Questioning the Media-Democracy Link: South African Journalists' Views

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Abstract

It is often assumed that a robust, free and independent media will contribute to the deepening of democracy by keeping governments accountable and broadening citizen participation in deliberative democratic debates. But in new democracies such as South Africa, the deepening and broadening of democratic participation is often curtailed by challenges such as unequal access to the media, the orientation of mainstream media towards elite audiences and renewed attempts by sources of power to control the free flow of information. Despite the promise of a peaceful, equitable and democratic society after the end of apartheid, conflicts continue to erupt due to continued social polarisation, vast socio-economic inequalities and new struggles for power. In South Africa these conflicts include social protests on a daily basis, repeated outbreaks of xenophobic violence and disruptions to the parliamentary process. This paper probes the role of the media in these conflicts from the perspective of journalists who have reported on these

issues. The paper explores ways in which journalists critically reflect on their abilities to perform the roles expected of them within a normative framework informed by the Habermasian ideal of deliberative democracy. The reasons they offer for not fulfilling these roles, and the conditions underpinning these failures, lead them to question the ability of the South African media to contribute to an emerging democracy.

Keywords: South Africa; journalists; media; democracy; xenophobic violence; service delivery protests; community protests

Introduction

The media's role in democratic life is often celebrated in popular journalistic discourse as being of central importance. In these narratives the media is seen as contributing to rational deliberation in the public sphere and increased transparency of democratic processes as well as ensuring greater accountability by officials towards citizens. Seen in this way, the media can play a monitorial role as a watchdog over powerful individuals and institutions or a facilitative role (Christians et al. 2009) to encourage democratic deliberation in a rational, Habermasian public sphere. As citizens mainly access political discussions through the media "the deliberative model of democracy places exacting demands on media and journalism...democracy can never become more deliberative without the active participation of media and journalism" (Strömbäck 2005, 340).

However, assumptions about the deliberative and watchdog role of the media cannot be taken for granted, especially in contexts that have recently undergone major political transitions, or those marked by severe socio-economic inequalities – or both, as in the case of South Africa. In these "bifurcated" public spheres (Heller 2009), the media could be seen to be aligned with one side of a polarised society and add to tensions rather than ameliorate them. In a new democracy, still coming to terms with the history of violent conflict, the type of debate associated with a "marketplace of ideas" can indeed contribute to "confusion and the aggravation of conflicts" (Voltmer 2006, 3). While democracies are value laden and have "a strong ethos of political equality and tolerance" (Strömbäck 2005, 335) in societies that are newly emerging from

violence, the nature of democracy may be in flux with a clash between different types of democracies. Various models of democracy have been suggested by various authors, for example whether democracy is simply procedural (e.g. with regular elections) (cf. Strömbäck 2005), or participatory with strong involvement from civil society (cf. Ciaglia 2016; Strömbäck 2005). These different models of democracy may influence the role that the media play, for example, influencing the extent to which "less powerful actors may get drawn into the news" (van Dalen 2012, 35), the extent to which media relies on pronouncements from government officials, and the level of criticism directed at those same government officials (cf. Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Schudson 2002).

In these different democratic environments, the assumption that the media provides an open space for deliberation and debate in the interest of democratic deepening should be questioned. For example, the media could simply be providing "information to catch the eye of relatively inattentive citizens" (Curran et al. 2009, 6). As Voltmer (2006, 3) remarks, in an unequal, stratified society, the media may amplify the voices of those who are able to access the media most effectively, rather than those whose arguments most deserve to be heard. In transitional societies, despite considerable political change, social transformation can lag behind and the media may remain untransformed, since "[n]ew institutions are formed on the remnants of the old...as a result, what prevails is often a culture lodged within a former authoritarian political system that is carried over and internalized by the new democratic political dispensation" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 134).

New democracies such as South Africa, Voltmer (2006, 5) observes, are "frequently faced with fragile identities, deep social divisions and unfinished nation-building". While a monitorial, watchdog role is very important in these societies, the media do not necessarily provide a neutral platform for democratic deliberation, but may instead act – however unintentionally – in favour of entrenched powerful interests. These interests may be political or commercial in nature. Arguably then, "media are overcharged with the task of presenting a true picture of the 'world outside'" (Donsbach 2004, 133), since multiple influences determine the role that the media play, including economic influences (e.g. advertising needs, profit motives), organisational influences (editorial decision-making, managerial routines), routines of news work, and "the policies, conventions, and customs of the profession" (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011).

If the asymmetries in access to the public sphere are left unaddressed, the media might therefore prevent the marginalised or powerless from having their views heard. The media would thus contribute to the further silencing and marginalisation of sections of the citizenry. The imperative is on the media in situations of inequality and conflict not merely to attempt to voice the concerns of the public, but to engage in a reciprocal relationship of speaking and listening (Couldry 2010, 7–11). This would require a departure from the normative assumption that journalists are professional "gatekeepers", towards the notion that journalists facilitate conversation – becoming "gate-openers" that involve citizens as equal partners in the production process (Carpentier 2003, 438; 2011, 123).

This paper focuses on the post-apartheid South African context, where the formal transition to democracy took place more than two decades ago, but social inequality remains high, conflict continues to erupt and the role of the media in democracy continues to be criticised by politicians (see Ndlovu [2015] for an overview of recent debates). While there are currently no "indications of a crisis in journalism standards", key regulatory decisions have arguably "embedded unequal power relations, to the advantage of press owners and to the detriment of media workers and press users" (Duncan 2014, 77). And the media, while "certainly driven by commercial interests, are also embedded in non-market social relations and networks" (Chakravartty and Roy 2013, 255), such as race and language groups, kinship relationships, or community-based organisations.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the role of journalism in two particular conflicts where the persisting social tensions and economic inequalities became very pronounced. These conflicts are 1) ongoing community protests and 2) recurring xenophobic conflicts in the country. These conflicts were selected as examples of conflict in post-apartheid society that provide a lens through which to understand the ways in which media coverage and democratic politics intersect. As elsewhere, politics in South Africa has also become increasingly mediated, and the way media frame conflict and dissent has an impact on the way such conflicts can play out in the political sphere (Cottle 2008). In a previous study (Bosch, Chuma and Wasserman, forthcoming 2018), a content analysis of print media representations of these conflicts was

undertaken, which showed an emphasis on the "disruptive" nature of the protests as a common thread in newspapers' framing of community protests. Although the particular approaches and depictions differed across newspapers, "disruptions" or deviations from the "norm" are among the key criteria for newsworthiness and therefore commercial newspapers seeking to attract readers would act as per that convention. Noticeably absent from newspaper reports was an explanation of the underlying structural issues at the root of these uprisings.

As Cottle (2008, 857) points out, the media's "own shifting agendas and agency in championing certain causes and issues" in relation to demonstrations and protests need to be examined as well. Journalists' own perceptions of conflicts, the actors in these conflicts and the acceptability of such protests (Cottle 2008, 857) will result in some conflicts and protests receiving more favourable coverage than others. These attitudes can shape coverage, and ultimately influence the political outcome of conflicts. A study of media representations alone is not enough to understand the various power relations at play in democratisation conflicts. Content analyses cannot adequately capture the political contingencies and dynamics present in contemporary protest and demonstration reporting (Cottle 2008). This paper therefore explored the perceptions and attitudes of journalists who covered the outbreaks of xenophobic violence in South Africa in recent years, as well as those journalists involved in reporting on ongoing community protests. Of particular interest is the reasons journalists offer for failing to link media and democracy in ways they would be expected to, and the conditions underpinning these failures.

Theoretical Framework

This article's examination of South African journalists' perceptions of the media-democracy nexus in the context of their own work, and specifically in their coverage of "democratisation conflicts" aims to contribute to a burgeoning body of research which raises fundamental questions about the "universal" applicability of the media-democracy paradigm today (see, for example, Curran 2014; Deuze 2005; Gronvall 2014). In the South African context, interrogating this normative approach is important given the nature of the post-apartheid polity characterised on the one hand by one of the world's most liberal constitutions, and on the other, by extreme socio-economic inequalities which pose significant threats to the sustainability of the democracy.

The media-democracy paradigm is arguably one of the most enduring but also hegemonic approaches to researching and making sense of the media's role in society. Although it emerged in the context of the capitalist democracies of the global North, it has also informed work on media and society – including particularly journalistic practices – in other parts of the world, including Africa. And yet, the same approach has increasingly come under scrutiny, because among other things, it doesn't explain the complexities of media and society in different parts of the world, especially in the context of recent changes in the global political economy as well as changes in media ecologies.

At the core of the media-democracy paradigm is the assumption that the two are inextricably linked and, for democracy to function effectively, it needs to have a media system that renders that possible in specific and predictable ways; while a liberal democratic polity is considered an essential requirement for a vibrant and "free" and robust media. As McChesney (2008, 25) puts it,

> Democratic theory generally posits that society needs a journalism that is a rigorous watchdog of those in power and who want to be in power, can ferret out truth from lies, and can present a wide range of informed positions on the important issues of the day. Each medium need not do all of these things, but the media system as a whole should make this calibre of journalism readily available to the citizenry.

Besides being "watchdogs" and in a way acting as "early warning systems", the media-democracy perspective also conceives of journalism as performing a deliberative function by providing feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society, i.e. the citizenry (Habermas 2006). For journalism to perform these functions, the profession has traditionally been informed by certain norms and ideal-type values, which albeit unachievable at any one time, serve as guides. These include notions of journalistic autonomy to centres of power, objectivity, public service obligations, and ethics, which serve as legitimating factors to the profession as a whole (see Deuze 2005; Josephi 2013). As Nerone (2013, 447) argues, "Journalism is an ism…a belief system that defines the appropriate practices and values of news

professionals, news media, and news systems". But the "belief system" may be specific to different contexts, or common themes may exist across countries.

Josephi (2013) argues that the journalism and democracy paradigm owes much of its pervasiveness to its normativity:

> It seems to imply that there is only one kind of journalism and only one kind of democracy, or at least notionally one desirable type of each. This has provided a yardstick against which journalism is judged as to whether it fulfils its role of advancing and upholding democracy (Josephi 2013, 442).

Researchers operating from this paradigm have often cited numerous instances of journalistic exposés of corruption and abuse of power in different countries and contexts to highlight the centrality of the institution of the media to liberal democracy (Curran 2014). However, with the media facing increasing economic difficulties, the expensive endeavour of investigative journalism in also coming under threat (Hunter 2015).

However, other models of journalism can also influence media coverage. In some African countries media production is influenced by "development journalism", which places higher emphasis on addressing poverty than in many Western countries (George 2013). Kenix (2015) has argued that the media also play a role in creating a national identity, and Tamba M'bayo (2013) argues that good journalism reconstructs social relationships. It is important to consider these roles in the South African context: while Bosch (2010) has argued that (at least in the example of talk radio), South African media can play a role in promoting democracy and development, Duncan (2003) argues that the South African media do not do enough to address poverty inequality, and Barnett (1999) argues that the fragmentation of South African audiences limits the extent to which media can build social cohesion.

At the same time, with changes taking place across the world – these include geopolitical shifts marked by the rise of China (and members of the BRICS), the increasing hyper-commercialisation of the media, new media and the fragmentation of audiences, social media,

amongst others – there has been growing interest in questioning the media-democracy nexus in both established and emerging democracies. George (2013, 49) argues that scholars no longer take seriously the idea that the end of the Cold War would result in "successive waves of democratization that would funnel the affected countries down a single, liberal democratic course". So globally different media models have emerged: in Singapore for example, the "watchdog" role of the media is barely relevant since "a watchful citizenry backed by effective law enforcement has rendered the media redundant as a watchdog against corruption" (George 2013, 496).

In some instances, there have been arguments in favour of "decoupling" journalism from democracy and vice versa. In a study of Scandinavian media executives' views on journalism practice in their organisations versus the general perceptions of journalism as a prime tool for democracy (the media-democracy nexus), Gronvall (2014) found a significant incongruity. It emerged that the notion of sustaining "democracy" was seen as much less important than considerations for commercial viability. While this is hardly new (political economists of communication have reached similar findings on the influence of commercial imperatives on media functions and how this impoverishes democracy), what is interesting is the idea of "de-coupling" the media-democracy link in the first instance. Others suggest that while the use-by date for this paradigm may have been reached, there is some valuable legacy in it, especially in the normative area (Josephi 2014). For Curran (2014, 28), the challenge "is to work out what should be retained from this tradition, and what should be revised and rejected and to think about the concrete implications" of this.

The South African Context

In post-apartheid South Africa, the debate about the role of the media in the new dispensation has mainly been framed in terms of the media-democracy paradigm, with substantial contestation around both the normative and practical aspects of that role. Language and socio-economic factors divide audiences, and "dictate access and ideas around what is considered news" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 136).

In the two decades since the attainment of democracy, the tensions between the various normative expectations of the media in the country have played themselves out in different

phases. These include the initial debates around the overall transformation of the South African media landscape (ownership, staffing, representation, among other things) to reflect the new social realities (Horwitz 2001; Tomaselli 2011), tensions around the question of whether the media, particularly the SABC, should serve the "national" or public interest (Duncan 2003), contestation around whether the mainstream print media were undermining democracy by adopting a racial-inspired line of reporting politics in the post-apartheid era, debates about commercial imperatives negating the media's obligations to the public sphere, and tensions around the state's "encroachment" on the sphere of constitutionally guaranteed media freedoms through legislative interventions such as the ruling ANC's proposal for a Media Appeals Tribunal, and the tabling of a new State Information Bill in Parliament in 2010. In addition, it is argued that the interests of the poor are marginalised by the South African media (Duncan 2003), and that "there is still substantial racism, xenophobia and white middle-class bias in the South African press" (van Baalen 2013, 18).

Even though much of the South African media is not under direct control of the state or the ruling party (Ciaglia 2016, 96), there is no guarantee – even with a very active civil society – that "a more plural and fair decision-making process will take place" (ibid, 99). Indeed, with regard to the post-apartheid power structure, the media remain an "ambivalent force", emerging "as a power centre in their own right, displaying considerable agency in relation to political power" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 134–35).

But what do journalists themselves consider to be their roles in the context of the country's "emerging" democracy? This is an issue that this article pursues, and it takes cognisance of research that has already been conducted on this topic. Wasserman (2010), for example, conducted in-depth interviews with journalists and political players in South Africa to explore how values like freedom of speech, media responsibility and the democratic role of the media are understood by these various role-players in the political communication process. The findings point to a shifting and negotiated nature of the perceptions of these normative ideals. Similarly, Rodny-Gumede's (2015) work on South African journalistic self-perceptions of their roles revealed that they viewed themselves as neither watchdogs nor lapdogs. Rather, they articulated their roles as based on competing imperatives, in which concerns for the audience and a broader

articulation of the public interest took precedence over more liberal conceptualisations of the role of journalism in democracy. This paper proceeds along a broadly similar trajectory, focusing more specifically on the journalistic perceptions of coverage of community protests and xenophobic attacks, and how this coverage reflects journalists' perceived role. The aim is to establish how journalists saw the link (even if tenuous, or absent) between their coverage of these specific conflicts and the democratic culture in South Africa in general.

Methodology

The study was part of a broader five-country project exploring the media-democracy link in transitional democracies using content analysis, social media analysis and interviews with journalists, civil society and government officials. This paper is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 25 journalists from various media houses (print and broadcast) in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Most of the interviews (21) came from mainstream print newspapers, with the remainder from commercial radio and television. The focus of the interviews was on journalists' working practices, working conditions, perceptions of their roles, and their ethical orientation, as well as their perceptions of democracy and the media's role.

Interviews were conducted at the journalists' chosen location, sometimes in their office space but more usually in a neutral public venue, and typically lasted 60–90 minutes. Participants were selected based on a convenience sample, but also drew on quota sampling methods to allow wide representation from commercial radio and television, as well as daily and weekly papers from various media houses, to represent a range of ownership structures. Participation was voluntary and participants granted their informed consent on the basis of anonymity. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded using the NVivo software package and a thematic qualitative analysis was conducted through a process of inductive and deductive coding.

Discussion

Journalists and Traditional News Values

All the journalists interviewed were driven by traditional news values when making the choice to cover protest stories. Previous studies have noted that "[j]ournalists around the world share some common values, roles and routines that help them define news and how to report it" (cf. Herscovitz 2004, 71). Sometimes, the journalists interviewed had heard about a story from other news outlets, demonstrating that journalists followed certain norms that were "taken for granted across news organizations" (Welbers et al. 2015, 6). In other instances, the "criteria of newsworthiness" (Josephi 2013, 484) was that the protests had escalated to public demonstrations of violence, making it impossible to ignore as a news story. Journalists subscribed to mainstream Western news values, with the more violent public protests often receiving more prominent coverage.

As one respondent reflected,

> Peaceful protest action might be covered on page 6 or 7 but a violent one will get coverage on page 1 or 2, it depends. There is a saying in journalism that if it bleeds, it leads. (Interview 1, 14/11/2014)

The placement of protest coverage (a decision typically made at editorial, not journalist level) certainly points to a news value in which "[c]onflict is a central element of politics", and may even be seen as "a necessary condition for the functioning of democracy" (van Dalen 2012, 33).

Furthermore, respondents indicated a strong focus on "the fairness doctrine, going out of their way to carry the views of counter-demonstrators and the establishment every time they cover the views of the protesters" (Small 1994 in Jha 2008, 713). As one respondent noted,

> Am here just to write the story, to tell the story. I don't have a predetermined...I don't write according to a certain way. I write the story as it unfolds. And I write the story; I hope and believe that I am as objective as it can be. I am not going to fall into that trap and say that journalist are all objective because we are not we are human. So I will look at my story and see that I have all the voices that I need from everybody. Not just a

> particular organisation, or party or political leader or what. So yes, I try to be as objective as possible. (Interview 1, 14/11/2014)

This call to objectivity suggests that journalists do not think about how they "exercise influence by framing information in a particular way" (Schudson 2002, 265). Journalists also indicated that they made "perceptional decisions (truth, relevance, acceptability of facts and issues)" (Donsbach 2004, 151), selecting "what is true, what is relevant and what is, in a moral sense, good or bad" (ibid, 136). One journalist interviewed said:

> Well, you know for me I just wanted the people to know the truth about what was happening. It was just saying, "this is what people were experiencing and this is what politicians are saying". I was doing my job as a newspaper journalist and I was writing for the reader. (Interview 3, 14 /11/ 2014)

The notion of "truth" implies that journalists are not aware of how protests and demonstrations usually have "a dominant law and (dis)order frame, labelling protesters as deviant and de-legitimizing their aims and politics by emphasizing drama, spectacle and violence" (Cottle 2008, 853). When they talk of "truth", they are not grappling with "whose truth?", but instead "writing for the reader" and selecting a truth that will be palatable to their audience.

With respect to the coverage of the community protests and xenophobic violence specifically, journalists reiterated this desire for "objectivity" but simultaneously agreed that coverage could have been more detailed and contextualised better. Journalists agreed that they did not stick to notions of fairness that include providing "opportunities for those who are being attacked or whose integrity is being questioned to respond" (Tamba M'bayo 2013, 44). At the same time, even when journalists had engaged with communities to understand the background to protests, there was a sense that this was often not reflected in the print copy – pointing to the fact that "upper-level managers (with potentially diverging personal views or judgments) will have more influence on the news than journalists in lower positions" (Peiser 2000, 246).

Journalists reflected on how issues such as service delivery protests were often reported on in terms of straightforward binaries. One of the respondents noted:

> I think there was definitely a lack of depth and I will agree even the newspaper that I worked for and did a lot of those kinds of reporting did not allow me the time necessarily. Cos I was working as a daily newspaper journalist at the New Age and you are constantly reacting to news when you work at a daily newspaper. It's difficult to have time to research and spend time you know. So it was, for example, very black and white; it was very much like good guys and bad guys. With some media it was like the poo protesters are bad.[1] (Interview 3, 14 /11/2014)

The above quote implies that journalists are not connecting "the lives of ordinary people with the words and actions of political parties and other political actors, to show how these domains of actions relate to each other" (Strömbäck 2005, 340), and are also not making connections between different parts of society (George 2013). Hence, the deep divides in South African society are not ameliorated through media coverage and South African media are missing an opportunity to be a "conduit for the creation of a collective national identity" (Kenix 2015, 554).

Other interviewees also reflected on the coverage of community protests and xenophobic violence as a kind of "media event", subscribing to dominant frames and narratives. This reflects the prevalence of a traditional method of news coverage where journalists find drama by representing two sides of a story as conflicting parties, though this dismisses the possibility that there could be multiple sides with the "truth" somewhere in between (Richards and King 2000). One journalist reflected on his experience of reporting:

> So in a sense I found that we as the media went with what we had. We did not really engage with issues properly. Especially going behind the figures. We were not questioning the figures enough. And we were not questioning the underlying factors enough. It was just like, and especially the daily papers, it's you know if you look at the

[1] The so-called "poo protests" involved community activists flinging human waste in public spaces in Cape Town, such as the Cape Town International Airport, to demonstrate their anger at local authorities.

> daily realities of the newsroom it's really touch and go. Every day. You don't have time to actually go and engage with the subject matter. So I can't really recall any proper, am talking about Media24 now, analysis pieces you know, on service delivery in that sense. (Interview 2, 14/11/2014)

These examples of how journalists report – particularly in daily newspapers – suggest that some bias emerges not from "ideological decisions, but rather [as] the result of the routines by which journalists work", i.e. a structural or "unwitting bias" (van Dalen 2012, 34). Journalists have to make decisions about what to report "under severe time constraints and under the pressure of competition" (Donsbach 2004, 137). As another journalist commented:

> If media reports adequately they should reflect an understanding of our society and of different communities. Now what is happened with SDP [service delivery protests] is it's reported more as an event. And the real conditions and the real story, context behind it is not covered. And so it's reported more as the state of, five people were injured, and people smashed car windows, blah blah blah, that kind of stuff. But if the media had been in touch with those societies, they would have reflected the issues in those societies even before the protests. So then they come after the event and so on and they don't understand what is happening. (Interview 8, 27/2/2015)

The conceptualisation of journalism's institutional role is deeply influenced by a Western understanding of news making and does not echo cultural variation across the globe (Hanitzsch 2007). While the journalists pointed to ideas of "[n]ews judgement, criteria of newsworthiness or news values" as measures of "journalistic credibility" (Josephi 2013, 484), with regards to service delivery protests, the above journalist indicates that they do not always understand what is happening, and thus the credibility of their reporting in conflict situations comes into question.

The journalists interviewed also reflected on institutional challenges, which led to poor coverage of the protests. These included issues such as limited word count, deadlines and time pressures to file stories on a daily basis without having the time for engaged research as well as other issues

such as the juniorisation of the newsroom, resource and capacity constraints. As one former editor put it,

> The one reason for it is that the media at the moment are seriously, seriously understaffed. And they're seriously juniorised and there is a shortage of skills in newsrooms throughout the country. And because of that you find that reporters don't have enough time to do features, they basically just churning out stories, they don't have enough time to do contextual stories. (Interview 8, 27/02/2015)

The juniorisation of newsrooms results from declining audiences and thus, declining advertising revenue, creating "downward pressures on profitability…[and] in turn place[s] pressures on newsrooms to reduce costs, leading to mass retrenchments and the overburdening of remaining staff" (Duncan 2014, 170). The funding pressures lead to limits being placed on journalists' time and ability to take on the investigative function that ideally underpins reporting on conflict situations.

Another journalist reflected on the similar challenges newsrooms are facing, thus:

> So I mean there are lot of facets there that sort of lead to the easy quick telephone journalism rather than being embedded on the ground and spending time with communities to really understand, in a lot of instances media respond when something set on fire. There is no establishment of a relationship with a community say for the months before that happens. If you are reporting on a community and one of the issues in that community for a long period when something happens you already understand why it's happened. As opposed to parachuting and then going "oh my God there is a mob on the streets and people are burning stuff down, this is outrageous". There is no understanding of the long-term sort of journey that leads to that particular point. (Interview 6, 20/01/2015)

This journalist makes clear that community actors are in a less influential position and therefore are less able to be "visible in the media, whereas visibility would be needed to help to get public

opinion on their side" (van Dalen 2012, 35). Hence, South African journalists' self-reporting highlights how "hegemonic journalism" rarely works for the powerless (Nerone 2013, 455), and therefore that the news media are "a more important forum for communication among elites…than with the general population" (Schudson 2002, 263).

Academic research in the field of protest coverage has generally found that journalists rarely interview ordinary protesters who are not organisation officials or spokespersons (Jha 2008). However in all of the cases, and despite the findings of the content analysis (Bosch, Chuma and Wasserman 2018), all of the journalists interviewed reflected on their coverage of the conflicts as having involved on-the-ground research and engagement with ordinary people. What is interesting here is that these voices often did not make it into the pages of the newspaper, as the content analysis revealed.

Media Coverage of Democracy

The journalists interviewed differed in their views on the current state of the South African democracy. There was overall agreement that there have been some improvements such as freedom of the press, but the general view was that this is not a consolidated democracy. Some felt that South Africa's history of conflict with an authoritarian narrative resulted in a particular political culture, despite the new constitution. Journalists also raised concerns about the limitations of a dominant party state with an ineffective political opposition. As one journalist put it,

> I do feel that our democracy is fragile because we have in power a government that is quite frankly complacent and not vigilant about guarding that democracy. And I do feel that it's a result of having the majority of just one party and those people who are in that party they essentially run it like it's a business and a private business. So I feel very much that a lot of the systems and the sort of apparatus, the things that are meant to be upholding this democracy are in the hands of a few people you know. And they essentially make decisions on how the course of that democracy. So I feel almost like South Africa's democracy is fragile but at the same time I am very confident that our democracy is stable. It's just fragile as well. (Interview 3, 14/11/2014)

Unlike the Western media, where "news gathering is generally an interinstitutional collaboration between political reporters and the public figures they cover" (Schudson 2002, 251), in South Africa journalists feel that they have a limited role in upholding democracy, which is "in the hands of a few people". While journalists may see their role, in part, as "holding government officials accountable" (Relly et al. 2015, 348), government accountability is in short supply. As one journalist put it,

> there are two pillars of democracy at the moment that are increasingly eroding. That have not eroded completely but are in a very advanced stage and those two pillars are transparency and accountability. And I think that is feeding, and the problem is from a very high level, so from your national government, from your state institutions down to local government and municipalities. And I think at the core face of delivery, which is municipalities, that is where this problem then trickles down and causes frustration among the people. If you look at most of our social protests there is always a lack of communication, lack of accountability from those in power. (Interview 7, 21/01/2015)

This critique of South African democracy and the government points to a condition in which the media are "an ambivalent force" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 135) in relation to the democratically elected government. Despite this, some journalists interviewed were very conscious of their role in continuing to build the South African democracy. As one pointed out,

> South Africa was an apartheid state, therefore the founders of our democracy put it in the constitution that while you are free to write what you like, you will not be allowed to foment violence, and use hate speech, and you can therefore cannot hide behind media freedom and freedom of expression by dividing the society because the main constitution kind of advocates for unity. Therefore those were the kind of debates that we had where the journalists, young and old, had to remember that we have been a divided society, we are possibly still are to a large extent. And therefore, whatever stories we write, even if they are the truth, we always have to be cautious whether or not the words do not in the end perpetuate hatred or hate speech and divide the society. (Interview 4, 20/01/2015)

In essence, then, journalists are grappling with the need to hold political elites accountable, while "not destabilizing the often fragile legitimacy of the new regime" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 140). However, such grappling does not only consist of examining the role of political elites, but also identifies a role for the media in contending with issues such as race, class and gender. Such issues are fairly common in post-colonial societies, but do not form part of Western media models (Rodny-Gumede 2015).

In general, journalists felt positive about mainstream media coverage of democracy, raising the issue of a strong regulatory framework and general media independence from government control. Journalists felt strongly about the role of the media in building democracy. Many interviewees felt that South Africa is still a fairly young democracy. As one journalist put it,

> If we're talking in terms of age, we're an adolescent and we're difficult and we're prone to tantrums, we're prone to throwing our toys out of the cot when we don't get our way and it's kind of what you expect. It's part of the growing pains of being in your teens. And we've still got a way to go but I still think we still show the world a lot…generally we're doing okay and we've got a long way to go still. (Interview 19, 31/3/2015)

However, journalists nearly all felt that the media was limited in its current abilities to play a role in building democracy. They highlighted the trend of the media to reduce conflict to simplistic binaries, and also felt that the mainstream media reflects a race and class bias, as reflected below:

> I think the media does take a very sort of doom and gloom approach generally to like news and events and things that happen. And when they talk about South Africa and South African sort of government, you know, there is a lot of stuff in the media that wants to put fear into people. I think some the media can be a bit more sort of less alarmist in the way to report about our democracy. They don't report about our democracy in the context of the developing country. It's almost as though they are reporting it as it should be like America or it should be like Europe or it should be like the first world. (Interview 3, 14/11/2014)

This "gloom and doom" approach shows a disconnect between "whatever is published…[and a] straightforward reflection of professional intentions" (George 2013, 498). Editorial processes may lead to shortening of stories and the removal of nuance so that "content has to be read as the product of a complex interaction between independent professional judgments and various forms of accommodation" (ibid). As one journalist reflects:

> I think, like any democracy we are like quite noisy and chaotic. And I think that's a great thing. I mean people are always sort of talking, challenging etc. But I think the problem when it comes to how the media covers is that in the main there seems to be a sort of a cop out, in terms of the easy way out that is to reduce the national conversation into sort of very reductive binaries, you know that are easy for the media to try to say this is what is happening...And I think part of the inclination to be reductive is because there is a class and race bias in media in South Africa. There is certainly an anti-poor bias, there is certainly an anti-black bias. (Interview 6, 20/01/2015)

Similarly, there are problems with how Western models tend to focus on political elites as the custodians of democracy, whereas in a highly unequal society like South Africa, economic elites have tremendous power in shaping how society addresses poverty and inequality. This points to a situation in which journalists are highly influenced by Western ideas of relating the media to political authority, and not necessarily other elites that have power in society. Hence one journalist commented:

> So the media are vibrant and they pick the big stories and they take on those in power especially political power. The criticism has been that media don't take on enough of corporate power, don't challenge corporate power enough and they could do more. So, I think that's a fair assessment, but in terms of politics, the media, do, do a fairly adequate job. There is room for improvement particularly with the dailies, but the weeklies are the strongest in exposing lapses in governance and so on. (Interview 5, 14/01/2015)

Clearly then, journalists are aware of the weaknesses of their coverage, in that they are "removed from the concerns of the broader population in the country" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 140), and of the way this limits the extent to which they are supporting/building democracy. Journalists tended to agree that they need to change their news gathering practices, for example:

> We could do better. I really think we could do better. I think a lot of the time as a political journalist in particular I think a lot of the time is spent on personalities and on factional interests, which are generally an elitist issue. It's issues of the ruling elite in a country and I think we could be spending more time on the ground. (Interview 7, 21/01/2015)

This self-critique suggests that while the South African media are performing a watchdog function in terms of political elites, they are not facilitating "deliberative discussions [which] should be a part of daily life and decision making on all levels in society: between individual citizens, between politicians, between political institutions, and between citizens and their representatives" (Strömbäck 2005, 336).

Journalists' Relationship with Government

While there have not been explicit arguments in favour of de-coupling the media-democracy link within the South African debate as such, key issues centre around the relevance of the media or its primacy in advancing the country's democracy. Within government circles, for example, the argument is often that the media are anti-poor, anti-ruling party and opposed to the transformation agenda.

In 2003, then President Thabo Mbeki (2003) opined that the country's post-apartheid mainstream media had arrogated itself the role of "fishers of corrupt men", disproportionately targeting a black-led, democratically elected government for critique. Over the years since then, media-state relations have shifted back and forth depending on what issues occupy the public agenda, but what can be observed is that with the President Jacob Zuma administration, the relationship has deteriorated, in large measure because of competing interpretations of what the "watchdog" role of the media should entail. Due to lobbying and protesting against new media legislation, "the

South African news media have so far resisted attempts at coercion from government" (Rodny-Gumede 2015, 137).

While the mainstream commercial media cover the shenanigans of the Zuma administration – such as the Nkandla issue, corruption within state owned enterprises, the relationship between Zuma and the Gupta family, among several other topics – the government views this as unnecessary distraction from the "good story" the government has to tell, namely the state-led socio-economic transformation that has happened since 1994. Even the public service broadcaster, the SABC, has come out openly to argue that journalism should rather celebrate the success stories of government than focus on "negative" reporting.

In general, journalists saw their relationship with government as problematic, but then also saw their role in the coverage of stories about the xenophobic violence, for example, as directly addressing government on policy failures. Several interviewees mentioned that it was difficult to find specific information on policy around migration; and that during the height of the xenophobic conflict, there was no public statement from the president or government. One editor reflected that while his newspaper could not provide detailed coverage of the story, they used their coverage to highlight the shortage of government action in this area.

Here we see the notion of the media as a Fourth Estate, highlighting a more adversarial role with journalists seeing it as their responsibility to directly challenge the government. As the editor noted:

> I had to decide because my readership is a complicated readership as a business person. It doesn't want necessarily the blow-by-blow story of how this farmer hates the farm workers or how the farm workers hates the foreign nationals. But you mention these things in your story to highlight the bigger lack of policy clarity in government...So, our editorial showed, and you can still find them, that we condemned the state and condemned the national intelligence for failing to pick up these things on time. And even failing to heed the research work of many universities because they were too, what do you call it, embroiled in ANC politics so to speak. (Interview 4, 20/01/2015)

Journalists did not feel as though there was obvious interference from government in that they were not coerced by government to cover stories in particular ways. However, day-to-day "journalism…is the story of the interaction of reporters and government officials, both politicians and bureaucrats...police officers or politicians. They are informed. Their information is judged to be authoritative and their opinions legitimate" (Schudson 2002, 255). Therefore, pressures on journalists are often exerted more subtly. This impression is in line with previous studies (Wasserman 2005) which found that journalists are put under pressure by politicians invoking a certain notion of "responsibility" or appealing to identity politics or patriotism. One of the respondents said:

> Even though we have a democratic society it's constantly being tested and when it comes to the media's role, when we try to report on various things, we also get constricted in a way sometimes by being told what our role is or what our role is not. So we have a lot of people in the cabinet, or spokespeople coming out and saying, the media is not being, we're not nation builders or we're targeting politicians. You know they're making it as though we have a specific agenda, something personal against government, whereas it's just us doing our job and making sure there's a free flow of information. (Interview 13, 11/3/2015)

This example points to a range of pressures on journalists, and therefore it is unlikely that journalists "have achieved their judgements independently" (Donsbach 2004, 143), despite their claims to the contrary, although, of course, journalists may actively resist the pressures. As another journalist commented:

> What happens is, people in powerful positions tend to want to put pressure on reporters and editors to report in certain ways, and they use different ways of doing that. They do call editors and reporters to try to influence the way stories are going to be presented… The other thing obviously that they use is the public scolding thing, where they make dismissive remarks about the media and on the way it's reported on certain things, and that can also cause doubts in the heads of reporters as to the accuracy of their reports. If I

> look at how many complaints the ombudsman has actually dealt with from political parties, it's actually not a lot compared to the perceived unhappiness from political parties on the way they've been reported on. (Interview 8, 27/2/2015)

While in many countries government "officials or their media advisers and spokespeople are themselves parajournalists" who seek "to prompt journalists to provide favorable coverage" (Schudson 2002, 251), the public lambasting of the media identified by the journalist points to a situation in which journalists cannot rely on government bureaucracies to "provide a reliable and steady supply of the raw materials for news production" (Schudson 2002, 255). Instead journalists point to suspicion from government limiting the extent to which they can access relevant information – the pressure from government does not involve overt threats, so much as criticising the media generally. As one journalist commented:

> I mean, I have never had, I think the last time I had a government minister call me to say, "look, don't print this, you're fucking up the revolution or whatever" was back in 1998. I've never really had overt political pressure. You know I mean obviously in conversations people will try and spin things in a particular way. I mean that I suppose is suspicious especially people within government. (Interview 6, 20/01/2015)

While journalists generally did not believe that their coverage of the protests showed any government influence, Cottle (2008, 857) has argued that "models of media–state interactions highlight how changing political dynamics inform media interactions with political elites and the representation of major issues". He argues that shifts in the political culture and the political contingencies at play in contemporary protest dynamics, might not be well served by existing static ideas of news frames. A previous study (Bosch, Chuma and Wasserman 2018) showed that print media coverage of protests was generally biased, playing into dominant frames of protesters as illegitimate and portraying their political action as undemocratic.

> I don't think we're in a good place with authority with the media. I think we're in a very bad place. I think we gonna look back at this time. I mean the relationship with authority is very bad. It's acrimonious. It's not healthy. I had a break, I worked for the Mail and

> Guardian for two years I was away from it. And I came back and I was astounded by how, I mean, I use public telephones again...not on my cell phone. I don't trust it. And it's unimportant things. I spoke to a person coming here said to me "don't phone me they're listening to my phone calls". (Interview 9, 04/03/2015)

Journalists also felt that there is a tension between the media and government, and that generally coverage of government has been very critical, but that simultaneously government critique of media has been unjustifiable. This points to a limited ability of journalists to provide credible news, because journalists need the support of "elected politicians or political elites and rulers who see value in independent information provision and credible news judgement" (Josephi 2013, 487).

Journalists and Commercial Pressures

Besides debate about whether the media should be watchdogs keeping surveillance over abuse of public office, another issue that has dominated the media-democracy debate in South Africa relates to the influence of commercial imperatives on the mainstream media's ability to act as a "voice of the voiceless". South Africa is not exceptional in this regard – around the world, "[m]edia markets are inherently concentrated…[which] may unavoidably yield biased coverage" (Germano and Meier 2013, 118). Amid cuts and closures, investigative journalism remains expensive, such that media may no longer be playing a vital watchdog role in democracy (Hunter 2015).

This against the backdrop of two key realities of post-apartheid South Africa: first, the tide of hyper-commercialisation, cost-cutting and profit-chasing that has come to characterise the local media; and second, the worsening of socio-economic inequalities, which have made South Africa one of the most unequal countries in the world. Against this background, the key issue of interest to the media-democracy debate has been how the media report on struggles for visibility, access and participation among the country's poor in the context of unfulfilled expectations of the democratic project, and the influences of commercial factors on this coverage.

Here several critics have argued that the media has, in a way "failed" democracy by marginalising voices other than those of the elite structures of the South African society. Berger (2005, 19) argued that "too much" of South African journalism had become "dull, dry and predictable – and of interest only to a bunch of middle-class elites", and added "much else is trivial entertainment for dumbed-down masses, without any illuminating information".

Reflecting on what he considered the commercial media's neglect of ordinary people's stories in South Africa, Michael Schmidt (2011, 15) noted:

> There is a dire need for an editorship with a bone-deep respect for the wretched of the earth rather than their buddies in the cognac class; and a committed press corps that is analytically, vibrantly, socially engaged (outside Facebook, on the streets of our country) with the "ordinary" people who drive our wonderfully intriguing society.

More recently, Rao and Wasserman (2015, 652) also observed that

> The fact that commercial imperatives largely circumscribe the terms of engagement between citizens to those interactions, which yield commercial value means that participation in democratic deliberation in the public sphere remains limited. The media may position itself as a watchdog over the young democracy, but because audiences with commercial value hold sway, the issues on the media's agenda are largely informed by what Friedman (2011: 107) called a "view from the suburbs".

What is clear from the foregoing is the extent to which the "view from the suburbs" has become a defining feature of the mainstream media: the government seems to prefer the political "suburban" view highlighting the successes of the post-apartheid political elite in driving transformation; while the vagaries of economics pull the commercial media toward privileging the commercially viable "suburban" views. Missing in this arrangement are non-suburban voices of the country's poor. The rise of non-profit news agencies (that deliberately target stories of interest to ordinary South Africans) like GroundUp and Health-enews, for example, should be viewed as a response to the mainstream media's neglect of this constituency on the basis of commercial viability (see Chuma 2016).

Journalists interviewed rarely highlighted the commercial pressures of their news institutions as limitations to their coverage of conflicts. Many seemed completely unaware of these critiques, as shown below:

> The only pressure I had is deadline, to get the story there by deadline. We do not have undue pressure to write the story in a certain way but to be objective and to write the truth. (interview 1, 14/11/2014)

However, while they did not feel that their stories were constrained by commercial interests, journalists all had a clear understanding of the demographics of their audiences, and an acute awareness that they were writing for specific audiences. As early as 1999, within the first five years of the democratic dispensation, Clive Barnett (1999) reminded us that although the role officially envisaged for the media in post-apartheid South Africa was to "act as the medium of national unification and democratic citizenship", this role was negated by "deep structural limitations that inhibit the reconstitution of South African broadcasting as a medium of inclusive democratic communication" (1999, 649). While this was a reference specifically to broadcasting (which persists to this day), it is also arguably applicable to the mainstream media across the board.

Conclusion

What emerges from the foregoing discussion of the South African media-democracy context is that while the media-democracy link still holds sway in many ways in journalistic value systems and normative frameworks, and also informs debates about the role of the country's media in the post-apartheid dispensation, this link is often very tenuous in practice. The main pressures exerted on journalistic practice which led journalists to question the strength of the media-democracy link, were identified by journalists as the following:

- News values and routines: Coverage of violent protests and conflicts tend to get preferential treatment. This means that democratic contestations are framed rather one-dimensionally in terms of violent conflict, and other forms of engagement are lost from sight. Such coverage also tends to delegitimise protest as irrational and therefore unacceptable in terms of the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy.

- Market/audience concerns: Journalists remarked on the pressure of keeping their market/audience in mind when reporting, rather than allowing the concerns of the wider public and interests of poor communities to guide them. Related to this is the acknowledgement that journalists belong to an elite professional class that remains out of touch with the lived experiences of the poor and the marginalised on whom they report.
- Economic, capacity and time constraints: The limited resources available to journalists to practice proper, in-depth journalism that would contribute to better understanding of democracy and provide context to democratic debates, is a recurring complaint. Journalists' attempts to contribute to democratic deepening are undermined by the institutional conditions under which they practice.
- Lack of government responsiveness and accountability: An important critique of the dominant assumption of the media-democracy link that emerged from the interviews with journalists is that their reporting does not make an impact on the ruling elite. The assumption that media coverage leads to democratic deepening and greater accountability on the part of government often does not apply in the South African context, where media criticism is ignored or dismissed as coming from an elite that do not have the broader public's interests at heart. To some extent this criticism of journalism is borne out by the acknowledgement that corporate power tends not to be criticised as much as political power.

There is an awareness that the media, including the public service broadcaster, are increasingly beholden to elites – corporate and political – and that this reality renders their role incompatible with the normative traditional liberal role in which media claim to protect the public interest.

Interviews with South African journalists suggest that although journalists see their role as contributing to democracy, they are not doing enough to cover issues on the ground, leading to the invisibility of poor South Africans and the issues that impact on their daily lives. Journalists also recognised that they were focusing on political elites and not economic elites, which had limitations in terms of trying to tackle inequality. The media also tend to still report on conflict within conventional news frames while applying conventional news values such as conflict and proximity to their audience. These frames have limits in contexts such as post-apartheid South

Africa, where the consolidation of democracy would also require more peacebuilding efforts and the broadening of the fragmented, "bifurcated", public sphere. Although journalists experience their relationship with government as pressurised and conflictual, there seems to be little reflection on the effects of commercial pressures on their reporting of conflicts.

The traditional "watchdog" model clearly seems to have its limits in this context of inequality and social polarisation. A more reciprocal, participatory approach of "listening" would acknowledge these limitations and accept that the media cannot claim to represent the citizenry in all its diversity unless it allows a greater role for citizens to co-construct news agendas and collaborate in the narrativisation of everyday lived experience. For such a shift to occur, the inequalities in access, the marginalisation of subaltern voices and the domination of elite perspectives have to be addressed. Only then can the link between media and democracy be strengthened.

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