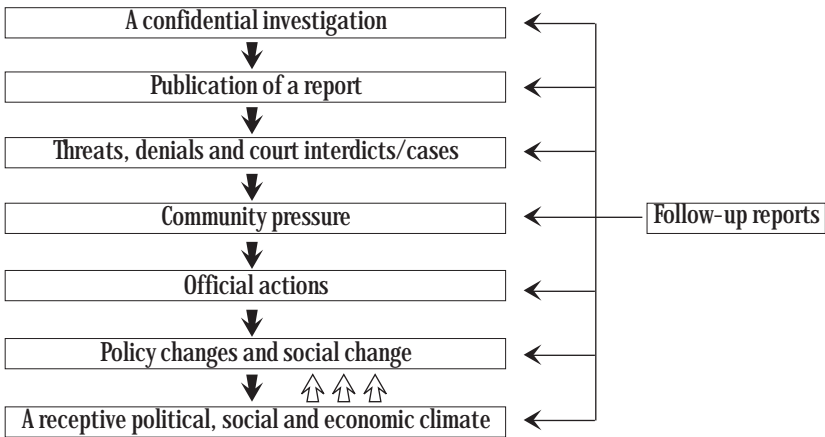


Figure 2: The symbiotic relationship between investigative journalism and its consequences

In conclusion, all the investigations initiated by the *M&G* and the *VWB* should be seen as so-called unobtrusive issues. The public would have had little or no direct experience of the global theme of the investigations. This means that the public would have depended on the media for their information. Information on corruption in high circles is particularly relevant to a new democracy such as South Africa. The public is still uncertain about whether South Africa will survive as a real democracy with adequate corrective measures to counter-balance the dominant power and authority by a single party.

Public interest and human rights are highly regarded in a democracy, and any violation or infringement of these rights by highly placed people in government circles or other societal institutions is strongly condemned. The disclosure to the public of any form of corrupt practice that belittles or ignores democratic ideals, as it were, can eventually lead to social change (changing values, attitudes and opinions that culminate in observable and measurable actions, such as policy change) (Faure, 1997:12; De Witt, 2000). Although the *M&G* case study has a number of direct consequences, the cause/effect link in terms of social change may take a little longer. It may take years to make the "honesty of government" an issue (Severin & Tankard 1988:279). However, by regarding investigative journalism as a priority, newspapers and other media will make a real contribution to "keeping authorities on their toes". All the role players will become aware that corruption

will come to the attention of the media at some time and that corruption is a serious issue in a democratic society.

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## Newspapers

### *Mail & Guardian*

25 January 2002; 3 May 2002; 10 May 2002; 25 October 2002; 29 November 2002; 24 January 2003; 14 February 2003; 11 April 2003; 16 May 2003; 19 September 2003; 26 September 2003; 10 October 2003; 31 October 2003; 7 November 2003; 14 November 2003; 21 November 2003; 5 December 2003; 9 January 2004; 16 January 2004; 16 February 2004; 20 February 2004; 27 February 2004; 5 March 2004; 12 March 2004; 30 April 2004; 18 June 2004; 25 June 2004; 9 July 2004.

### *Vrye Weekblad*

4 November 1988; 11 November 1988; 18 November 1988; 25 November 1988; 11 August 1989; 2 December 1989; 11 November 1989; 17 November 1989; 27 October 1989; 23 June 1989; 10 March 1989; 6 November 1989; 17 November 1989; 2 February 1990; 22 June 1990; 2 August 1991; 9 August 1991; 30 October 1992; 19 February 1993.

### *Sowetan*

22 June 1989; 19 December 2003.

### *Beeld*

26 January 1989; 20 December 2003.

### *The Star*

26 January 1989; 19 December 2003.

### *The City Press*

30 November 2003; 7 December 2003.

### *The Citizen*

6 December 1988; 14 February 1989; 21 October 1989.

### *The Pretoria News*

22 June 1989.

### *Business Day*

26 January 1989; 22 June 1989.

### Addendum A:

An explanation of the seven elements of the model that can give direction to the qualitative content analysis of investigative journalism:

**Disclosure:** This refers to the publication of new information that was consciously kept secret, that impacts on human rights, that damages interests and that is aimed at changing what was disclosed.

**Theme:** This refers to the "global topic a news item is about" (Van Dijk 1985:69). A single "global" theme or various themes can be identified in a report.

**Public interest:** This refers, with certain qualifications<sup>1</sup>, to the public's *right to know* in a democratic society.

**Questioning the status quo:** This refers to the right of existence of a specific status quo order (e.g. the apartheid state) or aspects of the status quo order (e.g. wrongful actions by people in positions of power; these actions are in conflict with the democratic values that are generally supported or should be supported in a status quo order).

**Accuracy:** This refers to the unique process of gathering information relevant to investigative journalism – journalists make doubly sure of their facts and the various sides of a matter to avoid possible libel cases and the loss of credibility.

**Follow-up reports:** This refers to the need to have follow-up reports in one's own newspaper and in other newspapers to procure official reaction and readers' reactions.

**Consequences:** This refers to the ultimate goal of investigative journalism, that is, to make readers and particularly policy makers aware of society's problems and deficiencies through agenda setting.

### End note

- 1 There are three aspects that are important in terms of public interest in a democratic society, namely:
  - The media has the right and the duty to expose wrongful actions
  - The media must take its own ethical codes into consideration (e.g. right to privacy, good taste, respect the interests of those concerned)
  - The media should maintain a balance between an individual's privacy and the public's *right to know*