

# The South African Publishing Gate: Information Keepers and Seekers

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of state capture is creating political angst among South African citizens, and therefore the role the media is playing in revealing sensitive information about key personas, as well as evoking public interest and debate, warrants further investigation. This article explores the media's role, but specifically trade book publishers' roles as gatekeepers and information disseminators in a post-democratic South Africa. Case studies of the controversial socio-political exposés Jacques Pauw's *The President's Keepers: Those keeping Zuma in Power and out of Prison* (published by NB Publishers in 2017), and Pieter-Louis Myburgh's *Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Magashule's Web of Capture* (published by Penguin Random House in 2019), are used to illustrate that these publishers achieved both social and business objectives in publishing high-risk titles. NB Publishers and Penguin Random House managed to publish these titles in the right format (hard copy and electronic format), at the right time (before the provincial and national elections), at the right price, and were supported by strong publicity and marketing campaigns, which contributed to the success of these titles. Furthermore, publishers assisted in bridging the gaps in knowledge that may have existed among concerned South African citizens because of political uncertainty, by publishing timely and relevant books. This concept links with Dervin's sense-making methodology regarding information behaviour, and the aim of this article is to highlight the synergy between gatekeeping and sense-making, fuelled by trade publishers that take calculated risks in publishing controversial titles, amid a politically tense environment.

**Keywords:** gatekeeping, South African publishing, sense-making methodology, state capture, Penguin Random House, NB Publishers

## Introduction

In recent years (2017–2020) countless media articles surfaced, implicating former President Jacob Zuma, the Gupta family and several state officials and institutions as participants of irregular and corruptive activities. One relatively recent example is the case where The National Treasury requested a forensic services report in 2018, investigating the consulting firm McKinsey, Regiments Capital, Trillian Capital Partners, Transnet executives including Anoj Singh, Brian Molefe, Siyabonga Gama, Gary Pita and Edward Thomas, and also the Guptas, for their role in compromising the integrity of Transnet contracts, appointments and procurement processes (Bezuidenhout 2018). In the previous year, the controversial book *The President's Keepers: Those keeping Zuma in Power and out of Prison* (Pauw 2017) (Figure 1) was published in which journalist Jacques Pauw exposed former President Zuma's corruptive dealings and simultaneously incriminated several authority figures, "keepers of secrets" positioned in the political and economic sectors of South Africa.

This phenomenon of "individuals or groups operating in the public and private sectors influencing government policies for personal advantage" (Martin and Solomon 2016, 21), with the consequence of an economy "becoming increasingly centralised" is known as "state capture". Another implication of state capture is the "weakening [of] state capacity through appointing pliable but less than capable people in key positions, especially in finance procurement and political bearers" (Whelan as quoted in Martin and Solomon 2016, 22).

Some would argue that South Africa is a failing state as a consequence of the African National Congress's (ANC) inefficient decision-making and general ruling of South Africa (Martin and Solomon 2016, 21). State capture is creating political angst among South African citizens, and therefore the role the media is playing in revealing sensitive information about key personas, as well as evoking public debate, warrants further investigation. This paper explores the media's role, but specifically trade book publishers' roles as gatekeepers and information disseminators in a post-democratic South Africa. The case studies of the socio-political exposés *The President's Keepers: Those keeping Zuma in Power and out of Prison* (Pauw 2017) and *Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Magashule's Web of Capture* (Myburgh 2019), which directly relate to state capture, are analysed in this context.

*The President's Keepers* sold an estimate of 200 000 copies, a sales figure uncommon for the average non-fiction publishing house in South Africa. This bestseller evoked global media interest. Amid political figures' questioning the author Jacques Pauw's credibility, threatening liability for revealing state secrets, as well as threats against the publisher, the book stayed on the bookshelves and achieved the publisher's social objective in sharing information which it believes was in public interest. In 2019 we see history repeating itself with the publication of another controversial title, Pieter-Louis Myburgh's *Gangster State: Ace Magashule's Web of Capture*, implicating yet another political figure, the secretary general of the ANC. This book sold close to 30 000

copies within the first month of publication (Nielsen BookScan 2019). These books stirred a debate, questioning the role of book publishers in disseminating information that are disputed and/or regarded as “secrets” or untrue. One therefore has to ponder whether publishers are mere messengers of information that is in public interest, or adversaries strategically playing devil’s advocate?

The publishers and authors in both above-mentioned cases have been threatened, leading one to think how dangerous information sharing or publishing has become (Le Roux 2019). Weighing up risk factors and benefits in publishing these titles, both NB Publishers and Penguin Random House published these titles in the right format (hard copy and electronic format), at the right time (before the provincial and national elections), at the right price, and were supported by strong publicity and marketing campaigns, which contributed to the success of these titles.

Considering the risks involved when publishing sensitive or possibly controversial information, this article proposes that trade publishers play an important role in gatekeeping, whereas the term “‘gatekeeping’ is applied when the focus is on judgments whether to admit persons or works into a cultural field; it has to do with accepting or rejecting works or their creators and the consequences of these choices for subsequent works and creators” (Janssen and Verboord 2015, 4). Furthermore, publishers assist in bridging the gaps in knowledge that may exist among concerned South African citizens because of political uncertainty, by publishing relevant books. NB Publishers and Penguin Random House succeeded in providing answers to the public’s questions. Dervin’s sense-making theory regarding information behaviour will be applied in this context (Dervin 1983).

## **Publishing South African Non-fiction**

Trade publishers in South Africa publish books that are for the “man on the street”, the general reader who has various interests, hobbies, and genre preferences, ranging from fiction to non-fiction, and typically reads for leisure. As opposed to educational publishing or academic publishing, trade publishers are dependent on readers’ likes and dislikes, as well as on discretionary income being available to spend on luxury<sup>1</sup> items. Trade books are also trend-dependent, have smaller print runs and compete with imported international titles, especially from the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Whereas an educational publishing house has a captive audience and a predetermined print run, the print run for trade books varies. The general sales reports obtained from Nielsen BookScan (2014–2016) indicate that a trade title sells an average of 600 copies per year, and that the bestseller in 2014 sold a total of 20 000 copies (Nielsen BookScan 2014–2016).

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1 In developing countries trade books or books bought for leisure and not for educational purposes as such are regarded as expensive items, and are thus classified as luxury items.

Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital theory states that publishers own cultural capital (including education, skills and qualifications), social capital (networks), symbolic capital (literary status, and prestige) and economic capital. Economic capital refers to the monetary benefits derived from the sales of a cultural product, specifically books in this context (Bourdieu 1984). But publishers' "selections and evaluations do not only affect the reputations of cultural products and their makers, but also their own status and authority ('their symbolic capital') in the field" (Janssen and Verboord 2015, 8). Thus, in order to manufacture a product, there also has to be an adequate demand. This resonates with the capitalist or commercial model.

In order for a publisher to make an informed decision to publish a book various costs need to be considered, including origination, production, printing, marketing and distribution costs. Market research about trends and market size, historical sales data about similar books published, and what publishers refer to as "gut feel", "... titles that intuition told them that they should publish" will determine the ultimate decision to publish the manuscript in question (Davies 2004). Political, economic, socio-cultural and technological factors need to be strategically considered, as the publication date of a specific title is crucial to its success.

Publishers may also need to consider whether to focus on fiction or non-fiction. Non-fiction books deal predominantly with current, trendy and newsworthy topics. The Publishers Association of South Africa's (PASA) industry report shows that local non-fiction sells better than fiction (Cassells and Le Roux 2018). Le Roux states: "Non-fiction outsells fiction. This is not a new trend, either: political books found a ready audience throughout the apartheid period" (Le Roux 2019). The sales statistics from the two case studies also confirm this notion.

The decision to publish a specific book is also guided by the publishing house's editorial philosophy. Does the publishing house focus more on cultural influence and social impact, with the profit motif becoming consequently less important? Or are bestsellers with guaranteed income that are published for pure entertainment the business objective? This article highlights the social objective as well as economic considerations of publications, whereas publishers want to make information available even at some cost.

## Case Studies

The two books, *The President's Keepers: Those keeping Zuma in Power and out of Prison*, and *Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Magashule's Web of Capture*, were selected as case studies owing to the amount of media attention they received, as well as the resistance and threats against these publications, amid a politically volatile period. The specifications (format, page extent, pricing), the respective publishers' commissioning decisions (risk, timing and positioning), sales statistics and general media coverage and reception, as well as the resistance or consequences of publication, are all dealt with in the case studies.

Academic and commercial articles that discuss topics of state capture (Martin and Solomon 2016), information-seeking behaviour (Foreman-Wernet and Dervin 2011; Godbold 2006; Shields 1999; Todd 2005; Wilson 2000), decision-making in commissioning in trade publishing (Buitendach-Miller 2018; Davies 2004; Van Rooyen 2010), and gatekeeping of information (Dick 2006; Essery 2004; Janssen and Verboord 2015; Le Roux 2013; Soroka 2012) were consulted when writing this article. Owing to the fact that these books received immense media attention, the publisher's statements, press releases, catalogues and websites, and Nielsen BookScan and PASA's sales figures provided sufficient information to adequately analyse the case studies. Furthermore, media news clips of interviews with the authors and publishers were consulted. No articles that focussed on this theme of the role of trade publishers as gatekeepers combined with Dervin's sense-making methodology (SMM) in a South African context could be found and were available for comparison or discussion. This article therefore fills a gap in this current research regarding the role of South African trade publishers as gatekeepers.

*The President's Keepers* is an investigative exposé written by journalist Jacques Pauw, and was published in October 2017 by NB Publishers. The book has a page extent of 352 and sells at a retail price of R285,00.

Considering that the gist of the book focuses on former President Zuma's tax evasion and financial dealings, the South African Revenue Service's (SARS) alleged corrupt commissioner Tom Moyane, relationships and business transactions with the Gupta<sup>2</sup> family and the State Security Agency's (SSA) misuse of taxpayers money on an intelligence programme (PEN), the production of the book was kept secret to avoid government interference. In an interview with Pauw (*Politicsweb* 2017), he mentions that law enforcement agencies could have approached the High Court to stop the actual publication and distribution of the book, had they known about the existing manuscript, "It was incredibly brave of Nasionale Boeke [NB Publishers] to publish this book, and we have already incurred substantial legal costs in the run-up to publication" (*Politicsweb* 2017).

This fear proved well-founded. The SSA responded after publication with "cease and desist" orders and attempts to remove the books from bookstores and sales points (Figure 2), while SARS threatened defamation charges due to the revealing of confidential tax records, which is in violation of the Intelligence Services Act (*Politicsweb* 2017). "The SSA threatened to go to court to get an interdict preventing NB Publishers from further distributing, printing, publishing or promoting the book should they refuse to withdraw it from book shops" (*Politicsweb* 2017). A book launch in Johannesburg was also allegedly ambushed when a power cut occurred during the

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2 The Gupta family is an Indian-born family that former President Jacob Zuma had an alleged corrupt relationship with. They ran several businesses in South Africa and it is suspected that they also interfered with ministerial appointments (BBC News 2018).

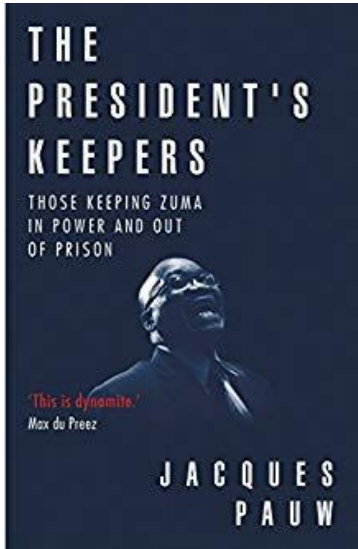
launch, and Jacques Pauw's house was raided within the same year of the book's publication (Magwedze 2017). But this tactic backfired: The fact that SARS and SSA filed complaints and threats just created more public interest and spurred more sales of the book. According to Pauw (2018), this title could be one of the bestselling books (non-fiction) in South Africa of all time, excluding the Bible (Pauw 2018).

The first print run of 40 000 copies was immediately sold out, whereafter a total of 30 000 copies were reprinted, with several reprints following and resulting in a total of 200 000 copies sold (Pauw 2018). Based on the average print run of non-fiction books in South Africa (5 000 copies according to Van Rooyen (2010)) and considering the limited book reading and book buying market according to the South African Book Development Council's national reading survey (2016), the first print run and overall sales of *The President's Keepers* were impressive. Furthermore, UK rights have been sold for the book to be adapted into a television drama series (Pauw 2018; Vallie 2018).

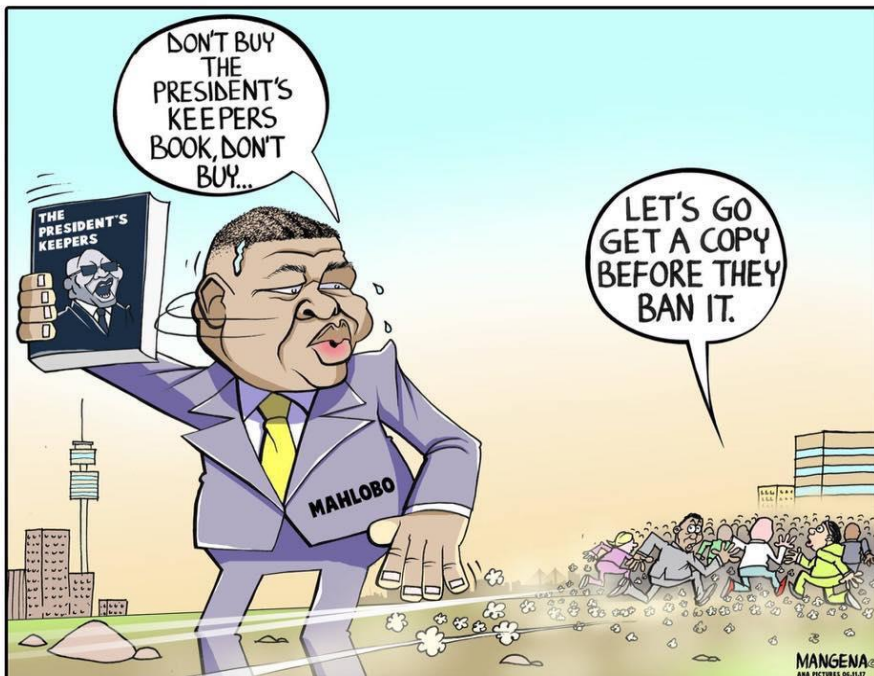
What accounted for this unprecedented level of interest? Not all the book buyers were necessarily avid readers, but searched for answers, and bought the book "as an act of defiance and outrage against the Zuma regime" (Pauw 2018). The media also provided support in publishing newspaper and online articles, which encouraged discussion and sharing of views and opinions on social media. Erika Oosthuizen, a non-fiction publisher at NB Publishers informed *HuffPost SA* that the first 20 000 copies were sold after the *Sunday Times* published an extract titled "Gangster Republic" on its front page (Haffajee 2017). The book also gained global interest with the *Financial Times* saying it is "one of the consequential books on South Africa since the end of white rule", and the *Washington Post* called it "the book that could change South Africa" (Haffajee 2017). While waiting for the reprint, digital copies were pirated and circulated on social media, which suggests the public's desperation for information.

It is clear that NB Publishers must have had a well-planned strategy to reveal the content of the book at the right time. Keeping the publication of this book a secret was of utmost importance to securing the success of this book, as "one man's leak is another's headline" (Schulte 1981, 387).

Although not direct consequences of publishing the book, a few events transpired in 2018. Former President Jacob Zuma resigned as the President of South Africa on 6 February 2018. Multiple businesses of the Gupta family closed down and Gupta family members left South Africa. Several political and authority figures resigned or were suspended, including SARS Chief Operations Officer Jonas Makwakwa and SARS Commissioner Tom Moyane, to name but a few. It was also announced on 16 March 2018 that former President Jacob Zuma would be charged for corruption relating to his involvement in the Arms Deal.



**Figure 1:** The President's Keepers: Those Keeping Zuma in Power and out of Prison

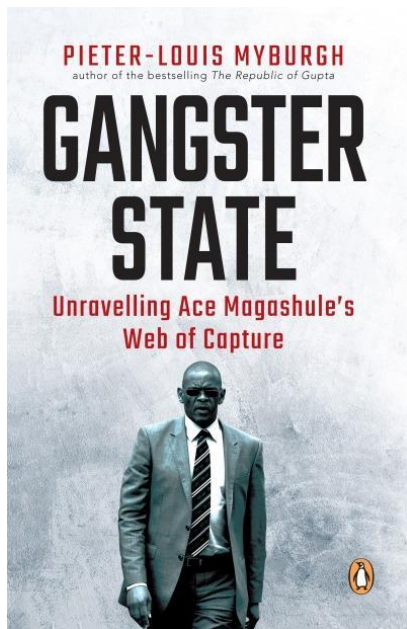


**Figure 2:** Brian Mangena's cartoon about book banning (Mangena 2017)

In March 2019 another investigative journalism exposé, authored by Pieter-Louis Myburgh, namely *Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Magashule's Web of Capture*

(Figure 3), was published by multinational Penguin Random House South Africa. The book has a page extent of 360 and sells at a retail price of R290,00. This book reveals secret and corrupt dealings of yet another state official, Ace Magashule. Magashule was the premier of the Free State province in South Africa, and later appointed Secretary-General of the ANC. The content of the book emphasises the reality of state capture, enforced by Ace Magashule and several other authority figures. The publication was well timed; it hit the shelves only a few weeks before the provincial and national elections in 2019.

Once again the sales of this book astounded the South African publishing community, as a total of 31 559 copies were sold in the first three months after publication (Nielsen BookScan 2019).



**Figure 3:** Gangster State: Unravelling Ace Magashule’s Web of Capture

Similar to *The President’s Keepers*, the author and publisher were threatened and forced to retract books from sales points. A book launch in Johannesburg was interrupted by supporters who demanded books to be taken from the shelves or burned (News24 2019). One cannot help being reminded of censorship laws enforced during the nationalist government rule during apartheid, banning books that conflicted with the current government view (Dick 2006). Satirical cartoonists joked about the “banning and burning of books” (Figures 2 and 4) in newspapers, commenting on state capture, voicing exactly what many South Africans were thinking (Mangena 2017; Zapiro 2019). Gatekeeping therefore does not only apply to publishers, but also to the media – when actually promoting, judging or sharing a specific work in question (Hirsch 1972).





**Figure 4:** Zapiro’s cartoon about book burning (Zapiro 2019)

*Gangster State* had high sales and left Ace Magashule with a tainted reputation, to some degree.

The consequences of publishing controversial titles are clear, and in hindsight, the publication of both these books could have gone terribly wrong. In 2018 NB Publishers also published *The Lost Boys of Bird Island* (Steyn and Minnie 2018). This book implicated several former apartheid cabinet ministers in a paedophile case and received a lot of media attention. This book, however, was retracted from the shelves in March 2020, two years after publication, due to legal action stating that the evidence used in the book could not be justified (Mjo 2019). Publishers should therefore use their role as gatekeepers carefully and ensure that all the information shared is correct and in public interest.

The case studies, however, indicate that both trade publishers exercised a gatekeeping role as information disseminators carefully. Ultimately, the publishers realised both a social and profit motif, sharing important information regarding South Africa’s political leaders. The publishers used credible information sources, and had support from book sellers and the media, and buy-in from the information consumers.

It is the behaviour of the information consumers that will be analysed further. Using Dervin's SMM (1983), the case studies will be used to illustrate how information consumers actively look for information when they are confronted with uncertainty within a specific time and space (context), in order to formulate answers to questions.

## **Sense-making and Gatekeeping**

In an attempt to link gatekeeping and information-seeking behaviour, the relationship between the creator and receiver of information is pertinent. Dervin's (1983) SMM focuses specifically on human beings' seeking of and interaction with information. Reinhard and Dervin (2011) describe SMM as "... how people make sense as they move through the before, during, and after of their media engagements." This methodology consists of four components, namely context (space and time of the information consumer), the "gap" where some information is missing and therefore creates uncertainty, a bridge (the publisher or information provider), and the results or consequences (seeking information to get answers to questions that can close the "gap") (Wilson 2000, 51). Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2011) applied the SMM in specifically the arts domain by recording the experiences and interactions of four young adults with certain art forms (2011). Reinhard and Dervin (2011) also applied the SMM in analysing experiences of films, video games and social virtual worlds. Several other sources have also used the SMM within a media or cultural field, including elite art and popular culture products, newspapers and advertisements (Foreman-Wernet and Dervin 2004; Shields 1999; Spirek et al. 1999).

Notwithstanding critique against this theory and acknowledging the fact that there has been improvements or developments to this methodology, the current model suffices to explain the synergy between gatekeeping and sense-making in a politically strife South African climate (Ellis 1987; Kuhlthau 1994; Wilson 2000).

## **The Information Seeker's Context**

Information behaviour is defined as the "totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use" (Wilson 2000, 49). Information-seeking behaviour specifically, is the "purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal" (Wilson 2000, 49). Considering the fact that trade publishers produce books on various topics annually, it is suggested that the readers will purposefully seek books that contain content they need, or will "satisfy some goal" (Wilson 2000, 49).

The media, including newspapers, television programmes and online news sites report on political dealings and sensitive information regularly, however, not consistently. Yet, it peaks the interest of citizens, thus they seek answers to questions that affect their current space or political context. With regard to the political exposés mentioned, it is clear that the media promoted the availability of these books via press releases and book reviews published, in print and electronic or online format. Therefore, information

seekers would look for books like *The President's Keepers* and *Gangster State* in an attempt to “clos[e] the gap between situation and outcome” (Dervin 1983). With one corruption scandal following another and a dwindling economy, trust in the authorities is low. Citizens seek authoritative views and answers, and the suggestion is that books like *The President's Keepers* and *Gangster State* ensure that a reader can follow a story or newsworthy event in one credible book or source.

## The “Gap” or Uncertainty

Following the information user’s context or space and time, uncertainty is evident.

Several media articles and sources argue that President Jacob Zuma had become a liability by the end of 2015 (Filitz 2017; Gebrekidan and Onishi 2019; Luthuli 2015; Martin and Solomon 2016; MyNews24 2015). He dismissed finance minister Nhlanhla Nene – which was just the beginning of orchestrating a monopoly of power. Not dispersing power but rather centralising it, actually contradicts one of the core ideologies of the ANC, “where governance should uphold the values of democracy, in which power is centred on creating a better life for all South Africans” (Martin and Solomon 2016, 22). Incriminating facts were revealed in media articles, and in books such as *The President's Keepers* and *Gangster State*.

In order to bridge the gap between the information consumer’s uncertainty and finding answers to pertinent questions about South Africa’s political and economic sectors, the publishers of these books act as the “bridge” in providing the information needed in the correct format, at a market-related price, at the right time, and via accessible sales platforms.

## The Bridge

Considering the gatekeeping role of publishers, it is the publishers or commissioning editor’s<sup>3</sup> decision to publish or decline a manuscript, based on various factors.<sup>4</sup> “Motivations for gatekeeping or information sharing could range from ‘political and moral concerns’, commercial interests, to ‘purely’ aesthetic motives” (Janssen and Verboord 2015, 4). However, government also plays an important role in what can and cannot be published. Legal restrictions influence how and what publishers publish. An example is the Publications and Entertainments Act, 1963 (Act No. 26 of 1963) that prohibited the publication of material which contained views (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) that were in conflict with government ideology. The amended Act (Act No. 42 of 1974) was then enforced by the Directorate of Publications. This legislation remained in force until the transitional era, when sections of the Act were repealed due

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3 Depending on the country and publishing house, the title may vary between publisher and commissioning editor.

4 One could argue that an author can self-publish, but a publisher still has the infrastructure, expertise and brand name to ensure a credible and good quality product.

to the Abolition of Restrictions on Free Political Activity Act, 1993 (Act No. 206 of 1993). The new Films and Publications Act, 1996 (Act No. 65 of 1996) was promulgated. This Act marked the end of the era of censorship in South Africa, as the terminology in the new legislation relates to classification rather than suppression.

In the 1970s “oppositional publishers” were established. These publishers were mission-driven, and published works that “encourage debate, rather than focusing on gross margins and the market” (Le Roux 2013, 169). Some of these publishers had a “deliberate anti-government stance” and opposed its censorship regime (Le Roux 2013, 36). Wright (2009) defines oppositional publishing as “books that challenge the ways things are”, while Essery (2004, 2) states that “all organisations that publish material that questioned governmental policy and ideology, from the inception of a Nationalist government in 1948, to the policies of the ANC government today” are oppositional publishing.

Considering the case studies of NB Publishers and Penguin Random House, these publishers could in a way be regarded as “oppositional”, although they differ from the traditional oppositional publishers in being predominantly profit-driven. However, they managed to also promote their social objectives by sharing information that was in public interest, going against government rule. Schulte (1981, 383) regards the relationship between the press and the state or government as somewhat troublesome, yet also important in promoting or advocating a democratic society. Because if one is to accept the position as a public figure, public scrutiny is automatically suggested and, “Politicians should generally be held accountable to an exacting standard because they are inclined to preach morality in one form or another and so their morality becomes the public’s business” (Schulte 1981, 421).

It is therefore also argued that it was the publisher’s role to provide access to the content contained in these books, and thus acted as a bridge in closing the gaps of knowledge for the information seeker.

## **The Result or Consequence**

Bearing in mind the timing of both these publications, these books provided useful and necessary information to South African citizens, just before the elections. “Media content matters to campaign dynamics and voting behaviour; it matters to public attitudes and political and policy preferences more generally; and it matters to policy making itself” (Soroka 2012). Useful information could have assisted information seekers in deciding which party to vote for at the time. Therefore publishers should consider their role as information disseminators (“the bridge”) and assisting in providing information to information seekers, carefully and strategically.

## Conclusion

When publishers bridge the “gap” in order to solve problems, answer questions, and make sense in a specific context, one should note that risk, timing and other elements of publishers’ gatekeeping played a significant role in the publication and reception of both *The President’s Keepers* and *Gangster State*. Since the writing of this article started, several other incriminating exposés of authority figures or books pondering the future of South Africa have been published, including *Blessed by BOSASA: Inside Gavin Watson’s State Capture Cult* (Basson 2019), *The Bosasa Billions: How the ANC Sold its Soul for Braaipacks, Booze and Bags of Cash* (Styan and Vecchiatto 2019), and *Will South Africa be okay? 17 Key Questions* (Joubert 2019).

Some argue that publishers are attempting to enter a slippery slope, being too liberal in expressing one-sided ideas and information. Although sales are looking positive, the threats against authors and publishers should not be trivialised. There has been concern from author societies and publishers alike, with the threat of future possible censorship looming. PEN’s article “Writers at risk” clearly indicates what measures government officials and authority figures will go to in order to protect their honour and their supporters’ votes or respect, thus causing authors to embrace self-censorship (Le Roux 2019). This reminds us of past legislation and freedom of expression, “What was and was not able to be published, has exerted undue influence on South Africa’s social history” (Greyling 2003, 53). Books serve an important role in the preservation of information and knowledge, acting as “memory museums” for historical events. The trade sector still has the power and luxury of publishing and providing access to these texts (Loots as quoted in Taljaard-Gilson 2013).

Publishers are responsible for information sharing, being gatekeepers, resisting censorship, and making information accessible to the public in order to fill the sense-making “gap”. Information can inspire, influence and change an information user’s perspective on his/her context or environment. Information evokes debate, uncover the unknown and lead to information seekers making better decisions about their lives, enriching their knowledge base.

This article thus illustrates the synergy between gatekeeping and sense-making, fuelled by trade publishers that take calculated risks in publishing controversial titles, amid a politically tense environment.

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