

## CHAPTER 1

# It Happens Overnight

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In December 2016, in Oslo, a group of journalists traded tales of intimidation, arrest, repression and murder. The Russians had a list of dead colleagues. A Somali journalist had been forced to work in exile, while a Briton had hired bodyguards to guard against men lurking outside her home.

She was Clare Rewcastle Brown. She showed us photographs of a corpse cemented into an oil drum and thrown into a swamp – a public prosecutor in the 1MDB Malaysian corruption case. We had met at a conference at the Oslo Metropolitan University to discuss how we investigate and tell tales of corporate and political corruption, bad government, nepotism, and so on, and what threats we face as a result.

There is a straightforward logical argument: By exposing the bad things powerful people do, we pose a threat to their wealth, reputation and power. Therefore, it is in their interest to fight back against us. They might fight by trying to convince us to retract our stories. Or they might try to convince the public and authorities, through some sort of statement or campaign, that we are wrong. They could follow some sort of legal process, such as suing us. Or, they might try to hurt or kill us.

On that last point, I felt I had little to add. But unfortunately my risk analysis proved to be flawed.

## Risk analysis

I am from South Africa, where I worked for eight years for the non-profit amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism. Our (recently deposed) president Jacob Zuma and his cronies had seized control of our criminal justice and state intelligence apparatuses, and Zuma openly used these to target enemies. Violent organised criminals had infiltrated the same structures, and journalists exposed the Zuma family's links to a number of them. Zuma's people had also captured state-owned companies with big spending budgets, and they were skimming off the cream. Over many years, we investigated and wrote about this.

Recent developments have demonstrated the level of risk we posed to them. The ruling African National Congress pushed Zuma from the presidency in February 2018. He and his cronies' reputations are now mud, and an apparently criminal enterprise that thrived under his rule has fallen apart. Many of those involved now face the prospect of going to jail.

We do our accountability reporting in a violent context. Our government has been openly hostile to dissenters – to the point of gunning them down, like the police did at Marikana in 2012. Meanwhile, numerous local-level politicians have been killed in political violence throughout the country. We also know the South African state, and other Zuma sympathisers, have spied on journalists. And in repressive regimes throughout our continent, places like Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Somalia and Sudan, journalists are often attacked. Zuma sympathised with many of these governments.

In sum, powerful people have had both motive and means to repress journalism with violence, because this might have seemed close to a normal thing to do in the regional and local climate. But physically hurting or killing journalists in South Africa? Not quite, I used to think. So, I told the journalists in Oslo, it felt to me like we were standing with our backs to the edge of a cliff while we taunted and threw rocks and sticks at thugs. They *could* easily push us over that edge. Yet they did not.

Clare, the Briton, raised her hand and cautioned me. It happens overnight, she warned. You have to be vigilant. She was right.

## The SABC 8

Wind back to mid-2016: The chief operating officer of the SABC, our state broadcaster, had ordered that the SABC not show any videos of attacks by protestors on public property. The attacks were part of civil unrest brewing in South Africa, fuelled by poverty, corruption and a weak, racialised economy. A campaign group took to the streets to protest the SABC censorship. Then the SABC banned its journalists from covering the protests. Eight of them objected publicly, but they were suspended. This group came to be known as the “SABC 8”. Their story was widely reported, capturing the public imagination – but in spite of widespread support for the Eight, the SABC fired them.

As it turned out, just a few days after I had said in Oslo that South African journalists were not being attacked physically, one of the SABC 8, 32-year-old Suna Venter, walked out of a Johannesburg restaurant, where she was shot in the face with an unidentified weapon. Surgeons later removed metal pellets from her face, but she survived.

In fact, for months before that, Venter had received numerous threatening messages on her phone. According to her family: “Her flat was broken into on numerous occasions, the brake cables of her car were cut and her car’s tyres were slashed. She was shot at and abducted – tied to a tree at Melville Koppies, while the grass around her was set alight.”

She had survived that too, but in June 2017, she died of broken heart syndrome, and her family said they believed her heart condition was caused by the stress of the intimidation.

## “White Monopoly Capital”

On the same day Venter’s body was found, a small mob gathered outside the house of Peter Bruce, a well-known news editor and columnist.

The mob called itself Black First Land First, or BLF. Their placards read: “Peter you murder the truth”, “Peter Bruce wa Hemba [you are lying]”, “Land or death” and “Peter Bruce propagandist of WMC”.

This situation and “WMC” need some explaining.

Since about 2010, South African journalists have investigated and reported on the brothers Tony, Ajay and Atul Gupta and their relationship with Zuma. This is the Zuma looting project I described earlier. To combat negative press, the Guptas hired the UK firm Bell Pottinger to redirect public resentment in a campaign against Zuma’s critics. This ended spectacularly, when a UK public relations industry group investigated and suspended Bell Pottinger. It said the Gupta campaign “was by any reasonable standard of judgement likely to inflame racial discord in South Africa and appears to have done exactly that.” Bell Pottinger subsequently went out of business.

Linked to the Gupta campaign was an army of social media accounts and websites that attacked named journalists and campaigners. Journalists like Peter Bruce – the one who was targeted in June 2017 – were painted as racists seeking to protect “white monopoly capital”, or “WMC”.

On at least one occasion, the Guptas commissioned a leader of the BLF – one of the protesters outside Peter’s house – to write an article criticising a journalist. BLF promised to stage more protests at the homes of other journalists whom it named and branded “askaris”. In South Africa, “askari” is an inflammatory term used during apartheid to brand liberation fighters who changed sides and joined the oppressive regime.

Had such rhetoric flared up further, it could have led to real violence. So, the group of journalists went to court and won an interdict banning BLF from further intimidation or harassment.

Ten days later, BLF supporters accosted and threatened my amaBhungane colleague Micah Reddy. He escaped unharmed, but when he tried to lay charges at the nearest police station, the officers refused to take his statement. Three weeks later, amaBhungane hosted a public meeting about a leaked cache of data from the Guptas’ business empire, which had become a news sensation. A group of people interrupted the meeting. They sang, shouted and physically threatened people.

The BLF was there again, and another amaBhungane journalist, Stefaans Brümmer, later described how a BLF leader “stood up, grabbed me with two hands and tried to shove me to the ground, shouting words like ‘You fuck with me’. A second person then threw me to the ground.”

The incidents were widely reported on and criticised in the South African media. A court also found the BLF mobs to be in contempt of the earlier interdict. They were fined and their leader was sentenced to three months in jail – although the latter conviction was suspended. The judge extended the original court order to protect all journalists from BLF harassment.

## Whistleblowers

Investigative journalists are just one part of a community of dissenters. There are activists, politicians, upstanding officials, journalists’ sources and other whistleblowers. I believe the sources and whistleblowers face the biggest risk because they are usually anonymous, so it is easy for bad people to quietly get rid of a serious threat without public outcry.

Indeed, when I made my comments in Oslo in 2016, I was ignorant of earlier attacks on two whistleblowers central to one of the Gupta-Zuma scandals. The story involved a fake state dairy project, allegedly used by the Guptas’ as a personal ATM.

In one case, the police allegedly opened fire on an outspoken local politician as he drove through the gate at his home. The politician also claimed he was physically assaulted by “supporters” of the dairy, who called him an “enemy of employment”. In the second case, a provincial state auditor investigating the dairy was hijacked and then tortured. He died after three months in hospital. Five years later, the police had not solved the murder.

Journalists whose stories are not picked up by other media also face a distinct risk.

In 2016 and 2017, News24 investigative journalist Caryn Dolley wrote a string of articles describing an underworld war on the streets of Cape Town. Mobsters fought one another to control nightclub security and

the right to trade drugs and more. They met in the shadows with senior politicians and police officers, monitored by layers of competing spy groups – unofficial and official.

After Caryn watched and photographed one such meeting, one man emailed her: “I don’t think I need to explain to anY ONE who I meet or why! I meet lotsa people all the time would you like to no WHO THEY ARE ASWELL [sic].” He followed up with a sinister message: “WE HAVE EYES EVERY WHR [sic].” This was accompanied by a photograph of Caryn as she staked out his meeting with the politician.

As it happens, this man was more recently photographed socialising with Zuma’s adult son Duduzane, who has also been on the Guptas’ payroll since Zuma became president.

Among her reports, Caryn described how the organised criminals used guns smuggled from police vaults – apparently with the help of police officers. Then she received another message, this time anonymous. It said: “Ms doley! That. same. guns. that. the. cops. sold. is. going. to. be. used. on. your. head. at. work. or. your. house. or. your. mom. house. and. your. dog. [sic]”

The incidents generated a little bit of press coverage, but until a recent court case, Caryn was alone in her crusade to cover Cape Town’s mob war. It would have been so easy for someone to snuff out further reports from her. Thankfully, she remains safe.

## Overnight

I have had to readjust my risk analysis of the threat to South African journalists. On the one hand, I maintain that South Africans recognise and support their investigative journalists, and this helps keep bad, violent people from our door. If I am right, this might be rooted in apartheid, when people learned the importance of civic activism supported by journalists who held a racist, oppressive government to account.

We also have brave people willing to speak out from within government and elsewhere, and our courts are independent and strong. We have vibrant opposition politics, and by peacefully replacing the Zuma regime, the ANC proved our democracy is alive.

On the other hand, my risk analysis of December 2016 ignored the thugs who had already started pushing people over the “cliff edge”, and many of the other aggravating factors outlined in this article remain in place, even with Zuma gone. Indeed, an opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, has since embarked on a verbally and physically violent campaign against journalists. As we go to print, my amaBhungane colleagues did not go to their Johannesburg office after a purported EFF member threatened on live radio that party members would invade our premises.

I cannot pretend to compare South Africa to Syria, Russia, Mexico or Lesotho, but I am forced to concede that, as Clare warned, it *does* happen overnight.