

## ProJourn condemns 'chequebook journalism'

The Professional Journalists' Association of South Africa (ProJourn) on Friday, 02 July 2010, released a statement to the association's facebook page condemning the actions of Ashley Smith who admitted to having accepted secret payments and having acted as a covertly paid media strategist and advisor to Ebrahim Rasool during the bitter internecine struggle between two factions of the ANC for control of the party in the region, while he was employed as a political reporter at the *Cape Argus*.



The actions of Smith, who resigned from *Cape Argus* during a disciplinary inquiry into these so-called 'Brown Envelope' allegations, have brought journalism in South Africa into disrepute. They also cast a shadow over the integrity - the hard currency of our profession - of all journalists and, as such, we condemn it in the strongest possible terms.

This week's revelations, based on an affidavit to the prosecuting authorities by Smith in the hope of being indemnified from any prosecution, were carried prominently on the front page of *Cape Argus*, with further extensive coverage inside.

ProJourn wishes to commend *Cape Argus*, which had assigned its chief reporter to investigate the scandal, for publishing the allegations of impropriety against Smith and another member of staff, former political editor Joe Aranes, so prominent

The admission by the *Cape Argus*, in a rare front page leader, that it had failed its readers in this matter, as well as the editor's reaffirmation of paper's core values is to be commended. We particularly commend the exceptionally strong language of *The Argus* front-page leader, which calls Smith's actions - amounting to "a conspiracy leading from the top office in the province to the heart of the newspaper - in receiving public funds to support one political faction's agenda "at as damning a charge as you can level at journalists."

This reprehensible instance of the political "embedding" of a journalist in the democratic era is eerily reminiscent of the actions of certain journalists of the apartheid era who attempted, sponsored by covert Security Branch slush-funds, to advance a racist agenda and to distort accurate reportage of the struggle for democracy in South Africa. We recall that during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in September 1997, Craig Kotze, a former crime reporter at *The Star*, unabashedly admitted his role as a paid police informant. Like Smith's revelations, those hearings made grim reading for journalists, especially when retired police strategic communications commander Vic McPherson claimed that almost every newspaper in the country was tainted by the embedding of a total of 40 informers.

South Africa remains a society in dynamic transition, one in which all aspects and institutions of our new democracy - including media freedom and independence - are being continually exercised, tested and challenged. This robust process normal, but we must recognise that many journalists are being placed under extraordinary pressure to conform to and advance the agendas of various contending political parties, factions and ideologies. Not only do we support those stalwar journalists who resist the demands that they be partisan in their reportage, but we abhor those who cross the line and succumb to the temptations of "chequebook journalism".

It would be a tragedy with damaging implications for our democracy if we slid back into the dire practices of the apartheid past and did not cut out from our ranks those who have turned their backs on the fundamental ethics of our profession. Jo the [facebook](#) page to view the full statement that release by [ProJourn](#)

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