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This article is the result of an international investigative reporting project that exposed the fraudulent behavior of a well-educated South African, who traveled all over the United States, gathering money and computer equipment under the guise of starting an anti-apartheid newspaper in Cape Town, South Africa.

Hargey Vows to Publish or Perish

But South African's broken promises leaves disappointed disciples in wake of travels

By Ken Martin

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He swept into Austin April 3 riding the crest of a national media campaign and within two weeks had charmed 50 college students and other residents into joining his crusade to start an anti-apartheid newspaper in South Africa.

But earlier recruits of Taj Hargey of Cape Town, South Africa, have mutinied. They deserted Hargey after deciding he was not a university professor as claimed, that his organization was a façade and that he might tell them anything to get money.

In the course of an investigation of these allegations, the *Austin Business Journal* learned that Hargey was not accountable to anyone for donations of cash, computer hardware and software he may have been given during his 13 months traveling in the United States. He claims donations to his cause are tax deductible, but he has not completed the necessary paperwork for that status.

At one point, he pawned a donated Macintosh computer to obtain

money to buy some IBM PC clones, his lender said.

Experts on South African newspapers said Hargey's claim to be founding a unique newspaper is a misrepresentation.

Hargey has had no trouble getting attention in Austin, where he has solicited money, equipment and volunteers. He has spoken to business, college students and small groups of residents. He spread his message through newspaper articles and broadcast interviews.

Although Hargey had no local sponsors when he arrived, he was able to arrange classroom appearances in the English, history and journalism departments at the University of Texas by calling individual professors and mentioning the names of other professors who had given him a referral.

"It's very seldom someone will appear on campus without forewarning and schedule guess appearances," said associate professor John Lamphear, who permitted Hargey to speak to his history class at UT. "I saw it first in the *Daily Texan* and thought, 'Oh great, this is something interesting.'"

He has raised considerable interest among would-be volunteers, but Austin computer makers have stayed at arm's length from Hargey's requests for donations of computer equipment.

John Pope, a spokesman for CompuAdd, said Hargey called recently to ask for an equipment donation and was requested to submit a letter that would be considered in an annual process.

IBM, Texas Instruments and Dell Computer Corp. were unable to confirm whether Hargey had approached them.

Hargey's story shows what can happen when an idealistic project isn't backed up by organizational or business skills.

He's been traveling around the country talking to any group or reporter who will listen. He packs an appealing message that audiences eagerly accept. Whether describing apartheid's evils in

the well-organized talk of a college lecturer or relating poignant recollections of childhood injustices under the white South African regime, he inspires people to follow.

But many who enlisted in his cause earlier now have serious reservations about the man they decided to uproot their lives for and follow into the jaws of apartheid, a rigid social system characterized by racial classifications, official segregation, unequal land division, and denial of the black people's right to vote.

Rougher journalism

Their decision to follow Hargey was not taken lightly, for journalism is a form of hardball in South Africa. South African journalists have been detained without charge or trial for up to three years, foreign journalists are routinely expelled from the country and, in 1986, a cameraman died after being attacked by a conservative black group while covering a story.

While the recent unbanning of the African National Congress and the freeing in February of its leader, Nelson Mandela, were momentous occasions, they did not erase vivid memories of atrocities committed by the white regime over the past several generations.

Yet when the polished, Oxford-educated Hargey came along and passionately espoused a vision for another newspaper to oppose the menace of apartheid, Americans have embraced him as if it were the Second Coming.

Typical is the reaction of Austin attorney Chrys Dougherty. "It looks to me like a very interesting project, and he's a very impressive fellow to talk to," said Dougherty, a partner in the law firm of Graves Dougherty Hearon and Moody, who was among the first people Hargey approached in Austin. "Of course, I know nothing about him."

Followers dropping out

At least five people who would have followed Hargey to South Africa have lost all respect for him and quit the project. They feel betrayed and psychologically battered.

They never shared their misgivings with the press or the general public. Nor did they confide in the computer firms Hargey was hitting up for equipment. This is the first report of their experiences.

“Everything Taj Hargey has told you is fraud,” said Betsy Spratt, a Detroit freelance journalist who met Hargey last summer at a convention for the National Association of Black Journalists.

“She found out I wasn’t all that I said I was,” Hargey admitted, heaving a sigh.

Spratt and several others said Hargey told them he was a professor at the University of Cape Town. The same claim appeared in at least five publications, including the *San Jose Mercury News*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Diego Union*.

Even in an Austin interview, Hargey at first tried to pass off the printed misstatements about his credentials as reporting errors. Finally he admitted he had never been a professor and had left the university’s payroll more than a year before arriving in the United States.

“I made the cardinal error of thinking that if I used the university name more doors would be opened,” Hargey said.

The ironies of the lie are abundant. Hargey, a victim of repression that makes him extremely secretive even with his closest supporters, said he once used forged documents to escape from South Africa to Cairo, where he earned a master’s degree.

Disorderly financial dealings

Since landing in California April 6, 1989, Hargey has allegedly taken financial advantage of numerous supporters. Although the amounts of money involved are not huge, they raise red flags about a man whose avowed mission in life is to run a newspaper of the highest integrity.

Layna Fischer of Fischer-Howard International Inc., a computer wholesale firm based in Redwood City, California, said Hargey was given free office space for his cause and then without asking ran up \$3,000 in expenses, mostly for telephone calls and postage. He left without paying.

“I learned later he had used this, after it was a *fait accompli*,” said Fischer, who herself immigrated to this country from South Africa. “More calls were coming in for him than for our own company, but we didn’t mind because he was very charming, and what he was doing is a very worthy cause.”

Fischer’s loss was written off by her company. Other supporters, mostly people of modest means but generous natures, were hit in their personal pocketbooks.

Last fall, Hargey allegedly got both Spratt and Bruce Charonnat of San Francisco to pay for the same trip from California to Detroit, where he was to address a chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists. At the time, Spratt and Charonnat were not aware of each other’s financial involvement.

Charonnat said he loaned Hargey \$600 for airline fares and expenses. Spratt wound up paying for two tickets, a total of \$768. She said Hargey told her he did not make the first flight because his schedule changed. Neither did he return the first ticket so she could get a refund.

“I got to talk to Bruce later and he asked me if my group would send him any money. He understood the Detroit journalism group would send a check to pay him. Bruce was very distraught about it,” Spratt said.

Hocked donated computer

More businesslike in protecting his finances was Ted Nace, who runs Peach Pit Press of Berkeley, California, a publisher of desktop publishing books. Nace said he loaned Hargey \$1,200 last November when Hargey told him he had found a good deal on IBM PC clones. When the funds weren't forthcoming as promised he asked Hargey to sign a note.

When Nace later heard Hargey was planning a trip, he expressed concern for repayment. As a result, Hargey provided as collateral a Macintosh II computer valued at about \$4,700, according to one estimate. Apartheid or no apartheid, Nace said he intends to keep it until Hargey pays his debt.

Commenting on the way Hargey treated his less wary recruits, Nace said, "It's stupid and naive to (anger) your supporters and not to account to people who support you."

African connections dubious

Hargey's former followers in this country now believe that the civic organization Hargey claims to head—which is supposed to act as publisher for his newspaper—may consist of nothing more substantial than letterhead stationery.

In public appearances here in Austin, Hargey distributed literature that describes the Open House Cultural and Welfare Society as a 100-member group that promotes adult literacy, health education and job placement in the black community.

But articles that appeared last Nov. 9 in *South*, a Cape Town weekly newspaper, and last Feb. 18 in *The Sunday Times* of Johannesburg indicated that the society may not exist.

The *Austin Business Journal* confirmed that the Society is registered with the South African government as a nonprofit closed

corporation. The registered location is a Cape Town address, 221 Lansdowne Road in the Claremont section, the same address listed on Hargey's business card for *The Forum*.

But the board of directors listed in the organization's letterhead does not check out.

Hargey told his early recruits that Mr. M. Tyala listed in the society's letterhead as chairman was Mandla Tyala, who is a journalist now studying in this country under a Harvard fellowship.

"I have never met Mr. Hargey," Tyala told the *Austin Business Journal*, adding that he did see Hargey on a television interview in Boston. "There are not that many black news writers, so I would know if I had a namesake."

Asked in Austin to explain this discrepancy, Hargey said Tyala's first name was not Mandla but Moses, a man now traveling in the tribal reservation homeland of Ciskei, where he can't be reached by telephone.

A San Francisco man who lodged Hargey for five months, and who spoke on condition his name not be printed, said Hargey changed the story about Tyala's first name only after being confronted with the results of his supporters' independent investigation.

The person listed as treasurer, Dr. Alie Mahate of Cape Town, when contacted by the *Austin Business Journal*, denied any involvement with the society.

"To my friends it was a big joke," Mahate said, referring to the articles about the dispute over his role in the Society that were published in South Africa. "My wife is my treasurer. I can't look after my own finances. How can I be treasurer?"

Hargey said here that Mahate was initially interested in the newspaper project but was driven away by his son, Hamied, who opposes it for political reasons. "The father liked me but the son

poisoned his mind.”

Hargey’s explanations aside, these circumstances could not be papered over well enough to suit his followers, who had already suffered from his financial misdeeds and found that his claim to be a college professor was false. They became convinced there was no organization, just Hargey and his stories.

They acted on that belief by bailing out. Indisputably the newspaper project suffered because of its abandonment by highly talented people—including journalists, a graphic artist and a computer programmer—who had once been ready to scrape up the \$1,200 air fare to South Africa and work for a stipend to help his cause.

Not the ‘first’

In both his talks and his literature, Hargey claims he is starting “the first independent, non-aligned multi-racial newsweekly in the nation’s history.” That’s a distortion, an observer of South African newspapers said.

“It’s not true that it would be the first independent paper. He keeps saying it would be the first black-owned paper, which isn’t true,” said Sally Chew, who monitors the South African press for the Committee to Protect Journalists, based in New York City.

Black, in the context of South African politics, is a political label readily accepted by many ethnic groups classified as non-white by the apartheid government.

“There are any number of small, black-owned newspapers, so that’s nonsense. They’re all over the country,” said Erwin Manoim, co-editor of the *Weekly Mail* in Johannesburg. “There are up to 20 such publications.”

Tecnica, a Berkeley, California, nonprofit organization, has just sent a technical assistance team to South Africa to assist two leading opposition newspapers of the Mass Democratic Movement, *Southin* Cape Town and *New Nation* in Johannesburg.

Rah-rah Press backing

While there may exist room for disagreement in this country about the nature of South African newspapers, there can be no doubt that Hargey has done a remarkable job of garnering favorable publicity in the United States. In addition to television and radio coverage in numerous cities, glowing reports of Hargey's mission have appeared in such respected newspapers as the *San Jose Mercury News*, *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*.

"It's amazing all these papers have written about him and not checked him out," Spratt said. "But the project seems to be a very laudable one and people admire him for the time and energy he's put into it. You cannot believe it's not true."

Hargey was even able to recruit David Bunnell—who founded magazine giants *PC World* and *Macworld* before moving on to start Io Publishing of San Mateo, California—to push computer makers for donations to his cause.

Bunnell personally signed letters to numerous industry heads, including one last August to Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs, now president of Next, Inc.

"I am actively supporting and contributing to a worthwhile project run by a nonprofit multiracial organization in Cape Town, South Africa, that will lead to the creation of a free and independent black press in that country and I would like to ask that you support this venture also," Bunnell wrote.

One computer industry executive on the West Coast said, "The way the press reported on Hargey here, if you didn't get on board you were racist."

Former supporters of *The Forum* project said playing on white guilt was Hargey's deliberately chosen tactic because it "made strategic sense."

The Machiavellian strategy worked well. Hargey, who admittedly has only entry-level user computer skills, was able to use the press barrage to bludgeon many companies into giving him top-drawer equipment for his newspaper.

“When Apple was approached for making this donation, there had already been considerable press attention given to Hargey and his project in the Bay Area,” Fred Silverman, a spokesman for Apple Computer Inc., said.

“We couldn't make the kind of rigorous check of the project's legitimacy or credentials, as we could do with domestic groups,” Silverman said. “It was quite difficult to do and we made a leap of faith.”

Austin computer makers have not made the same leap.

No accountability

Quite apart from the allegations of his detractors, Hargey arouses suspicion because he offers no independent accounting for the monies, computer equipment and software he's been given since starting his campaign in this country 13 months ago.

A telephone call to Tecnica, listed in Hargey's literature as recipient of donations to *The Forum* project, revealed that while Tecnica initially offered to serve as a tax deductible conduit for donations, the necessary legal paperwork for that to happen was never completed by Hargey or any of his followers.

Consequently, donations to the project are not legally tax deductible, through Tecnica, at this time.

The “wish list” of computer equipment Hargey presented to Austin audiences asks for donations of computer equipment that exceeds by quantum leaps the capabilities of Austin newspapers that publish products comparable in size to his proposed weekly 48-page tabloid.

Further, the list has not been updated in seven months. Potential donors are given no indication of what has been received since it was printed last September 22.

When asked, Hargey admits to having received an “abundance” of computer software—indeed a California source said he has at least 50 to 100 software packages stockpiled. But Hargey said his computer-hardware cupboard is not yet filled.

“An audit? Yes, when we have gotten the paper rolling we will say exactly where contributions and everything came from,” Hargey said in an interview here.

Look before leaping

Former followers who abandoned Hargey’s crusade said they advise anyone considering Hargey’s appeal to think twice. Spratt became concerned when she learned that students at the University of Texas were expressing strong interest in joining Hargey’s self-proclaimed peace corps.

“My worst fear is he’s going to get a bunch of Americans over there and they will be seriously hurt,” Spratt said.

Volunteers from Austin will not gamble on Hargey alone. He claims to have tentative agreements with San Francisco State University; Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi; and Howard University in Washington, D.C. After *The Forum* starts rolling the presses, these universities have agreed to consider sponsoring students to travel to Cape Town to work on the paper for academic credit, Hargey said.

Although Hargey seemed troubled when confronted with the allegations of his former followers, he swore he would forge ahead until his newspaper is published.

“This paper is coming out,” he said angrily. “I’ll bet you my right arm and my right eye.”

Buy ads or else

If Hargey succeeds in launching his publication, the 200 or so white-owned corporations still operating in South Africa will find him banging on their doors next.

“We’re going to strong-arm the companies to buy ads,” Hargey said, in addressing a private gathering in Austin April 16. Targets, he said, would include such mega-corporations as Kimberly-Clark and Johnson and Johnson.

If the corporations don’t fork over the rands, the currency of South Africa, Hargey said he would write to major universities in the home towns of their U.S. headquarters and reveal “they don’t buy ads in our newspaper. *That* will create fireworks in the boardroom,” he said.

“I think most companies will play ball when we tell them what we are doing, and between the lines what we will do if they don’t play ball.”

With his fiery past, including years of conflict with the Moslem Judicial Council and an appearance in a lawsuit against clerical leaders to win full religious rights for a minority sect, few who know Hargey think he will give up his quest to start *The Forum*. Least in doubt is Hargey himself.

“This project will see the light or day or it will kill me,” Hargey vowed.

He is not a man who inspired trust in the followers who helped him before, yet Hargey would brush aside his past and continue as if nothing happened.

“I’ve learned a terrible lesson. You have to be up front, you have to be honest and everything you say must be corroborated. I want to make it up to the Betsy Spratts of the world, and I will after the

paper is up and running.”

But too many dollars have been coaxed with promises not kept, too many expedient falsehoods have been uttered, for the defectors from Hargey’s crusade to endorse his project now.

“The means are important. The way you go about things are important,” Nace said. “If his head’s not screwed on straight, he could hurt the anti-apartheid movement more than he helps, and that’s a pity.”