

Too cosy for comfort?

A media ethical investigation into the Presidential Press Corps

by

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date: 14 February 2003

The Presidential Press Corps

Summary

Government and the media are in the process of establishing South Africa's first Presidential Press Corps (PPC) based on the White House Press Corps in the United States of America.

The need for a body like the Presidential Press Corps (PPC) has become increasingly evident as the recent relationship between the South African president and this country's press can only be characterised as poor.

The establishment of the PPC potentially presents an ethical dilemma though due to various factors. A journalist can only serve the public with the most comprehensive and accurate news when his or her finger is on the pulse of events that take place within the decision-making bodies. However, being so close to those in power may seriously threaten journalistic independence. This dilemma would be discussed in detail in this assignment.

In May 2001, the troubled relationship between Mbeki and the media was tackled at an Indaba between the South African National Editor's Forum (SANEF) and cabinet at Sun City. The crux and outcome of these discussions are set forth in *The Way Forward*, a report prepared by those attending the Indaba. The establishment of the PPC is one of eight joint government and media initiatives outlined in this report.

Although there is overwhelming support for the PPC, there is concern that the PPC members would be censored, manipulated and controlled by government as a result of their proximity. The Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) believes the implications are far reaching and pose a serious threat to a free press.

This first group of PPC journalists is going where no other has gone before in this country's history. They are however facing a daunting task, as the arena they are entering is fraught with novelties, challenges, obstacles and temptations.

This assignment will examine the media's role in a democracy, the challenges of far closer cooperation between the media and government, the ethical dilemma potentially presented by the PPC as well as ways to ensure as far as possible, an ethical and professional relationship between government and the corps's members.



Die Presidensiële Perskorps

Opsomming

Die regering en die media is in die proses om Suid-Afrika se eerste Presidensiële Perskorps (PPK) te stig. Die konsep is geskoei op dié van die Wit Huis Perskorps in die Verenigde State van Amerika.

‘n Dringende behoefte bestaan in Suid-Afrika aan ‘n liggaam soos die PPK aangesien dit duidelik geword het dat die verhouding tussen die president en die media nie na wense is nie. Die stigting van die PPK kan egter weens verskeie faktore eties-problematies wees.

Joernaliste kan die publiek slegs voorsien van akkurate nuus indien hulle vingers op die polsslag van gebeure binne die land se besluitnemende liggame is. Joernalistieke onafhanklikheid kan egter in gedrang kom indien die verhouding tussen die “waghand” en die regering te intiem raak. Die PPK-lede sal na verwagting weens gereelde kontak ‘n veel hegte verhouding met die president hê as wat die geval is met ander joernaliste.

Die vertroebelde verhouding tussen die media en president Thabo Mbeki is in Mei 2001 bespreek tydens ‘n Indaba by Sun City. Een van die inisiatiewe waarop daar ooreengekom is in ‘n poging om die probleme aan te pak, is die stigting van die PPK. Die Suid-Afrikaanse Nasionale Redakteursforum en die regering hoop dat die korps sal bydra tot ‘n vryer vloeï van inligting asook tot ‘n beter verstandhouding tussen die regering en die media.

Hoewel daar oorweldigende steun is vir die PPK, is daar ook vrese dat die korps se lede gemanupuleer en beheer sal word deur die kabinet.

Die eerste groep PPK-lede gaan baanbrekerswerk verrig, maar die pad voor hulle is onbekend en vol potensiële gevare. Die uitdagings, slaggate sowel as maniere hoe etiese probleme oorkom kan word, word in hierdie werkstuk bespreek.

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**This assignment is dedicated to my parents, Gerrit and
Bettie van Zyl**

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The Presidential Press Corps

1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

The most powerful American journalist ever, Walter Lippmann, remarked during his farewell address that journalism had convinced him “many presidents ago that there should be a large air space between a journalist and a head of state” (Altschull, 1990:310).

The “Pontiff of the Press”, as Lippmann was called, however did not follow his own advice. He believed remaining close to those in power was the only way to identify and recognise the main issues of the day (Altschull, 1990:310).

This anomaly is apparent in the ethical dilemma potentially presented by South Africa’s first Presidential Press Corps (PPC). A journalist can only serve the public with the most comprehensive and accurate news when his or her finger is on the pulse of events that take place within the decision-making bodies. However, being so close to those in power may seriously threaten journalistic independence. This dilemma would be discussed in detail in the assignment that follows.

The need for a body like the Presidential Press Corps has become increasingly evident though, as the recent relationship between the president and the press can only be characterised as poor.

In March 2001, South African president Thabo Mbeki told a meeting of editors in Pretoria that it was “just pressure of work” that had kept him from maintaining regular contact with this country’s media (Barrell, 2001: 5).

Mbeki, who has been bitterly criticised for his inaccessibility and lack of communication with the media, acknowledged that there were shortcomings in the manner that the presidency and the government had dealt with the press. The media have slammed the president, among others, for his "silent diplomacy" on the Zimbabwean issue and for not doing enough to address the spread of Aids in South Africa (Louw 2001). The Aids epidemic provoked considerable tension between the government and the media after president Mbeki publicly disputed the orthodox scientific view that Aids is caused by HIV. The presidency has even admitted that Mbeki's image is starting to suffer.

In a new democracy like South Africa, the president's public image is of crucial importance, as the people's confidence in government needs to be built. This cannot be done if the president seems to be inaccessible, or the presidency not visible or transparent enough.

Mbeki has also come under fire for his incessant overseas travel, leaving local matters often unattended (Mulholland 2002). Editors have also been complaining about the poorly trained government communicators. Western Cape radio station Kfm 94.5's news editors for instance, have on more than one occasion made mention in the office of the inadequate or delayed replies when government communicators are approached for comment.

Mbeki's government was sharply criticised in late August 2000, when the Defense Ministry reportedly attempted to restrict contact with the media on the grounds that its press office needed restructuring. A similar news blackout had been imposed weeks earlier by the Heath Special Investigative Unit, which announced that it would not release data about crime victims until such time as it had established 'a workmanlike media policy' (FXI Report 2000). The decision caused an outcry among the local press, which has devoted much attention to South Africa's surging crime rates.

Cabinet on the other hand has been accusing the media of being too critical. Mbeki has on more than one occasion expressed concern about the poor level of especially political reporting in South Africa. A lack of pride and general professionalism are other gripes the president has with the media. Mbeki has alleged that reporters sometimes write stories, pretending to have canvassed government's views (Barrell, 2001: 5).

To a question what the parameters are when it comes to criticism of a public figure, Mbeki said it was "up to the conscience of each editor" to establish these parameters (Barrell, 2001: 5).

In May 2001, the troubled relationship between Mbeki and the media was tackled at an Indaba between the South African National Editor's Forum (SANEF) and cabinet at Sun City. The parties acknowledged the "level of mistrust and animosity" between them, which they believe is based on a lack of understanding of the each other's functioning as well as inadequate channels of information. Cabinet and SANEF admitted to a communication gulf existing between them, which has resulted in many misunderstandings. It was agreed upon "while there was a necessary tension between government and the media in a democracy, this need not be characterised by animosity". The crux and outcome of these discussions are set forth in *The Way Forward*, a report prepared by those attending the Indaba.

To quote from the document's preamble:

"The Cabinet-SANEF Indaba represented a historic moment in the relationship between government and the media."

According to the Government Communications and Information System, (GCIS), which is primarily responsible for communication between government and the electorate, *The Way Forward* spells out ways of ensuring a better flow of information; improving government communication; improvements in the performance of the media;

international issues; joint government and media initiatives and deepening freedom of expression.

The establishment of the PPC, based on the lines of the White House Press Corps in the United States of America, is one of eight joint government and media initiatives outlined in *The Way Forward*. The intention to build bridges between government and the media can clearly be seen by the various initiatives. The others are, as quoted from this document:

- Economic Cabinet Cluster to brief journalists and editors more frequently on significant and substantive issues, in context of agreed rules of engagement
- Explore exchange of internships
- Minister of Finance to initiate a pilot project with regard to the above two points
- Expand investment in training of both government communicators and media professionals
- Nurture mutual respect on the part of both institutions
- Initiate a pilot project for more regular briefings
- Arrange a meeting of government and media owners

1.2 The selection process – sex, lies and videotape

The birth of the PPC has not been an easy one. The corps was scheduled to begin operation on 30 April 2002, but the Final Working Document was only tabled for discussion in December 2002.

The corps will have two representatives each from the following media organisations (GCIS Media Statement 2002):

Beeld

The Citizen

Independent Newspapers

Sowetan

Business Day

Natal Witness

Die Volksblad

Sunday Times

Sunday World

City Press

Rapport

SAPA

News24

Financial Mail

SABC

e-TV

Jacaranda FM

Kfm 94.5

Radio 702

PPC facilitator, *The Citizen's* Assistant Editor, Hopewell Radebe, said in an interview for this assignment, the formal launch would follow after final consultations between cabinet and SANEF. These consultations would only take place once both parties have reached agreement on certain points of contention, which would be discussed in more depth below.

Although the establishment of the PPC carries the support of media organisations countrywide, the selection process was met with an uproar. The outcry followed the questioning of candidates by the National Intelligence Agency as part of PPC-members' security clearance (Matisonn: 2002).

In February and March 2002, journalists were subjected to questions of an intensely personal nature, so much so that Intelligence Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, later apologised for the "insensitive and unsavoury questions" (sabcnews.com 2002; *Dispatch* Online 2002; AfricaOnline.com 2002).

The questions that incurred the wrath of journalists were especially those about their sex lives. These included the amount of sexual partners they have had and whether he or she has slept with members of the same sex. Some of the applicants even had to provide a list of names of colleagues who would be able to testify about their sex lives. Another sex-related question was whether the candidate would provide sex in exchange for information. Married journalists were asked to comment on the state of their marriages.

South African newspapers and websites reported Sisulu's comments from the 21st to the 23rd of April, quoting her as saying that certain "over zealous" members of the NIA might have "gone overboard during the non-standard interview". The minister's office also said the nature of the NIA's questions was never discussed by the GCIS and journalists.

In its reaction, the NIA said it was not the journalists' sexuality or their sexual behaviour that had to be judged. According to the agency they had to determine whether anyone had something to hide, something they could be blackmailed with later (News24.com 2002).

In a *Sunday Independent* interview with the longest-serving member of the White House press corps in April 2002, Helen Thomas expressed her shock and disbelief with the questions posed to candidates. She told the newspaper that the security clearance for White House Press Corps members involved checking their credentials and verifying their professional work, but never their private lives. "They have no right to do it. It

would be unconstitutional. It would hurt free journalism in South Africa and make the country a laughing stock. This kind of thing would ruin South Africa's reputation” (Matisonn: 2002).

The selection scenario was sketched via e-mail to Bob Steele from the Poynter Institute in the United States of America. His response was as follows: “I don't believe the government should determine who covers the president (or any government official) nor how these journalists operate.”

SANEF also expressed concern over the reports that some journalists had been asked questions they were not comfortable about answering. The forum's president, Mathatha Tsedu, said: “Our standpoint is that questions asked to applicants should be modelled on those asked for instance by the White House and which are concerned with the security of the state”. It is Tsedu's opinion that government, editors and individual journalists should have determined the types of questions. SANEF's council resolved that because of the continuing controversy, the interview process be held in abeyance until the matter has been resolved (SANEF Newsletter: May 2002).

Of an entirely different opinion was Parliament's joint standing committee on Intelligence who came out in support of the NIA and criticised the media for “gross misrepresentation” (Kfm 94.5 news archive).

Presidential spokesperson, Bheki Khumalo, said the presidency should not comment on the questions. He did add however that he saw nothing sinister in the process, as “vetting of journalists was done all over the world” (Donaldson, 2002: 2).

The media has won the battle after the NIA has agreed not to probe journalists about their sexuality if further interviews need be. The struggle however is far from over. Radebe says the United States of America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was approached for input on recruitment after the debacle. Its feedback was discussed when the GCIS and the PPC's Interim Committee met on 9 December 2002. The purpose of this meeting was to finalise the PPC Final Working Document. However, after consultation with the CIA, the document was not accepted by all present, and as a result the launch of the PPC will have to be postponed for a while longer.

The CIA says thorough scrutiny is the order of the day for journalists in Great Britain, the United States and Germany, and that the same procedure should be followed in South Africa by the NIA. According to the CIA one of the dangers is that journalists who work and travel with their countries' respective leaders, often become targets of foreign intelligence agencies, wishing to recruit them.

The NIA has now come forward with two options, one being a basic entrance requirement to be a PPC member, and the other a Top Security Clearance. Journalists who would want to travel with the president would have to undergo further intensive scrutiny in the form of more interviews as well as polygraph tests. Candidates' friends and family would also be interviewed. Those who would just attend briefings would only need a basic security clearance.

Radebe says it is the responsibility of the NIA to safeguard the president, and although no further questions of a sexual nature would be asked, no stone would be left unturned in establishing whether a potential PPC member poses any kind of risk to the president.

This new development, coupled by the fact that a clause in South Africa's National Security in the Promotion of Access to Information Act protects confidential government documents, have put the launch of the PPC on halt. It can be expected that PPC members will have access to such documents when in the company or travelling with cabinet ministers. Members of cabinet may even choose to reveal some of the content, although it would be strictly off the record.

The Act defines "subversive or hostile" activities as aggression against the Republic; sabotage or terrorism aimed at the people of the Republic or a strategic asset of the Republic, whether inside or outside the country; an activity aimed at changing the Constitution order of the Republic by the use of force or violence; or a foreign or hostile intelligence operation (Retief, 2002: 31).

“The main defence and security exemption in the Act is contained in Section 41(1), which provides that the information officer of a public body may refuse a request for access to a record of the body if its disclosure could reasonably be expected to cause prejudice in the defence or the security of the Republic” (Retief, 2002: 31). Retief says although the value accorded to national security is widely recognised as a vital and legitimate concept, “there is an urgent need to define the meaning of ‘national security’ in a comprehensive and consistent way” (2002:31).

South Africa’s Bill of Rights acknowledges freedom of expression and access to information as basic human rights, yet neither is absolute. Retief (2002:27) says “the right to obtain and disseminate information and ideas is not absolute; it is constantly under pressure from other values such as privacy, national security, public order and public health amongst others”.

Radebe believes the problem of conflict of interest arises, as PPC members who do obtain top-secret documents, will not be able to reveal the content “at any cost”. The presidency’s security office made it clear that a journalist will be charged with breaking the law if top-secret information leaks out. A concerned Radebe mentions the Watergate and Muldergate scandals and says if it were not for journalists who obtained confidential government information, the wrongdoing by the United States and South African governments would not have been exposed.

According to Radebe only a few of the representatives at the 9 December meeting voiced serious objections to the punishment of journalists who violate confidentiality agreements. The Act is now being studied after which the respective parties would meet again.

Radebe says it is of crucial importance that the media’s role be recognised and respected. Representatives of the media sector have agreed that the president should draw up a document of understanding regarding the media’s role in South Africa - one that would serve as a blueprint for at least another 20 years. According to Radebe, this

document/declaration must also cater for extreme scenarios such as what a PPC member is to do when for instance he/she discovers a nuclear secret or finds the president or a cabinet minister in a compromising position. To reveal or not to reveal such information would have to be clarified. This declaration will govern the future relationship between the media and government.

1.3 The Final Working Document

THE FINAL WORKING DOCUMENT

Membership

Members are all senior journalists and would have as much unhindered access to the president as possible. These journalists will have greater access to information, and would as a result gain a greater understanding of the workings of government.

Operation

The pivot of the PPC will be weekly briefings by senior government members, including the president, deputy president, ministers, directors-general and other senior public officials. These briefings, to be conducted at a centralised venue (possibly the Union Buildings in Pretoria) at a stipulated regular time, will be deemed to be “on the record” until indicated otherwise.

¹

When the need arises for “off the record” briefings, the necessity and nature of these briefings will be negotiated by delegated government officials and a representative

¹ This document is a direct transcript by the PPC Interim Committee, resulting from talks with government representatives.

structure of the PPC.

The “off the record” briefings will take two forms:

1. “*Off the record*” *and not for attribution*. Information may be used but not attributed to a particular individual. Precise sourcing must be agreed upon by both sides.
2. “*Off the record*” *and not for use*. Information is purely for background and may not be used until further notice.

Both sides will strive to minimise the latter option, as it is not ideal for the flow of information. However, those PPC members who may feel they object in principle to the latter option, will be obliged to respect the negotiated arrangement by a representative structure as it does not preclude individuals from securing information through other avenues.

Failure to abide by the negotiated arrangements could result in sanction after due discussion and reflection by members of the PPC. Again the spirit underlying the briefings will be the need to facilitate the flow of information to the public.

Logistics

Media companies shall be responsible for the financial and logistical arrangements of running the PPC. Government will however be expected to provide certain facilities such as a briefing room and a limited but reasonable range of working and filing facilities. The extent of these facilities will be the subject of an ongoing negotiation between the government, a representative structure of the PPC and a recognised structure of the industry. At all times it will be understood that government will bear minimal financial burden for the functioning of the PPC.

Travel

As the primary rationale for the PPC is improved access to information, there will be occasion for members to travel with the president, deputy president and ministers - both domestically and internationally.

Government will endeavour to provide an annual calendar of important international engagements by the president, the deputy president and ministers. These will be regularly updated. Members of the PPC will recognise and respect that there will be times, when for security reasons, these travel arrangements are not to be made public information. The government will be encouraged to provide full consular facilities for members of the PPC travelling with a government delegation.

There is an undertaking from government that accommodation will be made for media representatives to travel on the presidential jet. As space on the jet is limited, a representative structure of the PPC and a reconsidered structure of the industry will have to work out a formula for the use of this facility and the financial implications thereof. There will also be ongoing consultation with government on the optimal use of this facility.

Pooling, rotational and financial arrangements shall be discussed by the PPC and GCIS. When not traveling in the presidential jet, PPC members will liaise with the relevant government office as to the optimal travel and accommodation arrangements as well as transport logistics at a said destination. Members of the PPC travelling with the president and/or a government delegation will receive one or more briefings per day from government representatives. The president will also provide at least one comprehensive briefing during a said foreign visit. The nature of these briefings will be conducted along the guidelines detailed under *Operations*.

Media houses will at all times bear the costs of travel and there will be no obligation on government to facilitate travel for any member of the PPC unless otherwise negotiated by

the PPC or a recognised structure of the industry.

At all times interaction between members of government ministers/officials and members of the PPC on foreign travel will be guided by the principle of improving access to accurate information.

Functioning

Members of the PPC will on an annual basis elect an Executive Committee of no more than 10 members. This structure may change from time to time. This committee will consist of the following:

Chairperson

Deputy Chairperson

Secretary / Treasurer

Print representative

Radio representative

Television representative

Wire /Internet representative

Parliamentary representative

Two additional members

While the duties and functions of the Executive Committee will be elaborated and expanded upon during the first annual general meeting, its main tasks will be:

1. Ensuring the smooth running of the PPC
2. Liaising with the government on matters affecting the PPC
3. Liaising with media houses on matters affecting the PPC
4. Liaising with recognised industry structures on matters affecting the PPC and journalism in general
5. Liaising with possible sponsors on possible projects to ensure the enhancement of

professionalism and skills of PPC members

6. Ensuring that the principles of *The Way Forward* document and other PPC related engagements are adhered to by all sides
7. Enforce codes of conduct adopted at the first AGM of the PPC

Code of Conduct

It is suggested that the code of conduct be adopted at the first AGM. Its elements should include normal adherence to journalistic principles and ethics; observance of “on/off the record”; embargo agreements and protocol in the briefing room (cell phone interruption, rowdiness, dress code etc).

Sanction for those who violate the code could range from a mere reprimand, exclusion from one or more briefings or suspension from the PPC. The entire process will be conducted transparently and the said individual's editor will be kept abreast at every stage of the process so as to avoid victimisation or suspicion thereof.

In the event of a severe sanction, there will be appeal mechanisms, the nature of which should be deliberated upon by the PPC, media houses and recognised structures of the industry. It should however be borne in mind that the primary enforcers of acceptable and professional behaviour remain the media institutions who employ members of the PPC and a code of conduct will therefore have to secure the support of the media houses.

The document's conclusion stipulates that the existence of the PPC does not in anyway make the normal engagement between the media and the government obsolete. Normal arrangements between the media and the government, which have hitherto existed, will continue to be in place. Individual journalists will still continue to have their individual engagements with government officials and departments.

1.4 Pioneers or pawns?

One of the United State's Founding Fathers remarked in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of man's most precious rights. Every citizen may therefore speak, write, and publish freely, except that he shall be responsible for the abuse of that freedom in cases determined by law" (Altschull, 1990: 93).

The rationale behind the idea of a presidential press corps is to improve relations between the media and the state, and allow a better flow of information.

The press's role is not only one of informing the public, but also one of serving as a critical voice. In a democracy, that "free communication of thoughts and opinions" will often be of a critical nature and will first and foremost be directed towards government. It is for this reason that the relationship between the news media and the state has, and always will be, an uncomfortable one.

Although there is overwhelming support for the PPC, there is concern that the PPC members would be censored, manipulated and controlled by their new bed partners. The Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) believes the implications are far reaching and pose a serious threat to a free press. In a weekly web report in May 2002, FXI says it now means journalists will have to go through a process in which government would allow or refuse them access to information pertaining to the presidency.

FXI believes such a structure may actually amount to censorship, with another probable result being that journalists may also censor themselves to fit into the structure.

To gain a greater understanding of the ethical dilemma the PPC may present, it is necessary to identify the potential problems. How can truth prevail and the flow of information be assured if there is a possibility of such censorship? The details of "*off the record and not for use*" are still sketchy, and may prove to become a bone of contention.

In addition to this, the threat by the president's security office that PPC members who stumble upon and leak confidential information would be punished, spells nothing good.

Some of the basic tenets of ethical journalism such as fairness, objectivity, responsibility and independence may be compromised, as the danger of conflict of interest is inherent in such a close working relationship between the watchdog (press) and the government. This may only become apparent once the relationship is forged. Fairness and objectivity may fall by the wayside once a more personal dimension comes into play. A PPC member who becomes friendly with a member of cabinet or even the president may be reluctant to expose or divulge information that could harm his new acquaintance. Objectivity, as far as that is possible, may also be tainted as the professional distance needed between a reporter and a source may become blurred.

Although the PPC members may prove to be truly professional and ethical in their conduct, they are only human and may in time become too close to those in power, resulting in their professional duties being neglected.

The conduct of credible media organisations in South Africa is governed by either institutional or professional codes of ethics. Safeguarding the freedom and independence of the press in South Africa is the crux of ethical codes of conduct for the media.

Looking at the Institutional Code of the Press Ombudsman of South Africa, it states that "the press shall be entitled to comment upon or criticise any actions or events of public importance provided such comments or criticisms are fairly and honestly made" (Retief, 2002: 239).

The professional code of the South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ) states that the principle of press freedom should be upheld at all times. According to this code, every journalist should strive to eliminate distortion, news suppression, and censorship. Journalists are warned not to accept bribes, nor should he/she allow other inducements to influence the performance of his/her professional duties. The SAUJ's code also warns

journalists not to lend themselves to the distortion or suppression of the truth because of advertising or other considerations (Retief, 2002:240). (These “other considerations” may in the case of the PPC be friendships forged with cabinet members.)

The Star's ethical code is an example of that of other newspapers in South Africa. It states that its journalists should be independent of government, commerce, or any other vested interest. “*The Star* should expose wrongdoing, the misuse of power, and unnecessary secrecy”. The newspaper believes the public’s right to know about matters of importance is paramount. “*The Star* should therefore fight vigorously any measure to conceal facts of public interest and any attempt to prevent public access to the news and any effort to curtail freedom of speech.” Another prescription reads as follows: “*The Star* and its staff should be free of any obligation to news sources and special interests, including political parties. Even the appearance of obligation should be avoided, especially by political and financial journalists” (Retief, 2002: 246).

In the case of the PPC there may very well be an “obligation” or the “appearance of obligation” in time to come due to the privileged access to, and preferential treatment by those in power. Every PPC member, and indeed every South African journalist, should familiarise him/herself with his/her organisation’s ethical code of conduct. This will serve as a reminder of the role of the press in a democracy.

This first group of PPC journalists is going where no other has gone before in this country’s history. They are however facing a daunting task, as the arena they are entering is fraught with novelties, challenges, obstacles and temptations.

In Chapter 2 the media’s role in a democracy will be discussed in more detail. The different definitions will shed light on what would be expected of PPC members.

The challenges of far closer cooperation between the press and government are the topic of Chapter 3. Ethical conduct will be crucial to the success of an establishment like the

PPC. This chapter would focus on ways to ensure as far as possible, an ethical and professional relationship between government and the PPC.

As South Africa's first Presidential Press Corps is based on the White House Press Corps, the role and functioning of the PPC's United States counterpart will be explained in Chapter 4.

The potential problems as well as the benefits of the PPC would be analysed in the final chapter of this document.

2. Chapter 2 - The media's role in a democracy

The sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, remarked on occasion in 1864: "Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe" (Sullivan, 2002: 7).

Although some may view this opinion as slightly naïve, it does allude to the core of the media's role in a democracy. Journalists in a social and political democracy have to ensure a well-informed citizenry in order for the people to make educated choices. Well-informed citizens can also hold government accountable.

To understand the role the PPC is expected to play, it is necessary to look at the media's role in a democracy, and especially in one as young as South Africa's.

Fourie (2001: 133) says "democracy is associated with the liberal tradition which views humans as free and as having the right to self-determination. Human freedom for which democracy makes provision includes freedom of speech, religion and movement, as well as the freedom to form economic associations" (cf. Ruddock 1981; Oosthuizen 1989:6).

The media as the unofficial "fourth branch" of government must be free not only to provide information, but also to check on the other three branches of government, namely the legislative, executive and judicial authorities. In this role they act as watchdogs and can execute their duties effectively on condition that government intervention remains limited.

Unfortunately, the media's role in our young democracy is not as clear-cut as this. In a lecture in September 2002 on "Journalism in the Age of the Market", University of the Witwatersrand journalism professor, Anton Harber, said South Africa had "an awful irony". Harber believes that much of the secret journalism practiced under the repressive conditions of the apartheid regime was "richer" than it is now in a free society. "The mind *did* breed in captivity - whether it was in the cells of Robben Island or in the

newsrooms of the alternative press - there was a powerful use of imagination, of innovation and of public debate....”(Harber 2002).

Harber says the same depth of public debate, imagination and intellectual innovation seem to be lacking now due to the fact that journalists are struggling to deal with their new freedom and the opportunities they present. He is of the opinion that the media have divided themselves into two crude camps: “one which says that the sole role of journalism is to act as a vigilant watchdog of government, and one which says it is our (the media’s) role to assist the government in nation building”.

Harber believes both are inadequate as “both put their adherents into political corners where they tend to produce predictable and shallow journalism”.

Transformation is the key word today in South Africa, and Harber is of the opinion that in joining this rush, journalists are neglecting their duties. “So involved are we in debates about what our attitude is to the ANC, or to development, or to the new South Africa, that we forget that if a piece is thoroughly researched, well-written and insightful then the reader will not care too much if it is pro- or anti-government, or if its conclusion is critical or complimentary.”

If ever since 1994 there were a time for the South African media to raise the standard of journalism and to guard its independence, it is now. The new millennium has brought its fare share of threats to freedom of the press. It is time for introspection, for concerns are mounting that press freedom may be under attack. If the media are not free to criticise this country’s highest office, it does not bode well for the new Presidential Press Corps. Recent events threatening freedom of the press in addition to the expected restrictions on PPC members discussed in the Introduction, do not bode well for the corps’s future.

2.1 The past

Before the last apartheid legislation was scrapped in 1991, the communications system of South Africa could best be described as authoritarian. The National Party government (1948-1994) had an unyielding hand on what was being broadcast and printed. Various laws prohibited any challenges to the NP's policies and empowered those in office to ban whatever media they believed to be detrimental to their regime.

The Suppression of Communism Act (1950), although supposedly enacted to fight communism, was used to attack any opposition to the government, regardless of whether it was inspired by communism (Fourie, 2001: 579).

Especially during the State of Emergency period between 1985 and 1990, the National Party restricted the flow of any information, deemed hostile to the regime. Only information released by government could be reported on. Legislation, force and intimidation prevented journalists from sourcing their own information. The draconian censorship was firmly embedded in the Internal Security Act of 1982, which prohibited banned organisations from distributing any kind of news. The main piece of censorship legislation was the Public Control Act of 1974, together with the Publications (Amendment) Act of 1986 (Fourie, 2001:580). These laws enabled three bodies (a Directorate, a Publications Control Board and a Publications Appeal Board) to ban whatever material they saw fit.

2.2 The present

Before we look at the challenges PPC members and other journalists in South Africa are currently faced with, the system within which the news media operate (or are supposed to be operating in) should be explained.

In theory, South Africa has one of the most liberal and diverse constitutions in the world. This is also reflected in the Bill of Rights, pertaining to the media (Sections 16(1) and

32). South Africa's media are often envied by colleagues on the rest of the continent for their freedom to be able to criticise and challenge. (According to *Kfm 94.5's* records, investigative journalists exposed more than 30 corrupt government employees in 2001.)

Hachten (1999:20) explains the fundamentals of the Western, or libertarian press concept:

The press in theory, must be independent of authority and, of course, exist outside of government and will be protected by law and custom from arbitrary government interference. And so an independent press usually means one situated in a democratic, capitalist economy and enjoying the same autonomy as other private business enterprises.

Hachten (1999:21) says the press makes self-government and democracy possible by gathering public information and scrutinising government. A free press can provide diversity of views and news and through freedom of expression, autonomy can be provided for individuals to lead free and productive lives. Hachten (1999:21) says such a system "enables an independent press to serve as a check on abuses of power by government".

Based on Hachten's model, South Africa's media theoretically fall under the libertarian concept as the Bill of Rights (Section 16(1) states that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes:

- Freedom of the press and other media
- Freedom to receive and impart information and ideas
- Freedom of artistic creativity
- Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research

"The right in Section 16(1) does not extend to propaganda for war; incitement of imminent violence; or advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm" (Retief, 2002: 26).

The current press concept prevalent in South Africa is in effect rather a mixture of theories. There is a strong egalitarian “push” to level the “playing fields”, as media ownership is still very “white”. Getting the message across to a multicultural community with 11 official languages is no easy task. To become a truly pluralistic society, a diversity of ownership is needed.

As media organisations are profit-driven, the legacy of apartheid has excluded black people from competing in the media market on equal terms. Unbundling and deconcentration of white-owned media organisations and black empowerment have taken place, yet the amount of new titles aimed at black audiences remain few. Primarily white-owned conglomerates still own most newspapers.

The major press groups in South Africa today are Independent Newspapers, CTP/Caxton, Johnnic Publishing, Primedia, Nasionale Pers (Naspers) and Kagiso Media. Among the prominent black-owned media companies is New Africa Media, which controls the country's largest circulated newspaper, *Sowetan*. *Ilanga* is the only mainstream newspaper published in an African language.

This imbalance, which is also evident in the representation on the PPC, results in news that does not cater sufficiently for the needs, culture or ideology of the black market. (It must be mentioned however that efforts are made to address this problem through the new Media Development and Diversity Agency, MDDA, which will be discussed later.)

With transformation and development being key goals in South Africa, this country's press concept also shares traits of the developmental model. This is a state of affairs that results from the emergence of political independence, which was recently the case in South Africa. Although this concept is not clearly defined, there are certain characteristics, as defined by Hachten (1999:32), which South Africa adheres to. These are the media's important role in social responsibility, in other words, in furthering national interests, as well as the belief that individual rights and liberties are “somewhat

irrelevant in the face of the overwhelming problems of poverty, disease, illiteracy and ethnicity” that face the majority of developing nations (Hachten, 1999: 32).

The three other main characteristics of the developmental concept are: “the media should support authority, not challenge it, information becomes the property of the state and that a country has a sovereign right to control foreign journalists and the flow of news across its borders” (Hachten, 1999:32). These are theoretically not applicable to South Africa although there has recently been a resonance of this, as will be seen in the examples of threats to press freedom later in this chapter.

It is safe to say that South Africa’s press concept is currently somewhere between a libertarian and an egalitarian model, as government intervention still exists, albeit on limited scale. The investigation into alleged racism in the media in 2000 by the Human Rights Commission, a government organisation, is indicative of the type of intervention that might take place within a country with an egalitarianism press concept. The establishment of the proposed MDDA also point towards egalitarianism.

2.3 Cause for concern?

2.3.1 Broadcasting Amendment Bill

What is of grave concern though, is that it seems as if Big Brother is again flexing his muscles. The SABC, who would be represented on the PPC, is in the center of the debacle. The latest and most disturbing event comes in the form of the Broadcasting Amendment Bill. If passed, the SABC, which has successfully emerged from being government’s mouthpiece and propaganda machine, may perhaps return to a system of media control, similar to that exercised during the apartheid era.

This will not only violate the SABC’s independence, but will also spill over to stifle freedom of the press in general, suppressing one of the fundamental cornerstones of a democratic society.

An independent broadcaster is central to the establishment and building of a true democratic state. The Broadcasting Amendment Bill however removes a clause guaranteeing the SABC's freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence. In a statement released on 14 August 2002, SANEF says while the bill seeks to deal positively with issues raised by the SABC in terms of their needs to comply with the corporatisation process, it however also introduces clauses that threaten the independence of the SABC board.

SANEF is of the opinion that these clauses seek to give to the minister the power to approve editorial policies for the corporation, which would suggest power for the minister to approve or disapprove what is essentially a journalistic ethical issue.

Subsequent statements on the Amendment Bill, made by the SABC's news programming chairperson, Thami Mazwai, are equally worrying. He told parliament's committee on ethics in August (2002): "We must see clichés such as objectivity and editorial independence within an African context and place this in context for our new developing communities" (Joubert 2002).

Trade union federation, Cosatu, who has demanded Mazwai's resignation, says his statements would have been funny, were they not so dangerous (Joubert 2002).

It is therefore ironic to note that the SABC's ethical code contains the following paragraph: "We shall evaluate information solely on merit, and shall not allow advertising, commercial, political, or personal considerations to influence our editorial decisions" (Retief, 2002: 252).

I must be mentioned that last minute amendments to the controversial Bill have lessened fears of government control over the SABC. The amendment, which was introduced on 16 October 2002, states that the SABC Board will fall under the control of the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), and not the

Communications Minister as was originally proposed. Hereby all SABC broadcasting policies, including news policies, will have to be submitted to ICASA (IFEX Alert Update, October 2002).

2.3.2 Media Development and Diversity Agency

The establishment of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) is one of the most contentious bones being picked in political circles as well as in the media industry. The draft legislation for the MDDA, an initiative by the Government Communication and Information Systems, was passed in the National Assembly on 15 May 2002. The nine-member board that will govern the agency, was appointed by president Thabo Mbeki in December 2002, and will have their first meeting in January 2003.

The headings of a few recent stories in *Die Burger* and *Cape Times* between 20 and 25 August 2002 on this controversial Bill indicate some of the resistance against it: “Pahad paai na NV omstrede mediawet goedkeur” (Pahad placates after National Assembly accepts controversial media bill); Media-wet ongrondwetlik, sê DA” (Media bill unconstitutional says DA); “Partye haaks oor mediawet” (Parties at loggerheads over media bill); “Uitsaaiers wil ombudsman hê” (Broadcasters want Ombudsman); “Pahad’s role in media agency comes under fire” and “Broadcasters: We do enough for diversity”.

The agency’s aim is to address the stark lack of access to information among the poorest of the poor. South Africa has a multi-cultural audience, yet information is mainly still targeted at whites. (It is estimated that 7,8-million South Africans - 18,6% of the population - still do not have access to standard radio broadcasts (Rhodes Journalism Review 2002). Government intends to establish the MDDA to promote media diversity through funding, training and infrastructure support in areas with little access to information.

Print Media South Africa and SANEF have expressed concern over especially two aspects of the agency. The one is that the minister in the president's office who will be responsible for the agency, Essop Pahad, will have excessive power. The other is the fact that commercial media will have to help pick up the tab. (Government, media organisations and other sponsors will have to fork out R20 million annually. It is estimated that R500 million will be needed over the next five years to give a "voice to the voiceless".)

Head of Rhodes University's Journalism and Media Studies Department, Professor Guy Berger, who in principle supports the MDDA, said in a written submission "a clause giving Pahad power to regulate any matter that is required or permitted to be prescribed in terms of this act threatened to discredit the agency as a politically impartial body" (ANC Daily News Briefing 2002).

Broadcasters want an ombudsman to prevent the minister from having too much say in the running of the agency. Democratic Alliance MP, Dene Smuts, put it this way: "There is concern that those who will receive money will be those who are prepared to publish Essop's fables" (NNP statement February 2002).

2.3.3 The presidential pardons

The debacle (in May 2002) about the presidential pardons for 33 convicted criminals further opened the floodgates of criticism against government. From a freedom of expression point of view, it is worrying that Justice Minister, Penuell Maduna, has labelled the public as well as the media's criticism against the presidential pardons as being "disrespectful to the president, contemptuous of the Constitution and insulting to him" (*Sunday Times* 2002).

2.3.5 The Rashaad Staggie case

The murder trial of Pagad-members accused of killing the Hard Livings gang leader, Rashaad Staggie, seriously challenged press freedom in South Africa. The media emerged victoriously, but not before they fought a bitter battle against subpoenas, raids and warrants for arrest.

The stage was set for battle when two weeks after Staggie was lynched in Salt River on 4 August 1996, government enacted Section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act. This allows the state to investigate journalists' sources and seize any information relating to a crime. Three Western Cape journalists were subpoenaed in September 1998 to testify and provide photographs of Staggie's lynching (News24 2002).

Media organisations were outraged, saying they believe the action will erode press freedom and set a precedent that will turn journalists into state informers.

When the prosecution closed its case on 11 February 2002, it withdrew the subpoenas unexpectedly. This follows repeated attempts to compel *Cape Times* photographer, Benny Gool, *Die Burger* editor, Arrie Rossouw, and one of his newspaper's photographers, Christo Lötter, to do so. The prosecution relented, saying they could not force the journalists to take the witness stand.

The decision by the Cape High Court to accept an affidavit from Lötter rather than force him to testify was a significant step to strengthen the role of the press. In the course of the trial, the court also declined to authorise warrants for the arrest of the journalists.

In another victory for the media, the court set aside the decision by the National Directorate of Public Prosecutions to seek international help in obtaining Reuters and Associated Press video tapes of Staggie's murder. Both agencies have placed on public

record that they will not surrender any material obtained at the scene to the authorities or anyone else.

2.3.6 The controversial Arms Deal

In June 2001, the press was banned from covering the court proceedings of one of the biggest news stories of the past few years - the questionable R63 million arms procurement deal by the South African government.

Public prosecutor, Selby Baqwa, who investigated allegations of wrongdoing in the awarding of arms contracts to European manufacturers, cited Section 118(a) of the Defense Act of 1957 (e-TV archives). This apartheid-era law requires that media organisations obtain the Minister of Defense's permission to publish or broadcast information regarding certain aspects of the Defense Force.

The public prosecutor further expressed concern that news cameras in the courtroom might intimidate witnesses and prevent them from testifying to the full extent of their knowledge.

The SABC and e-TV sued government over the constitutionality of Section 118(a), but their court action was unsuccessful (e-TV archives). On 22 June 2001, the Pretoria High Court ruled that there would be no live radio and television coverage of the public hearings into the arms deal, and dismissed the broadcasters' application.

2.3.7 Mbeki, the “womaniser”

On 11 April 2001, the ANC in the Western Cape called for special legislation to outlaw insulting the president. The ANC was furious with a claim by veteran journalist, Max du Preez, who called Thabo Mbeki a “womaniser” during a SAfm interview on “The Editors” on 8 April 2001. His exact words were: “He is seen as a womaniser. It is publicly known and I think we should start talking about this, that the president has this kind of personal life. I'm not saying it's scandalous. He's a womaniser” (*Sunday Times* 2001).

By mouth of spokesperson Mcebisi Skwatsha, the ANC responded that although freedom of expression is entrenched in the Constitution, “no one has the right to insult the head of state with impunity” (sabcnews.com 2002).

To expose or not to expose scandalous behaviour in the private lives of those in power is an ethical debate in itself, but what is far more worrying in the “womaniser debacle” is the ANC’s reaction. The ruling party’s call for legislation to restrict media criticism of the presidency makes a mockery of democracy, for how can South Africa truly function as a democracy if those in the highest office must be above criticism. Only the Constitution is sovereign in this country.

These cases show clearly that the three branches of government are muzzling the media to an increasing extent. Press freedom may be protected theoretically under the Constitution, but practice shows that there are more than subtle efforts to silence the watchdogs. The PPC will be in an even more precarious position due to their proximity to government. If attempts are made to silence the press, it can only be assumed that the PPC will be watched like hawks.

2.4 Shortcomings of the media

Thus far, the focus has fallen on how government is overstepping its boundaries. The question must also be asked whether mainstream journalism in South Africa is doing all it should for democracy.

Because of the profit-driven nature of media organisations, it becomes increasingly tempting for a newspaper or broadcaster to focus on what is “nice to know” instead of what “needs to be known”. This poses a serious threat to the dissemination of balanced information, which is vitally important for a well-informed citizenry.

Journalists who are serious about fulfilling their journalistic duty often find themselves stifled because “if it bleeds, it leads”, is becoming a far too common policy.

There are many other examples to be found, but a random selection brings us to the front page of *Die Burger* of 14 August 2002. The headlines of the three stories read: “Van Zyl wil verbod beveg”; “Twee sterf in veldbrand by oefening vir beraad” and “George-sakeman wil Hansie se vliegtuig museum maak”.

A story on the implications of the controversial Broadcasting Amendment Bill on freedom of the press and democracy in South Africa, only features on page two. Was it not the “watchdog’s” (the editorial staff of *Die Burger*) duty to have given the story the prominence it deserves, by placing it on the front page?

Yet, the *umpteenth* story on “ref-tackler”, Pieter van Zyl, gets to occupy no less than half of the newspaper’s front page.

Only on page six of the same edition of *Die Burger*, under a photograph of a smiling Nicolas Cage and Priscilla Presley, will one find a story on the unfolding humanitarian drama in neighboring Zimbabwe. “Boere in Zimbabwe gedreig” reads the headline of this story, which tells of how intimidation and violence (part of Robert Mugabe’s Land Reform Program) have forced more white farmers off their land, with hundreds more farm workers becoming destitute.

Although *Die Burger*, as the only provincial Afrikaans daily newspaper, has to cater for a variety of tastes, the selection illustrates a focus in favour of the needs of the majority of its readers. Drama and sensationalism clearly often enjoy preference over matters of national or even international importance. A story on the controversial Broadcasting Amendment Bill or the crisis in Zimbabwe have far wider implications, yet sadly, for most people it is of far less interest and importance than the antics of a ref-tackler.

Speaking to friends, family and the general public, it becomes clear that today’s journalists are already often viewed on the one hand as too powerful, and on the other, not trustworthy. This is not surprising, taking into account the emphasis on

sensationalism and the decrease in accurate, fair and well-balanced stories, covering a wide range of topics.

Unfortunately, in time, concerns such as the news media increasingly losing its credibility may no longer be heard. If this phenomenon continues of the media reporting “what is nice to know” instead of “what is needed to know” (Retief, 2002: 29), the public will eventually become so brainwashed that people will not be capable of distinguishing between the two.

The rapid advance in communications technology, such as news via the internet, is adding fuel to the fire, as quality and content control become extremely difficult. (The internet carries more than 1600 daily newspapers with a readership of between 40 and 50 million people worldwide [Hachten, 1999:64]).

The environment within which journalists operate is an extremely challenging one. The sensationalist trend that is increasingly evident, tighter deadlines and growing competition due to technological advances, create huge pressure for reporters, which often result in shoddy work. Coupled with the challenges of their newfound freedom, as mentioned by Prof. Harber, today’s journalist in South Africa is struggling to find his/her feet. (This will be discussed in more detail in the chapter that follows.) Black journalists have especially been in the line of fire since 1994. The majority of them were fierce supporters and advocates of the liberation struggle, yet they now find themselves in a dilemma - having to criticise the same government they fought so hard to instate (Media Development 1997).

In 1997 this dichotomy was highlighted when then president Nelson Mandela lashed out at black journalists for “trying to undermine the government”. Mandela’s exact words were: “They seem to regret that we destroyed white supremacy, and are very hostile to us” (Media Development 1997).

The role of the press in the “new” South Africa is still in the process of being defined. Journalists play an important role in advancing and stabilising South Africa’s fragile democracy; whilst also having to challenge it. The PPC, being the first group of journalists to enter into such a close working relationship with government, is faced with an especially difficult task. Juggling between public service and being the watchdog will require the highest order of journalistic skills and ethics. Government on the other hand has to make a concerted effort to understand and respect critical engagement by the media. If not, the PPC is doomed to fail.

3. Chapter 3 - Rules of Engagement

The two most influential players in society are becoming engaged in an entirely new phase of a relationship, traditionally characterised by animosity and distrust. Handing each other the olive branch so to speak, poses plenty potential pitfalls.

As was mentioned before, the aim of the PPC is to establish greater communication and cooperation between government and the media. The PPC is an excellent vehicle to achieve this, but what may fall by the wayside is something crucial for ensuring freedom of the press, namely independence.

With regard to the PPC members, this may be compromised because of various reasons. The main concern is whether the watchdog will be able to maintain its vigilance amid soil, fertile with social, political and economic gains. Favours, preferential treatment and fame are but a few of these “gains”. Some of the PPC members may not be experienced enough to deal with the challenges that are almost certain to come their way.

When it comes to the level of journalistic competence, the Skills Audit by the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) in 2002 has highlighted grave problems. The audit, which focussed on the skills of journalists with between two and five years experience, identified the following areas in need of critical intervention.

- Poor reporting skills
- Lack of concern with accuracy
- Poor writing skills
- Lack of Life skills
- Low level of commitment
- Weak interviewing skills
- Weak legal knowledge
- Lack of awareness and sensitivity to South African issues
- Weak knowledge of ethics

- Poor general, historical and contextual knowledge
- Low level of trainer knowledge

Although junior journalists were targeted in the audit, some of the candidates in the initial selection for the PPC have barely more than five years experience, and can thus not be deemed “experienced”. This may prove to be problematic as sound journalistic knowledge and skill are essential in not only identifying, but also in dealing with any threats to journalistic independence.

In his comment on the results of the SANEF-audit, Herman Wasserman says the problem areas identified by SANEF pose serious ethical implications (Wasserman, 2002: 9). “It is not only detrimental to journalists’ credibility and undermines their function as watchdog, but ill-equipped journalists can also cause a lot of damage.” Wasserman expressed the hope that the SANEF-report would encourage an ongoing debate so that the South African media not only to be free, but also responsible.

Mathatha Tsedu (SANEF’s chairperson) says the juniorisation of the journalistic skills base is one of the biggest problems facing the (media) industry. “This comes at a time when the South African story is becoming more and more complicated. We have to get our house in order in a very quick way in this sense” (De Beer and Steyn, 2002: 2)

Some of the recommendations subsequently made by SANEF, include the improvement of the skills of junior journalists, middle management and managers, as well as the cultivation of a new generation of sub editors. This would be accomplished through regular training (*Die Burger* 2002).

The fact that SANEF has identified a lack of ethical knowledge is especially concerning, as ethical conduct may be the saving grace in this new relationship between government and the PPC. High ethical standards will help guide the more junior reporters, but will also aid the experienced ones.

Sound ethical knowledge within the context of journalism can prevent serious error of judgment and is of the utmost importance to ensure journalistic integrity and independence within the PPC.

3.1 The importance of ethics

Most journalists emerge from South African tertiary institutions with vast amounts of practical and technical knowledge, but ill-equipped to solve ethical dilemmas. Moral excellence come from moral knowledge and this *can* be taught. Although the teacher would probably not be able to create a more virtuous person, instruction in media ethics can, according to Louis Alvin Day, “promote moral conduct by providing the means to make ethical judgments, defend them and then criticise the results of one’s choices” (Ethics In Media Communications: Cases and Controversies, 2000:8).

Teaching journalistic ethics to PPC members is of crucial importance, as these reporters would face many challenges that could threaten their journalistic integrity and independence. The Institute for the Advancement of Journalism planned a course in May 2002 examining the techniques for reporting on the presidency (IJNet 2002). This had to be postponed due to the problems with the establishment of the PPC. Topics to be covered in the workshop, that would take place once the more specific creases are ironed out, include:

- Development of a list of sources and resources
- The legal framework of political reporting
- On and off the record briefings
- Official secrets and whistle-blowers
- Handling of ethical dilemmas
- Techniques for conducting political interviews

Sunday Times columnist, Andrew Donaldson’s criticism (in May 2002) of the relationship between the president and a Presidential Press Corps, “being far too cosy for

comfort” (Donaldson, 2002: 2), will be the starting block to discuss journalists’ ethical obligations and the factors that come into play when ethical judgments are made.

Donaldson is alluding to the fact that this relationship may seriously jeopardise journalistic independence. He is not wrong as such a relationship may present a conflict of interest as loyalties may become divided. This may prove to become one of the biggest stumbling blocks.

3.2 Conflict of interest

Conflict of interest is a common problem journalists have to grapple with. The journalist, and especially the PPC-member, may easily be caught between his professional responsibilities and the need to please or be accepted by those he/she must report on. This will result in independence falling by the wayside. Day defines conflict of interest as “a clash between professional loyalties and outside interest that undermines the credibility of the moral agent” (2000:193).

The first step in ensuring independence is for a journalist to identify situations that may possibly give rise to a conflict of interest. Black, Steele & Barney advise in *Doing Ethics in Journalism* (1995:92), that in order to avoid a real or perceived conflict of interest, journalists must weigh their obligations against the impact of:

- Involvement in particular activities
- Affiliations with causes or organisations
- Acceptance of favours or preferential treatment
- Financial investments
- Outside employment
- Friendships

Editorial independence *can* be achieved if the media organisation is free of any obligation to a news source. In other words, the news organisation must at all times act independently. (In this case, the president and his cabinet will be the main news sources.)

With regard to the relationship between the PPC and the president, “affiliations with causes or organisations”, “acceptance of favours of preferential (presidential) treatment” and “friendships” may oblige the journalist to bend, or refrain from telling the truth (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995: 92).

Social Psychology (Byrne, 1991: 250) explains the dynamics involved in establishing friendships. It starts by being brought together by physical proximity. If the interpersonal communication that follows is perceived by both participants as rewarding, the acquaintance will more than likely become a friend. Due to expected proximity between PPC members and government, it can be assumed that friendships are likely to develop. This of course will threaten the PPC-member’s journalistic independence. PPC members should remember that a good journalist is on duty 24 hours a day, and that a good journalist would never let friendship stand in the way of a story.

Building good relationships with news sources is essential for every journalist as it contributes greatly to quicker and more effective access to information, and cooperation from these sources. News sources who come to trust certain journalists will also be more forthcoming in providing information, and may even keep him/her up to date about newsworthy events. It is however important for the journalist to keep in mind that there is a distinct line between professional and personal conduct, and that this line should not be crossed.

Working so closely with the president, accepting his hospitality on his brand new Boeing Business Jet (BBJ) worth R587 million, and in time, perhaps forming a personal relationship with the country’s leader, may put journalists under an obligation. He/she may refrain from criticising too much, which will seriously jeopardise the journalist’s role as watchdog and jeopardise his/her independence.

Less experienced PPC members (with Top Security Clearance) will especially run the risk of being over-awed and intimidated by the president's importance and the intimate hospitality in the form of among others, a comfortable lounge and convertible beds on the BBJ (*Sunday Times* 2002). Just being in the presence of the "mighty and powerful" will be overwhelming in itself.

The mode of travel will thus be one of great luxury in which PPC members will share. Some may very well be blinded or intimated by the comforts and the "honour" to travel with the president. Certain members may feel that any criticism may cost them their expensive seat on the jet.

It is purely speculative, but the other side of the coin is that there may be PPC members who may be tempted to abuse their "presidential privilege". It is not uncommon for specially assigned journalists to be taken into the confidence of those they report on. Certain journalists may use this opportunity to dig up "dirt" on the president or cabinet in order to make the headlines and gain "personal fame". Such behaviour goes against the grain of journalistic ethics, especially when a source clearly states that the information is 'off the record'. Fairness is a basic ethical principle in journalism and should always be avoided. Retief (2002: 84) says, "Unfairness causes harm".

Both parties - the president and the corps - should have complete assurance that their relationship is one based on trust and mutual respect. The president (or members of his cabinet) should at no time be concerned that any personal information conveyed during an informal discussion will be leaked to the public. In short, this relationship should not be manipulated or abused by either party in any way.

First and foremost, the journalist must always remember that his/her duty is to the public, and that the public has a right to know about matters pertaining to the presidency and cabinet. The intrinsic role of the journalist as watchdog entails freedom to be able to discuss, challenge and question the decisions made by those in power, including, and

especially, the decisions by their country's leader. The people will only respect the "Fourth Estate", if it achieves its ultimate goal, namely the truth.

The marquis de Mirabeau, a fierce supporter of freedom of the press, said shortly after the French Revolution in 1789: "Let the first of your laws consecrate forever the freedom of the press. This is the most untouchable, the most unconditional freedom – without which the other freedoms can never be secured" (Altschull, 1990: 94).

3.3 Ethical guidelines

Journalists who join the PPC must be made acutely aware of the potential pitfalls their new assignment entails. To help these journalists understand their role, it would be useful for them to answer the following questions, devised by the Poynter Institute's group leader, Bob Steele (who was mentioned in the Introduction). Steele says these questions would aid journalists to think more critically about ethical decision-making throughout the reporting process (Poynteronline 2002).

- What do I know? What do I need to know?
- What is my journalistic purpose?
- What are my ethical concerns?
- What organisational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?
- How can I include other people, with different perspectives and diverse ideas, in the decision-making process?
- Who are the stakeholders - those affected by my decision? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?
- What if the roles were reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?
- What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?

- What are my alternatives to maximise my truth-telling responsibility and minimise harm?
- Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

The Press Ombudsman of South Africa emphasises that “liberty is not a license” (Press Ombudsman’s First Quarterly Complaints Review, November 2002). In his review, the Ombudsman says the essence of its Professional Code of Conduct is as follows:

- News. The press shall be obliged to report news truthfully, accurately and fairly, without an intentional or negligent departure from the facts by distortion, exaggeration or misrepresentation, material omissions or summarisation.
- Comment and opinion must be presented as such, must be an honest expression of opinion without malice or dishonest motives and shall take account of and state all the facts which are material to the matter.

Responsibility, objectivity, fairness, accuracy and independence are the foundations of responsible and credible journalism. These concepts, which also allude to integrity and accountability, emerge clearly in the Codes of Ethics of credible media organisations in South Africa. Although they are the basic maxims of credible journalism and so deeply-rooted that journalists sometimes take these principles for granted, they would arm the PPC well in what may prove to become a battle to maintain independence. To understand the relevance of these concepts for PPC members, it is necessary to define each of them.

3.3.1 Responsibility

What PPC members and the organisations they belong to have to ask themselves first and foremost, is whether they want to help oil the state’s communications machinery, or whether they want to tell the truth.

The news media's main mission is to inform the public about events of public importance and interest. Enlightened opinion can only be achieved if the information conveyed to the public is true.

Seventeenth century British poet/writer, John Milton, believed that truth would always emerge victorious when grappling with falsehood. Although this is a somewhat romantic notion that has been modified over the centuries, it has established itself firmly in the tradition of journalism (Altschull, 1990: 40).

As truth is the guiding principle in journalism, journalists, being the representatives of the public, must be responsible and may at no time violate the people's trust. All practices that would impede of fairness and accuracy should be avoided (American Society of Newspaper Editors Online 2002).

Responsibility in journalism implies constructive criticism of all segments of society (American Society of Newspaper Editors Online 2002). Journalists have a responsibility to expose wrongdoing and the abuse of power, whether in the private or public domain. Needed reform and innovation should be advocated in addition to upholding freedom of speech and respect for the individual's right to privacy. The press should also fight vigorously for public access to news of government (American Society of Newspaper Editors Online 2002).

The PPC will be in the fortunate position that its members will have their fingers on the pulse of government matters. With this privilege also comes immense responsibility for the South African public would depend on them to provide the latest and most accurate news relating to government matters.

3.3.2 Objectivity

Retief says objectivity, neutrality and impartiality "all roughly mean not to take sides or to remain aloof" (2002:99).

Impartiality implies objectivity or neutrality, but absolute objectivity and neutrality are impossible to achieve. Every journalist has deep-seated personal opinions, values and attitudes that cloud his/her judgment - often subconsciously.

Retief mentions the famous journalistic slogan “we just report the facts”, which he calls naïve, for all people, including journalists, are “subjective, partial and biased” (Retief, 2002: 99).

He says a journalist has overcome the first hurdle once he/she understands his/her own subjectivity (2002: 102). According to Retief a mental commitment must however be made to “strive to be objective”. “By this is meant nothing more and nothing less than the commitment to report truthfully, comprehensively, and intelligently, putting an event into a context and giving meaning to it as best as you can” (2002: 102).

The Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) takes cognizance of the neutrality dilemma and for this reason states early in its code that broadcast reporters have an obligation to report news with “due impartiality” (Retief, 2002: 242). According to Retief, “due impartiality implies that only a ‘reasonable amount’ of impartiality can be achieved” (2002: 41).

The PPC will in time to come grapple with the impartiality issue. Although one of the aims of the PPC is to create greater mutual understanding between the press and the government, the line should not be crossed where such understanding results into close friendships.

3.3.3 Fairness

Fairness has many definitions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary it means “*inter alia*, ample, just, equitable, of moderate quality or amount, according to rules, above board, straightforward, and equal opportunities” (Retief, 2002: 85).

In the context of journalism, fairness means “pursuing the truth with both vigour and compassion, and reporting information without favouritism, self-interest, or prejudice” (Black, Steele & Barney, 1995: 53).

Retief says “the choice of words in a news report is important”. He says in order to be fair the journalist must select the best words to reflect the reality of what he/she is reporting on (2002: 84). Retief also emphasises the quest for *perspective*. “Without the quest for *perspective* (or content) no story can be properly communicated” (2002: 84). “The so-called *Rashomon effect* - the phenomenon that people have their own [unique] interpretations of the same event - must always be kept in mind” (Retief, 2002: 84).

“Fairness means *balance*” (Retief, 2002: 84). Retief says all sides on an issue must be looked at, for if one is overlooked, the report will be unfair.

For PPC members to be fair, they should for one, not take everything government communicates to them on face value. If accusations are made for instance, the PPC should not only rely on government’s version, but also fulfill their duty by getting all sides of the story and placing that into context.

In order for journalists to ensure fair play at all times, their stories have to be truthful, accurate and fair, as stated in the first sentence of the code of the Ombudsman of South Africa (Retief, 2002: 238).

For the end product to be truthful, it is vitally important to follow honest and truthful methods throughout the process of obtaining the facts. Nineteenth century philosopher, Karl Marx, put it most eloquently: “Not only the result but also the route belongs to the truth. The pursuit of truth must be true; the true inquiry is the developed truth, whose scattered parts are assembled in the result” (Altschull, 1990: 177).

To assemble the truth is easier said than done as the journalist often works in a hostile environment. Journalists are bombarded with information on a daily basis - often by those who have ulterior motives. Constant deadlines often make it very hard for journalists to sift through all the information in search of the truth. Politicians will for instance often go to great lengths to score public points. Wild and inflammatory accusations are regular tools in discrediting the opposition. In times to come, the PPC may even be seen by the president or his cabinet as a means whereby the opposition can be discredited. The PPC will have to guard against this vigorously.

3.3.4 Accuracy

Black, Steele & Barney (1995: 53) says “the principles of accuracy and fairness stand at the very heart of journalism”. The authors say accuracy means “getting it right”. The public pays for and deserves correct information (1995: 53), and the journalist, as the main provider of this information, thus need to be sure that his/her reports are accurate at all times.

Retief (2002: 49) says there are several important reasons why inaccurate reporting must be avoided at all cost:

- It can cause irreparable personal harm.
- It prevents the public from making informed decisions on important matters such as investments, voting, shopping, etc.
- It is very like to affect the media’s integrity as well as their credibility.
- The public rightly expects quality work from journalists, and has a right to be served by honest journalists.

Accurate reporting implies that the journalist gather all the relevant facts (Retief, 2002: 51). These facts should be checked and verified, using more than one source. After having gathered and verified all the relevant details, they should be weighed up. “The

really essential ones will go to the intro, and the facts of lesser importance will be used later in the story or not at all” (Retief, 2002: 51).

PPC members will receive information of national interest. They will have to make sure that this information is accurately conveyed to the public. Theoretically there will be no room for errors, as a substantial amount of the information they will receive from the president and government will be of national importance, affecting millions of people’s lives. “Getting it right” will ensure the PPC’s integrity. Stephen Carter, author of a book on integrity, defines it as “(1) *discerning* what is right and what is wrong; (2) *acting* on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and (3) *saying openly* that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong” (quoted in Day, 2000: 11).

Journalists are human though, and from time to time mistakes may occur. The PPC - whether it is colleagues, a special committee or the media organisations members belong to - will have to see to it that any such errors are corrected promptly and prominently.

3.3.5 Independence

The issue of journalistic independence was discussed in 2.3. To add to this, it is useful to define “independence: “To be independent in terms of democracy means to be “politically independent of the government of the day” (Berger, Towards 2000: Independent media in southern Africa, 1997: 5).

Part of being (journalistically) independent is, as was mentioned before, being free of obligations to news sources and newsmakers. “Even the appearance of obligation or conflict of interest should be avoided” (American Society of Newspaper Editors Online 2002).

Journalists should accept nothing of value from news sources or others outside the profession. The press should not accept gifts, free or reduced-rate travel, entertainment, products or accommodation by those they report on. Media organisations should pay for

any expenses involving news reporting. No special favours or treatment should be accepted, as this will put the journalist under a real or imaginary obligation to the source.

Although the PPC will largely pay their own way, they will be the president's guests on the BBJ. As was mentioned earlier, the luxurious mode of travel and being in the company of the president and/or cabinet ministers, could be overwhelming, and could easily result in the journalist feeling that he/she has an obligation to the president/cabinet. The fact remains that there is no alternative for this travel arrangement, as the PPC will have to accompany the president on occasion. Making an effort to keep a personal distance and keeping in mind that his/her media organisation has paid for the flight ticket should take the "pressure to please" off the PPC member.

3.4 Meeting mutual expectations

As was stated earlier, enhanced communication between government and the media is the main aim for the establishment of the PPC. This is in essence the most important mutual expectation

Effective communication is characterised by openness, honesty and respect for conflicting opinions. The president (and his cabinet) should under no circumstances try to disarm truth of her "natural weapons" (Altschull, 1990: 118). In other words, the president should not use manipulation or persuasion as tools to prevent the public from being truthfully informed. The president (and cabinet) has to respect these journalists' role as watchdog and at no time attempt to influence what will be printed or broadcast.

Although the PPC's position will be no less powerful within this relationship, they will mostly be on the president's "turf". Territorial advantage may shift the scales of power, to the detriment of the PPC.

As the corps members are ethically speaking not allowed to abuse this relationship to further their own means, the same should be said for the president and his cabinet. They

should not try to manipulate the media to feed selective information to the public for party political gains or to further their own personal ends. Omitting certain facts constitutes unethical conduct. The PPC's reports should not be censored at any cost, unless it was agreed upon that a certain discussion is "off the record".

As the PPC is a first for South Africa, there will be initial creases. The amount of time it will take to iron these out will depend on mutual respect and commitment and the level of ethical conduct. If the PPC and the president strive for excellence in this working relationship and standards higher than what are merely required on paper, all three "P's" will be satisfied – the Presidential Press Corps, the president and foremost, the public.

It will not be difficult to judge the success of the Presidential Press Corps. The success or failure may not be evident immediately, but as time elapses, the public will be judge and jury as to whether the principles of a free press and a democracy are being upheld by the PPC.

4. Chapter 4 – The White House Press Corps

Although the German and French governments were also approached for input when the idea of a presidential press corps for South Africa started taking shape, South Africa's PPC is modelled along the lines of the White House Press Corps (WHPC) in America. For this reason it is necessary to examine the functioning of the WHPC.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (Amendment I, United States Constitution, www.usinfo.state.gov).

Although the America's First Amendment specifically mentions only the federal Congress, this provision now protects the press from all government, whether local, state or federal (The First Amendment and Freedom of the Press, www.usinfo.state.gov).

United States presidential scholar Stephen Hess writes in *The Government/Press Connection: Press Officers and Their Offices*. “What more natural function of government is there in a democracy than for it to make available information about how it is governing?” In a democracy, Hess writes, dealing with the press is a duty (Sullivan, 2002: 9).

The press and government cannot be partners in a democracy as they are natural adversaries with different functions. Presidents and the press however need each other and are therefore obliged to work together. As former U.S. president, Bill Clinton, said during an election campaign speech in 1992, “each party in this relationship has its own goals: the president wants to be portrayed favourably in order to win public support, and the press wants to be independent and interesting in order to keep and attract an audience” (Nelson, 1998: 323).

Author Michael Nelson says due to in large the efforts of president Gerald Ford, the bitterness that prevailed between U.S. presidents and the press after the Nixon debacle was ameliorated (Nelson, 1996: 865). Ford's openness with reporters, his offer to hold regular press conferences and to schedule regular interviews eased tensions considerably.

In recent years the Clinton/Lewinsky sex scandal, which saw "hungry" reporters being held at bay by Clinton's staff, as well as the events in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on America soured the relationship once again. President George W. Bush promised in his address to the nation shortly after the attacks, "covert operation, secret even in success". A military official went so far as telling the *Washington Post* that because "this is the most information-intensive war you can imagine... We're going to lie about things" (Anti-war lobby, Common Dreams News Center Online 2002).

Disgruntled White House correspondent Dana Milbank says in an website article written in July 2002, the White House control over information since Bush's election has generated a large amount of pent-up hostility in the press corps. "If they treat the press like the enemy, eventually we are" (Media Research Center Online 2002).

4.1 The White House Press Office

Regardless of the above-mentioned hostilities, U.S. presidential communications function like a well-oiled machine. The Press Office, which gathers and disseminates official White House information, is one of three White House Offices that deal with presidential communications. (The other two are the Office of Communications and the Office of the Chief of Staff, but for our purposes, only the function of the Press Office will be discussed.)

Dr. Martha Joynt Kumar says in *The White House 2001 Project* (2000: 2) the cooperative character between the Press Office and reporters is perhaps the most important factor characterising the Press Office environment.

Although there's a lot of grumbling and complaints, reporters and White House officials cooperate very successfully in their search for and dissemination of information. This environment of cooperation is mutually beneficial as reporters want information for their stories and officials want publicity for their programs. Reporters also provide the Press Office and government officials with the undercurrents moving in Washington (Joynt Kumar, 2000: 3).

At the heart of cooperation is establishing a relationship of trust. For reporters to trust that the information provided by the Press Office is accurate, they must have confidence in the officials (2000: 2).

The first exchange of information between the White House and reporters takes place at 09h30 every morning. The aim of this short meeting, termed the "Gaggle", is to let each know where the other stands. No more than 30 reporters would stand around the Press Secretary's desk in an informal get-together that lasts approximately 15 minutes. Reporters get some answers on breaking events for their upcoming deadlines, and the White House finds out what is on the reporters' minds (Joynt Kumar, 2000: 8). After the "Gaggle" the Press Secretary would assign his staff to gather information for the daily news briefing with the president. This takes place at 13h00. The Press Secretary briefs the press, answers calls from reporters and conducts one-on-one interviews between 15h00 and 18h00 (Joynt Kumar, 2000: 27).

4.2 The presidential press conference

As weekly briefings (press conferences) with the PPC will form the pivot of the working relationship between the president/cabinet and the media, it will be useful to shed some light on what the U.S. presidential press conference entails.

Of all the direct exchanges of information between the U.S. president and the press, the presidential news (or press) conference is by far the most important (Nelson, 1996: 861).

Every U.S. president since Woodrow Wilson, who convened the first press conference on 15 March 1913, has held conferences. These conferences, in the form of question-and-answer sessions, have endured as both parties - the press and the president - find them to be extremely useful (Nelson, 1996: 862).

The press conference enables the president to communicate with the nation. It has the added advantage for the president that it brings him up to speed on existing bureaucratic problems (Nelson, 1996: 862). “The reporters’ questions often short-circuit the official channels, layers of bureaucracy, and tiers of staff adviser that insulate the president from the real world” (Nelson, 1996: 863).

The press naturally also benefits from the conferences as they receive information “from the horse’s mouth”. Nelson says “the gatherings give them an opportunity to take the president’s measure; they think they learn a great deal about a president as a person through occasions in which the president must respond publicly to their questions” (1996: 863).¹

Nelson (1996: 862) says the press conference is the only forum where a president regularly submits to questions. The press enjoys this encounter but it is of concern for the president as he is in a vulnerable position, not knowing beforehand what he would be asked. For this reason the press conference has become increasingly public with presidents and their staff investing a lot of time preparing for the conference (1996: 862). “Presidents who do not invest attention and time in preparation for press conferences put themselves at some risk. Because president Reagan, for example, did not like to prepare

²The “doyenne of the White House Press Corps”, 82-year-old Helen Thomas, whom mention was made of in the Introduction, traditionally asks the first question at presidential news conferences (agingresearch.org 2001).

for press conferences, his staff sometimes had to correct his statements after he made them” (1996: 863).

The amount of press conferences held by presidents has differed from person to person. For instance, president Richard Nixon averaged 0.6 a month (6.7 a year), with a total of 37 held; President Ford held 39 conferences, with an average of 1.3 a month (15.6 a year); President Clinton held by far the most with 38 in 1993 only, and 27 in 1995. Clinton also introduced the joint press conference. Nineteen of the 27 held in 1995 were in the presence of the leaders of other countries (Nelson, 1996: 866). George W. Bush also addresses the press regularly although no statistics were available by the time this document was completed.

The press conference with the PPC would be extremely beneficial to the South African presidency, for, as afore mentioned, Mbeki’s public image has started to suffer because of his inaccessibility. The regular briefings will also enable the PPC (and South Africa) to get to know Mbeki better, for his irregular contact with the media has made him come across aloof, especially when compared to his predecessor, Nelson Mandela.

Former U.S. vice presidential spokesperson, David Beckwith says, “when you have press conferences on a regular basis, they allow for steam to be released” (Sullivan, 2002: 3). Beckwith says it means over time, an aggressive sort of pressure builds up in reporters who have questions they want answered. The press conference releases this pressure. Beckwith stresses though that the first step in setting up a press conference is to be sure there is news as reporters do not like spending time at a non-event (Sullivan, 2002: 55).

4.3 Who covers the White House?

“The White House is the gilded cage of American journalism”, according to declared media critic Howard Kurtz (Nelson, 1996: 866). Kurtz says although very few people can say they spend their days in the West Wing of the White House, less than 50 feet from where the president is making decisions, it’s a waiting game for these reporters.

A White House press pass provides merely the privilege to wait - wait for a briefing; wait to see the president; wait until a press conference is called; wait to see the Press Secretary; wait to see senior officials; wait to have phone calls returned. There may be propinquity in power, but there is little control over when and how the news is gathered (Nelson, 1996: 867).

Kurtz's somewhat cynical view may contain some truth, yet being a member of this corps remains an honour, as the White House has and always will be one of the most prestigious beats in Washington. "On a day to day basis, it is the White House Press Corps to whom the president and the president's staff pitch their best stuff " (Nelson, 1996: 867).

Relatively few correspondents get issued with White House press passes (Nelson, 1996: 867). There are currently 1,700 members in the corps, of which not more than 100 are regulars. The journalists who travel with the president on occasion are mostly members of the pool of "regulars".³

It is estimated that up to 30 of these 100 regular members are under the age of thirty. In "*The Greening of the White House*", one of Clinton's Press Secretary's, Joe Lockhart expresses his surprise by how many senior White House reporters were succeeded by younger reporters just during his two years in the Administration. President of the White House Correspondents Association (and a White House reporters for Reuters), Steve Holland, says he is not surprised at all as "the White House is a young person's beat". The hours are long, the travel is gruelling" (Columbia Journalism Review: 2002).

4.4 White House Press Corps Accreditation

Until World War II the White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA)² controlled the issuing of credentials for reporters covering the White House. The WHCA, which represents the White House Press Corps in its dealings with the Administration on coverage-related issues, was established in 1914. The association promotes the interests of those reporters and correspondents assigned to cover the White House. The WHCA helps reporters get access to the president and aids news organisations in reducing the costs of covering the president on the road (WHCA Online: 2002).

The problematic selection process of PPC members was mentioned in the Introduction. After several inquiries (see footnote) as to what the process entails in America, an official at the Public Affairs office of the American Consulate in Cape Town, Amy Bell Mulaudzi, managed to obtain some information. An e-mail response from Lynne D. Scheib from the U.S. Department of State (Global Issues & Communications) on White House Press Corps accreditation, contains the following information:³

- The Capitol Police run criminal checks and issue passes for members of the press (White House Press Corps), who have been approved by their press agencies.
- A member of the Secret Service describes the accreditation process as being directed by the needs of the White House Press Office. The Press Office contacts the press agencies when they want to recruit photographers or reporters, or solicit names. Secret Service runs a criminal background check on them.

To quote Scheib in her e-mail response:

³ Two phone calls to the Press Office in Washington for information on representation, logistics as well as details pertaining to White House Press Corps accreditation amounted to nothing. Officials transferred me from one to another. Eventually it was suggested that I contact the WHCA. My two e-mail requests to the association also fell on deaf ears.

Per the information you had forwarded, the full security investigation forms issued by the FBI (which I have completed myself) for clearances do not ask invasive personal questions. However, the person investigated, along with neighbours, family, and past associates from school or work, are interviewed about whether the person is law-abiding, of good character, and loyal to their country. From what I have gathered, members of the White House Press Corps are not given full background investigations. Rather, a less involved check is run to assure there is no outstanding criminal warrants for the individual.

4.5 Travelling with the president

The Press Office is responsible for the travel arrangements for journalists who accompany the president when he travels outside of Washington. News organisations pay for their travel but the White House makes arrangements for their coverage of events and for their accommodation. (This would also be the case with the PPC.)

The Press Advance Unit is sent to a country or state prior to a presidential visit. Its task is to visit and search for sites that would meet the needs of both reporters and the president. On a major foreign visit, a representative of the press will accompany the Press Advance Unit and help to choose these sites. The press representative is tasked with writing a detailed report for representatives of news organisations, summarising the political, economic and social conditions prevailing in that country (Joynt Kumar, 2000: 21).

The United States' presidential air transport began in 1944 when a C-54 - the "Sacred Cow" - was put into service for president Franklin D. Roosevelt. Today, the presidential air transport fleet consists of two specially configured Boeing 747-200 B's. When the president is aboard either aircraft, or any Air Force aircraft, the radio call sign is "Air Force One" (UnitedStates Air Force Factsheet Online).

“The Flying White House”, which has the capability for in-flight refuelling, is also the home of White House Press Corps journalists who are invited to accompany the president on travels overseas or across the country. Reporters sit in the back, and aides and VIP’s sit up front. The more important the passenger, the closer they sit to the president himself. “Air Force One”, which can comfortably carry 70 passengers and 26 crewmembers, boasts a perfect flying record and is considered the safest plane in the world (National Geographic.com).

4.6 Speaking “On” and “Off the Record”

In its dealings with the press, the White House has the following classifications, quoted from *A Responsible Press Office: An Insiders Guide* (Sullivan, 2002: 53):

On the record, which means everything said to the reporter may be used and attributed to the source’s name.

On background. When you tell a journalist you are speaking “on background”, he or she may publish what you say but cannot attribute it to you by name or title. Rather, the reporter attributes your statements to a previously agreed upon identification, such as “well-informed source” or “an expert” or “a government official”.

On deep background. When you establish before an interview that you are speaking only on “deep background”, a reporter may use the information but without giving any attribution. Anything said in the interview is usable but not in direct quotation and not for attribution.

Off the record. When you speak “off the record”, you give a reporter information that is for his or her knowledge only and that cannot be used, printed, or made public in any way. A reporter should not take the information to another source in the hope of getting official confirmation.

Marguerite Sullivan, who was Chief of Staff to Lynne Cheney, wife of vice president Dick Cheney, says “sometimes spokespersons use an ‘off the record’ briefings to provide context for an issue when a reporter appears to be off the mark on a story, and privacy laws prevent putting the information ‘on the record’. Knowing the background can give a fuller picture of the story” (Sullivan, 2002: 53). She says however speaking ‘on the record’ is always the preferred way to speak to the media (2002: 53).

4.7 Lessons to be learned from the White House

Joynt Kumar (2000: 31) says those who have worked in the White House Press Office over the years have learned valuable lessons in their dealings with the press. The following would prove to be useful for the South African government once the PPC comes into operation. To quote from “*Lessons Learned*” (Joynt Kumar, 2000: 32):

- *Don't reduce reporters' opportunities or venues for receiving information.* You can add to what information reporters are given and opportunities there are to receive, but you cannot subtract from it without paying a heavy cost. When the Clinton Press Office shut off to reporters' entry to the pathway they traditionally used to query the Press Secretary, resentment from the press was swift and strong.
- *90% of Information you are dealing with comes from the press.* While it is natural to think the information one is dealing with in the White House is exclusively held, the contrary is true. The White House, like everyone else in town, discovers in the press most of the information they have to deal with about a given issue and what is happening on it around town.
- *An inquisitive press corps can work in the favour of the White House.* While the White House spends a great deal of its energy trying to stop stories it does not like as well as redirecting reporters to stories they want covered, it can come to haunt a president and his staff.

- *Don't sandbag the press.* Ray Jenkins who worked in the Carter White House spoke of the importance of not playing games with reporters with their deadlines. "This was something we were very careful not to do, was to play tricks with them. You did try to respect their need for familiarising themselves, getting the background for it, or even helping them get that insofar as possible."
 - *There are many ways to say 'I don't know'.* All reporters really want is to be able to get the information they need and have it right when they get it. To speak authoritatively when you don't have an answer rather than admit your lack of knowledge is a serious error.
 - *Lying.* Providing reporters with misinformation is a cardinal sin no matter whether it is willful or unintentional. When a Press Secretary does not get the story straight and causes a reporter to air or write an inaccurate story, reporters will not trust the information provided to them and search around the White House for other sources.
 - *Be wary of adopting a role of persuader.* The Press Office is the setting where official information is released, not a place where persuasion is the central task.
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5. Chapter 5 – Conclusion

“Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to understand that it bears very close resemblance to the first” (Collins Gem Quotations, 1997).

Although the idea behind the PPC is a commendable one, this remark by former U.S. president Ronald Reagan (a politician himself!) during a conference in 1977, should be remembered by those who become members of the elite group of journalists, to be known as the Presidential Press Corps.

There is no doubt that the PPC can be extremely beneficial to the public, government as well as the media. Not only would it make the presidency more visible, but the public would also receive more accurate and timely information regarding the workings of government. Apart from a more effective flow of information, the PPC might also go a long way in mending the rift between president Mbeki and the media.

On an operational level, the opportunity to travel with the president would present journalists with more opportunities to cover news events in foreign countries. Not all media organisations are keen to send reporters overseas due to logistical frustrations as well as security concerns. These would be largely eliminated, as journalists who travel with the president would not be subjected to security checks at airports. In addition, they would be under the protection of the South African presidency.

Although there are certain concerns, it is clear from the following comment that overwhelming support exists for the establishment of the PPC.

5.1 Comment on the viability of the PPC

5.1.1 Presidential spokesperson, Bheki Khumalo

“The PPC would allow journalists far broader access to the president and government. The constant basis contact would help journalists getting more insight into, and a greater understanding of issues of national importance.”

Regarding the concern of a possible conflict of interest, Khumalo says he sees “none”. He believes the universal policy in democracies worldwide, where freedom of the press is paramount and protected under the Constitution, would prevent any violation or abuse by government. “Look at the press corps in America, and especially those in the United Kingdom and Germany. The press is very critical of government yet nobody complains. Journalists are free to criticise.”

5.1.2 Sputnik Ratau from the GCIS: Directorate of International and Media Liaison

Ratau says the GCIS is committed to ensuring that the PPC remains independent, although the guidelines agreed upon should not be flouted. “Government and the media will operate from a point of consensus between the two parties.” According to Ratau the PPC steering committee and the government’s team, led by the GCIS, will continuously engage on matters pertaining to the PPC.

Ratau foresees “unrealistic expectations by the PPC” as the main “potential pitfall”. “The PPC membership might expect that all guards will immediately be dropped and that they will therefore have unbridled access to the political principals and government buildings. This will be overcome as part of the discussions and memorandum of understanding that will be signed. Proper understanding will be necessary as to what the actual deliverables will be.”

5.1.3 *Die Burger* editor, Arrie Rossouw

Rossouw was one of the people who came up with the proposal of a presidential press corps. He is however more realistic than Khumalo, who's view is utopian insofar as not foreseeing any conflict of interest.

Rossouw says the ideal is for South Africa's PPC to function like the one in the United States. "The White House Press Corps journalists do not owe anybody anything. The system is open and regulated and the credibility of the White House Press Corps is never in question." Although Rossouw says South Africa should strive for this, he adds that it may be an uphill battle.

The South African government is not ready for this. My fear is that PPC members would be seen as journalists who know everything, but who are not allowed to write anything. They would be perceived as part of the president's inner circle who share the secrets of those in power, but most likely, they would be expected to write nothing about what they see or hear.

Rossouw says "off the record" briefings are very rare in the White House and that the South African government should also adopt this attitude in its dealings with the PPC.

There are no hidden agendas (with the White House Press Corps). There is a clear policy of background briefings to which everybody (all White House Press Corps members) is invited. There are several rules governing the functions of the White House as well as its press. If the GCIS do not accept these rules, there won't be much need for the PPC.

Rossouw says although those media organisations with representatives on the PPC would pay for their trips with the president, which would eliminate the feeling of being under a "psychological obligation", it can also be a disadvantage. Considerable costs will be

involved in sending PPC members on international visits with the president. Rossouw adds however that there is a possibility of a state subsidy.

5.1.4 SANEF chairperson, Mathatha Tsedu

“Concerns about independence are not viable. What then about the presidential press gallery’s members - how do they maintain their independence?” This was the response of Tsedu when asked to comment on the possibility that PPC members would lose their journalistic independence within such a close working relationship with government. “To maintain independence and integrity is a challenge in every aspect of journalism. The aim is to minimise the distance between the press and the president and to bring the president closer to the people - in other words to keep the South African public informed.” Tsedu says SANEF has accepted this in principle. “I do not foresee ethical problems, although I do foresee logistical issues at first.”

Tsedu agrees with Rossouw that the relevant media organisations may not always be willing to cover the cost of flight tickets and accommodation. The matter of where the PPC will be based is also concerning to Tsedu. (It has been suggested that the weekly briefings take place at the Union Building in Pretoria, which means media organisations based in other parts of the country would have to either go to considerable costs to get their PPC representatives to Pretoria, or may simply not send them on a regular basis.)

Tsedu does not expect any problems regarding operational methods and procedures. He says there are sufficient similar bodies around the world to look at when operational hitches do emerge.

Rossouw’s concern that the PPC may become a government puppet was posed to Tsedu. His response was as follows: “There is relatively sufficient protection in the Constitution for freedom of the press. We should however not sit back; it will be a perpetual and contentious struggle. Government will always push the boundaries.” In this regard he mentioned the controversial Broadcasting Amendment Bill, saying this is a perfect

example of how a government committed to freedom of press “can sit with a piece of dangerous legislation”.

5.1.5 Cape Argus Chief of Staff, Steve Wrottesley

Wrottesley’s words when asked to comment upon the viability of the PPC were: “it is not a bad thing”. He says in theory it gives greater access to the president. Wrottesley highlighted how the presidency has become more distant from parliament as well as the people.

Regarding operational matters, Wrottesley is also worried that the PPC may become a Pretoria operation, as the bulk of the briefings will take place in that city.

He did express worry about press freedom but says for the PPC members to maintain journalistic independence “will boil down to ethical values”. Wrottesley says the solution in preventing the PPC and government from become “too cosy for comfort”, is to rotate the PPC members. “The PPC will only be as good as the people who work on it. There shouldn’t be a ‘yes-man’ to Mbeki.” Concerning government conduct *vis à vis* the PPC, Wrottesley believes the future of the corps will largely depend on when that first tough question is asked. “Will Mbeki be big enough to handle the tough ones?”

5.1.6 Senior political reporter for the *Sowetan* and PPC candidate, Taslima Viljoen

“I must say, the presidency has taken a bold step in ‘throwing open’ its doors to the prying eyes of the media.” Viljoen believes government’s intention to establish this body reflects its new policy of greater transparency. “For far too long have we been kept in the dark about the president’s official engagements including his overseas trips; now we can go along and see what these trips are all about.”

“As a journalist working in the new South Africa I am enjoying ‘the fruits of a democratic society’. The apartheid government would never have dreamt of establishing a PPC; everything they did was covert.”

Viljoen says the media agencies that would have representatives travelling with the president all have a particular interest, and will thus cover events differently. “Their agendas will dictate how they cover an event. The reality is that objectivity is relative. I doubt very much whether the local media will allow the presidency to steamroller them into becoming government mouthpieces.”

Viljoen says our media is too diverse and represent too a variety of interests to allow itself to become part of government’s propaganda machinery.

One only has to read the daily newspapers to realise the ‘agendas’ of mainstream media; and it is obvious that they are not singing government’s praises. I don’t think that after ‘rubbing shoulders with the president and his colleagues they will change their attitudes. We are not easily impressed by government and we keep them on their toes.

According to Viljoen PPC members may develop good relationships with government officials but would not allow them to influence their “objectivity.” She says central to this is the question of “public interest” versus “national interest”. Newsrooms will have to decide whether they will serve the “public interest” or the “national interest”. “We will have to decide for example whose interests it serves to write about the president’s alleged drinking habits and the fact that he doesn’t share a bed with his wife.”

According to Viljoen the PPC must keep their ethical guidelines in mind at all times when these decisions confront its members. “The PPC will work if a body such as SANEF has an equal say in its framework and operations. Crucial to the success of the PPC will be whether we can maintain our integrity and credibility.”

5.2 A final analysis

The main areas of concern and uncertainty regarding the PPC that have been discussed in the course of this document can be summarised in a nutshell.

- The NIA's "carte blanche conduct" during the selection process
- Presidential briefings to be held in Pretoria only
- The costs involved in travelling with the president
- Ethical concerns, especially conflict of interest
- Government's threats to freedom of the press e.g. the Broadcasting Amendment Bill
- Gray areas regarding "off the record" information
- The threat of punishment when PPC members do reveal confidential information
- The lack of representation of grassroots publications

The **costs** involved in sending PPC members of presidential trips will be considerable and would possibly prevent certain media organisations from having regular representatives on the presidential jet. Rossouw mentioned the possibility of a government subsidy. Such a measure should "level the playing fields" insofar that all PPC members would on occasion be able to accompany the president on domestic or overseas travels. The "playing fields" can however not be completely levelled if **grassroots publications** and media organisations are not represented on the PPC, as is currently the case. In principle this is unfair as they would be excluded from the same level of access to information pertaining to government and the presidency.

The weekly **presidential briefings** should not be limited to Pretoria as such an arrangement would be very expensive for media organisations. It would also be time consuming for PPC members elsewhere in South Africa to travel to Pretoria on a weekly basis. An effort should be made to rotate these briefings where possible, also holding them in other major centers in South Africa.

The potential of **conflict of interest** is without any doubt a major factor that could jeopardise the effectiveness and independence of the PPC. As discussed earlier, the close working relationship may lead to breaches in the professional conduct required between a journalist and his/her source. Friendships may develop between the “traditional enemies” within this new alliance, which could result in PPC members refraining from fulfilling his/her professional duty. Travelling in style with the president may create a psychological obligation in the minds of some PPC members. The story may not be told out of fear of disfavour.

Wrottesley’s idea of rotating PPC members should be seriously considered by government and the media. Spending prolonged periods of time with the president and his cabinet may result in PPC members becoming less vigilant.

On the other hand, digging up dirt may become the agenda of less ethical journalists, who would seize the opportunity to abuse their relationship with the president or cabinet. Personal gains such as favours and fame may be snares waiting to entrap certain PPC members.

Although the corps, as is the case with other journalists, can never be objective, they could strive towards objectivity (Retief, 2002: 102). Keeping in mind the **ethical guidelines** entrenched in the codes of conduct of credible media organisations, will ensure responsible journalism. Fairness, accuracy, independence and objectivity - as discussed in Chapter 2 - are the foundation upon which responsible journalism is built. It would also be useful for PPC members to run through the list of questions provided by the Poynter Institute mentioned in Chapter 2.

The matter of PPC members not being allowed “at any cost” to reveal **confidential government information** they may come upon in the course of their duties, is another matter for concern and careful consideration. In the Introduction it was mentioned that journalists who do leak confidential information would be punished. It has not been specified what this punishment would entail, but forbidding journalists to reveal

information in the public interest, also amounts to conflict of interest. If government adopts this attitudes, it will impede on press freedom in South Africa. If such information threatens national security, it goes unsaid that PPC members should refrain from revealing it. Although all scenarios that could lead to such a situation could not be foreseen, the PPC and government should establish clear guidelines before the corps comes into operation.

Another area of concern is “**off the record**” information. The Final Working Document does not specify what would constitute “off the record” information, but Ratau’s response to a question about who would decide what will be “off the record” is extremely worrying. “Anyone mandated to give briefings would inform the media whether the briefing is ‘on’ or ‘off the record’. Therefore *government* will determine what is or is not off the record.” Ratau says “off the record” information can be background to any issue. Regarding extreme scenarios, Ratau says PPC members with Top Security Clearance who for instance witness the president collapsing on his jet will have to understand the international implications of such incidents. “They will be expected to treat such information as ‘off the record’ until otherwise advised.” It remains to be seen whether the media accept these terms, as they are clearly excluded from determining what should be “off the record”.

It has become clear over the past few years, that government has forgotten what **freedom of the press** means. (The threats to press freedom were discussed in Chapter 1.) If the concept of a free press continues to be challenged, the PPC would not be able to function optimally. Government should respect critical engagement by the media for the new-found democracy that South Africans are so proud of, will cease to exist if journalists are prevented from telling the truth.

Viljoen is right in her assertion that government has good intentions, but for the PPC to succeed, more than good intentions would be needed. South Africa’s has not even celebrated its first decade as a democracy, and already there are signs of government muzzling the press. Besides the examples mentioned in Chapter 1, the “**birth**” of the

PPC also saw government flexing its muscles through the unnecessary questions posed to candidates. SANEF, who was not consulted when the line of questioning was decided upon, must be involved in the Top Security Clearance for PPC members who would be travelling on the presidential jet. Regarding the selection process, the success of the PPC would also depend on the caliber journalists represented on the PPC. Information about the “selected few” is still scant, as the selection process has not been completed.

Radebe mentioned (in the Introduction) that president Mbeki will be requested to draw up a declaration that will serve as a blueprint in governing the future relationship between government and the media. This document may become the saving grace of press freedom in South Africa *if* the president engages respected media role players when the document is drawn up.

One is prone to be skeptical of the initial success of the PPC in the light of all the new challenges and potential pitfalls. Although the goals are positive and the benefits potentially great, it will take time to achieve the same success of the PPC’s American counterpart. Taking cognizance of the *Lessons Learned* (in Chapter 3) would speed up the successful operation of the PPC.

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