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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY RICHARD PITHOUSE

28.07.2022

## *White Lies: Liberal Panic in the South African Media*



Photo by Alfred Kenneally

26 July, Johannesburg.

*New Frame* was an independent left daily online publication in South Africa. It launched on 16 August 2018, the anniversary of the state massacre of striking miners at Marikana, and published its last editorial on 4 July this year. Around 5 000 articles were published in just less than four years.

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From the outset, *New Frame* was strikingly different from much of the online media in South Africa. Uniquely, the foundations from which it received the bulk of its funding were primarily supported by a Black funder, a radical Black funder. The publication was largely and at times exclusively run by Black women, in terms of both its day-to-day editorial work and management. Moreover, *New Frame* explicitly aspired to be an editorially independent left publication that was African in terms of how it sought to make sense of the world as well as its geographic location. It did not assume that it was or should be part of the West, that the West has a right to rule the world, or that the West holds moral superiority.

*New Frame* was far more intellectually serious than the most influential online publications in the country – *News24* and the *Daily Maverick* – and far, far more committed to professionally and ethically rigorous forms of reporting. This commitment wasn't just a matter of holding to high professional standards. The rigour that we tried to develop and sustain with regard to facts, argument and process – including having six sets of eyes on every story before publication – was central to our political project. One of the guiding principles of the project was that intellectual seriousness and rigour, and ethical forms of engagement, should be foundational values of the left.

From a base in Johannesburg's vibrant student district, we swiftly built the infrastructure to create an intellectually serious space, a community of inquiry with a small but very good library, subscriptions to the best newspapers and periodicals in the English-speaking world, a weekly seminar, free language lessons for all staff, and time off and generous subsidies for university studies. Much of this was interrupted by the turn to remote work during the pandemic, but when the restrictions were lifted, interested staff were able to participate in the vibrant programme of book launches, panel discussions and workshops at a physically-adjacent public engagement project, The Forge, and its associated bookshop The Commune.

We were also able to run an unusually flat salary structure, with a top to bottom ratio of approximately 1 to 4, in which most senior staff were paid below industry rates and junior staff were paid at least twice commercial industry standards and nearly three times better than some non-profit media pay scales. *New Frame* was also able to sustain a network of freelance writers and photographers who were paid viable rates for their work (much better than elsewhere), were paid on time and treated with respect. This meant that *New Frame* was able to subsidise the wider intellectual life of South African society by making writing – and serious photography – a viable economic proposition.

We had the best sports and culture desks in the country, with women's sport and a pan-African perspective being particular strengths of the sports desk. The culture desk attracted some world-class writers, and engaged our realities with all due seriousness. A good number of the leading Black feminist intellectuals in South Africa were contributors, and we were particularly thrilled to have regular contributions from Pumla Gqola. We ran analysis by people of such standing as Duma Gqubule, Steven Friedman, Achille Mbembe, Paul Gilroy and others, as well as a weekly editorial. Our podcast was world-class in terms of production values and content, and interviewees included people on the frontlines of organising and struggle, as well as people of the global stature of Noam Chomsky, Angela Davis, Lewis Gordan and Linton Kwesi Johnson. We published excerpts from important new research and new books, and ran many excellent book reviews. We also regularly republished archival texts, ranging from the Mandé Charter of 1222 to a long excerpt from Sylvia Wynter's remarkable 1992 essay *No Humans Involved* – with her personal blessing. We were particularly pleased that we were able to publish in a number of African languages.

The visual side of the work – our photographs and illustrations – was, uniquely in South Africa, consistently world class. We took the images as seriously as we took the words.

In terms of the content of our reporting, we were able to consistently hold to the standards of professional and ethical seriousness that we had set for ourselves at the outset. Some of the highlights of the work included our reporting on labour, political repression in Durban and eSwatini, the endemic problem of xenophobia, the urban land question, the riots that rocked parts of South Africa last year and police violence.

The value of our work, and the difference between our approach to news reporting and that of much of the liberal online media, is well illustrated by contrast between how *News24* and *New Frame* reported the police murder of Zamekile Shangase in July last year. *News24* is a white-owned and edited publication with a liberal editorial line. The historical roots of the company are in fascist and white supremacist politics. The *News24* [report](#) was based solely on police sources that spun a narrative that amounted to a simple coverup for a police murder. This cover up was written by a white journalist working under a white editor and using two white people to give comment as experts. It didn't even bother to name Shangase, let alone give some sense of who she was. The *New Frame* report engaged Shangase's now-violated personhood and her community with dignity, listened carefully to what the community reported about what they had seen and showed that the police account of the murder was a lie.

The accolades that we received for our work were extraordinary. In an unsolicited public comment, the philosopher Achille Mbembe described *New Frame* as “one of the most exciting political, intellectual and cultural projects to emerge in Africa” and “arguably the top intellectual media platform on our Continent”.

The writer Sisonke Msimang said that “*New Frame* is one of the most vital voices in the Global South. Its mastery of long-form writing that is both urgent and thoughtful is unparalleled. Most importantly, *New Frame* does what its name suggests: it provides a necessary new frame for thinking about age-old problems.”

S’bu Zikode, leader of Abahlali baseMjondolo – by far the largest popular movement to have emerged after apartheid – commented that: “We have seen *New Frame* journalists taking time and carefully listening to our members in our communities with so much respect and dignity. It is for this reason we refer to *New Frame* as the people’s media house.”

### **Liberal hostility**

Yet when *New Frame* ran out of road with donors due to its high costs and small audience, it was subject to extraordinary attack from within key nodes of power in the white liberal media. Ethical considerations were set aside in the interests of a campaign of full-scale delegitimization.

This campaign was driven by two claims, neither of which was grounded in any attempt to assess the empirical evidence constituted by what we had actually published. One claim was that *New Frame* was somehow a propaganda organ for the country’s largest union, the National Union of Metalworkers’ of South Africa (Numsa), its General Secretary and the tiny and now barely-functional communist party that emerged from it, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (SRWP).

Even the most cursory look at what we actually published shows that our labour coverage was, aside from being consistently excellent in terms of journalistic standards, plainly non-partisan and never centred around any particular personality in the trade union movement. Both the major trade union federations in the country were covered, as were a range of unions, as well as struggles by workers who were not unionised or poorly served by unions. We published an article on the launch of the SRWP, something what was widely covered by the mainstream media, and another on a protest in which the SRWP participated and which was covered on national television. That is, by any measure, miserly coverage and a far cry from anything remotely approximating propaganda.

The evidence clearly shows that claims of some sort of dubious editorial connection to Numsa, its General Secretary or the SRWP are untrue. These claims were made by the sectarian left in South Africa, an often putrid space in which paranoia and slander are standard, and where outright thuggery is not uncommon.

I move in quite different political and intellectual circles to Vashna Jagarnath, who is my former wife, but at different times and for different reasons, we have both been subject to death threats from within the left. On one occasion, a direct threat, delivered to Jagarnath via Whatsapp and accompanied by a photograph of the building in which she was living, was made to harm our child.

Powerful actors in the white-run liberal media, ordinarily hostile to far left politics, were happy to exploit the claims of one staff member who is associated with a small Trotskyist group, as well as the wider sectarian attack that unfolded on social media, in order to put the knife into *New Frame*.

The second line of attack claimed that the *New Frame* editorial policy enforced a prohibition on critique of China and Russia – the two primary enemies of the West. The record shows that this claim is also bogus. It is an undeniable fact that we published work critical of both China and Russia. It was immediately striking that no mention was made of the fact that we never published a substantive piece on Saudi Arabia and did not publish very much on Rwanda, both US client states. It was equally striking that there was no mention of the fact that we did not publish much on the wars in Yemen and Ethiopia, and were never able to engage with the Congo in a sustained way. This line of attack from the liberal white media largely drew on comments from two staff members, one former and one current.

### **Actual attempts at state influence**

In almost four years of operation, one state and one state only sought to connect with *New Frame*. A few months after we launched, Donald Trump's ambassador arrived at our offices in a surprise unscheduled visit, accompanied by her three consul generals. I did not invite them in. But while standing at the entrance, she asked about the nature of our interest in international affairs and invited me to a monthly meeting for editors in Cape Town called 'On the rocks and off the record'. She stressed the first class transport and accommodation as well as the excellent food and alcohol, and told me that 'all the editors come' and how good it would be for my career. I declined the offer.

After the riots last year, I was invited to address all the US embassy and USAID staff at the US embassy in Pretoria. I declined this offer too. There was an approach from Voice

of America proposing collaboration. Again, I declined. We were also contacted by Joseph Studios, a marketing agency in Atlanta that offered to support us to write a story on “the current genocide situation in Xinjiang”. The agency notes on its website that “Our past in the intelligence community...gives us an advantage over our competitors”. The blurb introducing the founder and CEO, Daniel Klein, explains that he has “supported National Intelligence Clients, NSA, and US/Partner Military Clients”. We did not reply to Joseph Studios. Of course, if we had received a pitch or story on the situation in Xinjiang from a credible independent writer, we would have responded with interest.

In much the same way that a US-backed coup will always ally with local minorities sometimes marked out in racial terms as in Haiti or Bolivia, the liberal attack made extensive use of, to my knowledge, two current staff members and one former staff member. One, as noted, is a participant in far left politics. I think it is fair to say that the other two are people who once had left sensibilities but have drifted into open support for the West and the US security establishment on current geopolitical issues. Given that *New Frame's* staff is overwhelmingly Black, it is striking that not one of the three people that led the charge into the arms of the liberal media is Black.

From its launch until early this year, there were astonishingly few editorial differences at *New Frame*, and with one exception they did not lead to conflict. That exception pertained to what I am happy to call a fundamentalist view on animal rights. A story on a flood in rural KwaZulu-Natal used the phrase ‘lives lost’ in a way that deliberately referred to the lives of cows and a human being in a single reference, as if they were equivalent. I insisted that this be changed. There was also an article, written in full white saviour mode, on a white woman offering care to dogs in a working class African township. I didn’t spike it, but I did ask the writer to engage more carefully with what is in South Africa intensely complicated and fraught terrain. One staff member responded with explosive rage in a torrent of Whatsapp messages. This person would go on to be one of the two key protagonists in the claims about compromised editorial practices that were made after *New Frame* ran into a funding crisis.

Early this year, the same staff member exploded with rage again, this time verbally, after an article was published in *New Lines*, an obscure magazine, alleging a global conspiracy by a set of donor-funded left organisations to “deny the Uyghur genocide”. Along with numerous errors of fact, the piece had many features typical of conspiracy theory, including the fact that it brazenly ignored voluminous information that did not fit with its claims. Its author, Alexander Reid-Ross, is a discredited writer. The Southern Poverty



Law Center withdrew his work from their site on the grounds that it was not credible and apologised to the people he had slandered. Reid-Ross is a former anarchist who has drifted so far right that he is now a senior data analyst at the Network Contagion Institute in New York where his colleagues include a former Wall Street trader, a former chief of the New York Police Department, two former US military people, including a retired US army brigadier general, and a former U.S. Department of Homeland Security Advisory Council member.

Curiously the staff member who exploded with rage later claimed, in print, that he had not actually read the Reid-Ross piece.

### **White lives matter**

It was the war in Ukraine that turned a number of staff members – three to my knowledge but there may have been a fourth – against our editorial orientation. This was a small fraction of our staff, which was made up of twenty-five people. The first article that we published after the outbreak of the war spoke of the “the acquisitive, domineering and destructive nature of Russia’s invasion”. We then published an editorial that described the invasion as a “catastrophe” and Putin as a “an authoritarian who leads a kleptocratic state”. This was followed by an interview with the Russian dissident Alexey Sakhnin.

It was the fourth piece that we published, an editorial that came out on 18 March, that opened a break with a small number of staff members. The editorial was written in response to the view – commonly expressed in the Western media at the time and often echoed in that part of the white controlled South Africa media that understands itself to be part of the West – that the invasion was a threat to the ‘liberal order’, an order that was spoken of as if it were an unqualified good for all of humanity. The editorial argued that: “It is hardly surprising that this is the view of most of the media in the West. It is, though, striking that here in Africa, in the Global South, powerful actors in our media and in the elite public sphere more widely assume similar views, and assume them as common sense rather than as positions to be debated”.

It then went on to lay out a quick sketch of what the liberal order has meant to most of humanity – genocide, enslavement, coups, invasions and more. A question was asked: “What does it mean when an African country has a powerful internal force that assumes it is part of the West, that the West has a right to rule the planet, that the ‘liberal order’ is an obviously good thing and that threats to it should be met with hysteria, slander and force rather than reason?”

It was this critique of the South African media that provoked the initial internal hostility towards our editorial position on the war. That hostility escalated as one person took issue with the next four pieces that we published. He vigorously opposed measured and important articles that we ran on the war by Nontobeko Hlela, Jeremy Corbyn and Imraan Buccus describing them all as repeating ‘Putin talking points’.

He was particularly agitated by the Buccus piece that noted the racial double standards in how the wars in Ukraine, Yemen and Ethiopia were being reported by the Western media. He was equally opposed to a piece by Alex Čizmić that dealt with the racism experienced by African students fleeing Ukraine from Poland. We were told that talking about this racism was a ‘Putin talking point’ and he asked that the headline – “African expats say Ukraine is racist, but it’s home” be altered to remove the reference to racism. I could hardly entertain a demand from a white man that we should not speak about racism in international affairs on the grounds that this kind of discussion is a ‘Putin talking point’. We were also told that it was a ‘Putin talking point’ to suggest that NATO had played a role in escalating tensions before the war began or to use the phrase ‘proxy war’ with regard to the geopolitical interests of the United States in the war.

None of this played out in a conflictual manner. There was rational and respectful engagement. My position was made clear. *New Frame* was and would remain independent of all three of the great powers, and would look for critical and independent writers and experts on geopolitical issues. But two and arguably three staff members were not satisfied with this. Two people – both of whom went on to be key sources for the liberal attack to come – argued that Timothy Snyder, who sits on the Council of Foreign Relations, an American thinktank known for including politicians, former secretaries of state, CIA directors, corporate bosses and the like, was an important figure – even exemplary – for thinking through the war. One of these people simultaneously excoriated Noam Chomsky for ‘repeating Putin talking points’. Both would go on to be among the three staff members who sought to attack *New Frame* in the days and weeks after the funding crisis emerged.

There was an absolutely consistent racial character to the small group of people who began to express concern, and in a fairly directly hostile way, after the publication of this editorial and the four further articles that followed. Not one of them was Black. It was striking that not one of them expressed any interest in our clear failure to cover the wars in Ethiopia and Yemen adequately. I had a very strong sense that the unusual experience of witnessing the sudden vulnerability of white people in Ukraine had resulted in an



existential anxiety among some white staff members, an anxiety that was simply not present with regard to conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, etc. A demand was made that we cover the suffering of people in Ukraine more regularly. No such demand was ever made with regard to the wars in Yemen or Ethiopia, or the developing return to open conflict in the Congo.

It became clear that, along with the particular and racialised sympathy for the victims of the war in Ukraine, there had also been a collapse into the binary politics in which critique of one camp is misread as support for the other.

There was another dimension to some of this racialised hostility. There were a number of people in and around *New Frame* who were not willing to accept the authority of Black women who largely, and for some time exclusively, ran *New Frame*. This added to the resentment and hostility that was expressed by some at the onset of the funding crisis.

*New Frame* was not the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*. We did what we could with the resources and networks that we had, but inevitably had massive gaps in our international coverage. In the case of Ukraine, we had no freelancers there and never received a submission from a writer there, or even a piece that we could syndicate. If we had received a good piece, we would certainly have run it. The same is true with regard to Saudi Arabia, the Congo, Rwanda and many other countries.

### **The liberal attack**

Following the discontent that began to emerge among a small number of staff members after the publication of our editorial on the liberal order, I was asked to engage the staff on the question of *New Frame's* 'ideology'. I readily agreed. I explained that it was imperative that we retain a critical distance from all three of the great powers and always take care to look for credible and independent writers and analysts.

I also made the point that while the geopolitical coverage in the liberal media in South Africa was resolutely hostile to Russia and China, it was often enthusiastically in support of the West in general and the US in particular. I explained that as a publication of the African left, *New Frame* could not follow this approach and that we needed to think and write from within a deep understanding of what the rule of the West, and from 1945 the US, had meant for most of the world.

As we were having this discussion, some of the staff did not display any clear emotion, but among those who did there was a striking racial difference. As some Black staff members smiled and nodded their heads in agreement, sometimes verbally expressing agreement, two of the white staff members glared at me with what looked like naked hatred. I got a

strong sense that they experienced my critique of the West as an existential threat to their personal identity.

Minutes after the funding crisis was announced on 4 July 2022, the same staff member who had tried to persuade us to suppress any discussion of racial double standards with regard to the war in Ukraine aggressively threatened to work with Reid-Ross and the formerly-left British journalist Paul Mason, who has documented links to British intelligence, to bring down *New Frame* and a set of named individuals. He described Reid-Ross and Mason as personal friends.

The first major attack from the liberal media came quickly. It came from *amaBhungane*, a well-funded white-run investigative journalism operation that, along with support from the standard Western donors, had previously crossed an ethical red line and taken money from the National Endowment for Democracy. *AmaBhungane* has long been criticised for primarily focusing on Black corruption in the state and the ruling party while paying scant attention to white capital, and showing no interest at all in the deep structures of oppression that continue to mark South African society.

Micah Reddy, an *amaBhungane* reporter, swiftly dispatched a discombobulated list of questions that included wild allegations and bizarre conspiracy theory. Many of the allegations could have been quickly and easily checked and discounted by looking at the readily available empirical evidence about our editorial practices in the form of what we had actually published. At the same time as they were put to me, Reddy's list of questions was deliberately circulated to hostile current and former *New Frame* staff members from where they were widely circulated to a general audience. Reddy's editor Sam Sole confirmed that the questions had been deliberately circulated by *amaBhungane*.

Sole saw nothing wrong with this, but it is not standard journalistic practice in South Africa and is widely considered to be seriously unethical. What it meant, in this case, was that a set of often untrue, malicious and defamatory statements had effectively been published by *amaBhungane*, under their letterhead, without any attempt to measure these claims against reality, or to afford any sort of right to reply. It was clear they were running a campaign rather than an investigation.

It should be noted that it is widely thought that Reddy is a partisan in sectarian intra-left political battles. The obsessive and conspiratorial nature of the questions and statements about Numsa that he issued in response to the *New Frame* funding crisis, something that had nothing at all to do with the union, seems to confirm this. Nonetheless, he works and

writes from within a liberal publication, and the conduct of *amaBhungane* must be understood in those terms.

The next major attack came in the form of an evidently malicious hatchet job by Rebecca Davis, a white liberal writing in the white-managed and edited *Daily Maverick*. *The Maverick* does not disclose its funders, or even list its staff on its website. It is usually assumed that its funding largely comes from (still mostly white) capital in South Africa and some or other subset of the standard list of Western donors, but nothing is confirmed. It has been suggested that staff are not listed on the website because there is some embarrassment at the fact that they are overwhelmingly white.

The *Maverick* made its name via corruption exposés, and in particular its important work in taking on the kleptocracy that developed around Jacob Zuma. It has done other good work.

Its valuable *Citizen* section covered the recent assassinations of two Abahlali baseMjondolo activists well. Impressively for a liberal publication in South Africa, the *Maverick* has published work by *Open Secrets UK*, including a piece on how the mainstream media in the UK offers uncritical support to that country's military and intelligence establishment.

Like *amaBhungane*, the *Maverick* has stayed as close to the question of corruption in the state and the ANC as Ahab in his pursuit of the white whale. Of course corruption should be an essential focus of the media but, again like *amaBhungane*, deep social questions – the kind that call for a fundamental reorganisation of political and economic power – are largely elided in favour of this question. There is no doubt that if a movement of the oppressed were able to build its power to the point where it could mount a serious challenge to oppression in South Africa and question the basis of a legal order rooted in conquest, both *amaBhungane* and the *Maverick* would respond with intense hostility.

The work by *Open Secrets UK* is an outlier. On international issues, the *Maverick* is more often resolutely and uncritically supportive of the West. One of its key writers on international issues is Peter Fabricius, a long time stenographer for Western embassies. Along with the *Maverick*, he writes for the Institute for Security Studies, which undertakes research, training and 'capacity building'. It is largely funded by Western governments and donors, including USAID, and also takes money from the World Bank.

The *Maverick's* leading writer on international issues is the more flamboyant Greg Mills. Mills heads the Brenthurst Foundation, established by the Oppenheimer family, the richest family in South Africa – a family which primarily made their fortune under apartheid via

the exploitation of African labour on the mines. He has been a strategic advisor to the pro-US Rwandan dictator Paul Kagame, the special adviser to David Richards, the Commander of the NATO forces in Afghanistan, and a visiting lecturer at the NATO Higher Defence College.

A good sense of the nature of Mills' contribution to the *Maverick* can be gleaned from the webinar that he hosted with the publication at the onset of the war in Ukraine. One of his two panelists was David Kilcullen, who has worked as a special adviser to General David Petraeus and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The other panelist was Rory Stewart. It has been repeatedly suggested but not confirmed that Stewart has a background in MI6. The official record shows that he worked in the British occupying force in Iraq and held ministerial positions under two Tory Prime Ministers.

### **Actual bias towards a powerful state**

Davis appears to see no contradiction in suggesting, without credible evidence, that *New Frame* was aligned to states that are the enemies of the West while saying nothing at all about the writers and commentators embedded in the Western security establishment who are used by her own publication. Reddy has not published any investigation into the sources of the *Maverick's* funding or its evident editorial biases towards the West. Tellingly, neither Reddy nor Davis has shown any interest in exploring the ways in which the US state sought to make connections with *New Frame*.

In his most recent set of questions sent to various people imagined to be linked to *New Frame*, Reddy picks up on a few points from Davis's article, the last one being that I was reported to have been reluctant to accept funding from sources that I "considered either ideologically impure or high-risk in terms of potential editorial interference". This is a reference to a discussion in which I recommended that caution be exercised with regard to a proposal from a staff member that we seek funding from a foundation supported by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy. It is quite extraordinary that journalists have no shame in implicitly presenting a report of an editor's expression of the need to be cautious about a proposal to accept US state funding, even if mediated somewhat, as morally dubious conduct.

It cannot be argued seriously that *New Frame* was attacked by the white liberal media because we had a bias towards the metal workers' union, or because we were not critical of Russia and China. As noted, the record of what we published shows that these claims are simply not true.

But it certainly does seem that there was a significant degree to which we were attacked because we were critical of the West. The *New Frame* editorial published in March proved to be all too prescient when it asked: “What does it mean when an African country has a powerful internal force that assumes it is part of the West, that the West has a right to rule the planet, that the ‘liberal order’ is an obviously good thing and that threats to it should be met with hysteria, slander and force rather than reason?”

*Pithouse was the editor-in-chief of New Frame from its founding in 2018. It must, however, be noted that for two and half years he was seriously ill after contracting meningitis and encephalitis, and that while he was away from work the publication was run by others.*

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**CounterPunch 27.07.2022**