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## **The media, civil society and democracy in South Africa: SONA2015**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the events surrounding the State of the Nation Address in 2015 (SONA2015), during which opposition party members interrupted proceedings to raise questions about the president's controversial R208-million security upgrade to his personal home, with the use of public funds. The event raised issues about the constitutionality of the use of police in the National Assembly, the use of cellphone blocking devices, and the fact that television broadcasters were not allowed to broadcast the events as they happened. The article draws on a quantitative content analysis of print media coverage of SONA 2015, as well as qualitative interviews with members of the Right2Know (R2K) campaign in Cape Town and Durban. It explores their activities to 'take back parliament' and calling for a 'people's parliament'. At the core of this investigation is the role of civil society in the media-politics nexus with regards to strengthening democracy and democratic participation in South Africa, through an exploration of this case study.

### **Keywords**

SONA, democracy, participation, conflict, media, civil society

### **Introduction**

At the opening of parliament and the presentation of the State of the Nation Address by South African president, Jacob Zuma in February 2015, chaos unfolded as a newly formed opposition party disrupted the events<sup>1</sup>. This article focuses on the series of events that followed, exploring how SONA2015 raised issues of power distribution and accountability within South Africa's transitional democracy, and the role played by civil society and the media. SONA2015 took place in a very specific political context: At the same time as nationally organised local-level forms of contestation were taking place in the form of community protests, at national level various accusations of corruption were levelled against the ruling party – the African National Congress (ANC). A new revolutionary socialist political party - the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) - led by expelled ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema, managed to secure seats in the country's parliament (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2014). The EFF is the third largest political party, and their main party line is a critique of the ANC's neo-liberal economic policies, with calls for land redistribution, nationalisation of the mines, and increasing welfare grants, among other 'pro-poor' policies. Since one key corruption scandal was around the upgrades to the President's home (Beresford, 2014), the EFF warned that they planned to disrupt SONA 2015 with demands that the President 'pay back the money' and respond directly to their

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<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted that subsequent SONA addresses have also been disrupted in a similar fashion, but the events of February 2015 were this first of this kind and therefore can be seen as a significant event in the post-apartheid democratic era. Allegations of signal-blocking were only made the 2015 event and as such this particular iteration of parliamentary disruptions also had specific implications for the democratic value of freedom of speech and democratic debate.

concerns during his speech (Voltmer and Kraetzschmar, 2015). The controversial R208-million security upgrade was conducted at his personal homestead, Nkandla. He was widely criticized by media and citizens for his use of public funds for this purpose. In early 2016 the Constitutional Court ruled on the matter, finding that by failing to comply with the Public Protector's order to pay back the costs of non-security upgrades, the President failed to "uphold, defend and respect" the Constitution.

During SONA2015, the EFF members were removed from the National Assembly chamber by police and security personnel, with opposition parties later protesting that police acted illegally and unconstitutionally. Democratic Alliance (DA) members staged a walkout in protest of the use of police in the National Assembly during the proceedings. In addition, cellphone blocking devices were used by Parliament – referred to in the media as 'signal blocking' - preventing journalists and others present from broadcasting information from their cellphones during the ensuing chaos. The event was also controversial because broadcasters were not allowed to show what was happening as EFF members were being removed, and television news stations, which were covering the event live, simply showed an image of the Speaker of Parliament during this time. The so-called 'disorder clause' exists to protect the 'dignity' of the house, and several news outlets subsequently campaigned to declare this clause unconstitutional.

This case study demonstrates that in South Africa's emerging democracy, the existence of a democratic parliament does not mean the absence of political conflict within the democratic institution itself, with a range of democratic values being contested. While this is a multidimensional conflict, it falls within the category of power distribution and accountability. Through an exploration of various aspects of the conflict, this article intends to explore the ways in which both the media and civil society reacted and interacted in response to the events in Parliament, which can be seen as a democratisation conflict as part of the transitional negotiation of power relations in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Civil society, media and struggles for democratization**

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 to prevent the abuse of power by new elites or entrenched interests carried over from authoritarian rule, the media does not necessarily provide a neutral platform for democratic deliberation. Instead, the media may act – however unintentionally - in favour of entrenched powerful interests. The media may also contribute to the deepening of social polarisations inherited from previous periods of conflict if it privileges the viewpoints of a particular party, group or set of social agents. This is particularly true in a country like South Africa, with huge economic inequalities that persist even after more than two decades after democracy, as well as ongoing social polarisations along racial and ethnic lines. If the asymmetries in access to the public sphere are left unaddressed, the media might therefore prevent the marginalized 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, to not merely 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).

A conflict such as SONA2015 raises challenges for the South African media in this regard. The events taking place in Parliament were not only highly polarising, but were also highly mediated, given the direct coverage of the opening of Parliament by news organisations. The subsequent fallout of these events involved civil society actors directly, who engaged both the media and politicians in their attempts to facilitate open discussion and a participatory public sphere. In order to make an impact in a highly mediatised environment around an event like SONA, South African civil society organisations were reliant on a relationship with the media. The challenge for the media was to evaluate the highly polarised situation in such a way as to allow different voices to emerge and add nuance to a complicated set of relationships, instead of pitting one side against another in a binary fashion. Through serious and honest attempts at listening to various actors, specifically seeking out those that were at risk of being overshadowed by the loudest voices, the media could ‘open the gate’ for different interpretations of the events to emerge.

The focus on the media’s relationship with civil society in democratisation conflicts indeed rests on the notion that contemporary conflicts are increasingly mediatised events (Cottle, 2006). Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argue that gaining standing in the media is “often a necessary condition before targets of influence will grant a movement recognition and deal with its claims and demands” (116). Media coverage of political and social activism and conflict impacts 1) how civil society groups are viewed within the public sphere and 2) communications strategies these groups devise in order to maximise visibility and influence. These assumptions about the media and civil society should, however, not be taken for granted. Especially in transitional contexts, the ability for civil society organisations to connect with the interests of a diverse and often polarised, unequal or conflictual citizenry can be questioned, while the media’s ability to articulate the broad range of what constitutes the public interest is often hampered by social, political or economic interests.

Because certain conventional news values inform the way news is selected (Barnett, 2003; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999) and produced, democratisation conflicts are likely to be framed as ‘events’, with emphasis on the spectacle, and ‘official’ sources such as spokespersons are likely to be given prominence. This assumption will be further explored in this article, with a particular focus on how activists view their representation in the media and what strategies activists use to influence media agendas. The focus on media use for activism is, however, complicated by the difficulty of drawing clear delineations between political and social activism, because there is a continuum between these forms of activism.

The post-industrial West has witnessed a refocusing of political engagement outside of the parliamentary and political party system, giving birth to the emergence of ‘new politics’ (Dahlgren and Gurevitch, 2005). The assumption is that activists rely on mainstream media to reach audiences that may be of strategic importance to their cause, even if these may not be their primary support base, but that they also use new digital and mobile technologies to mobilise for activism and communicate with their constituencies. This article explores both sides of this relationship between media and

civil society by firstly investigating the media coverage of the SONA events, and then probing civil society responses to these events. It does so through a combination of print media content analysis and qualitative interviews, as described in the following section.

### **Methodology**

The main method applied in this article is quantitative content analysis. A total of 194 stories from 11 English-language newspapers published in South Africa's major metros were coded, all randomly selected from two online databases, namely SA Media and Lexis Academic. The key word for selection was 'SONA 2015', and the selected time period was between 11<sup>th</sup> February (The date of the SONA conflict in Parliament), and the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2015. This extended period was to allow for the inclusion of more stories covering the conflict, which dominated prime media space for much of the first two months and then began to taper after that.

The selected newspapers span a spectrum of the South African print media and these include, the *Mail & Guardian*, *Business Day*, *The New Age*, *Cape Times*, *Daily Sun*, *Pretoria News*, *The Star*, *The Mercury*, *The Herald*, and the *Sunday Times*. The selected stories included news reports and commentaries/op-eds on the SONA conflict. The coding process was based on a codebook developed as part of a larger, four-country study of media and democratization conflicts in transitional countries ([www.mecodem.eu](http://www.mecodem.eu)). The quantitative analysis was aimed at identifying general patterns of media coverage of selected conflicts (in this case the SONA conflict). It is important to note that this was not meant to represent the selected texts in their entirety as such, but to identify key features of the text considered important for the study. Of particular importance to this article were several aspects of the coverage including the following: voices included in the stories (e.g., gender, status), conflict definitions (causal factors), evaluations of the state of the country's democracy (in light of the conflict), language use, (including bias, polarization and emotion), etc.

The coded data was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) from which results were drawn. The unit of analysis was the individual newspaper article or the news story within each newspaper. The codebook built upon key concepts that underlie the research project, drawn from the fields of democratisation studies, communication research, various strands of conflict studies and from general political and social science research. Entman's definition of the key aspects of framing (1993) provided a useful organising device for the investigation of media reporting on conflict. From this perspective, key issues explored were (1) how the media define problems at the centre of the protests, (2) what causes and instigators of the conflicts they identify in the process, (3) how the media coverage evaluates the problems, and (4) what solutions the media prescribe for the conflicts. Framing refers to the way that the media presents and makes sense of events and issues. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) define a media frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events . . . The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (p. 143). Framing offers an alternative to the old 'bias and objectivity' paradigm, and recognizes the ability of a text to define issues and set terms of a debate, thus resulting in subtle but powerful effects on audiences (Tankard, 2001).

After several detailed discussions of the variables and revisions of the codebook, coding was conducted by four coders. The final intercoder reliability test results were very high, when interpreted in terms of the Percentage Agreement, with an average of 85%. However, when interpreted from the more conservative Krippendorff Alpha (2004), they were slightly down, at  $K_{\alpha} = .701$ . This notwithstanding, they still fell within the 'good' category (where  $K_{\alpha} = .800$  and above is considered 'very good',  $K_{\alpha} = .700$  and above 'good', and  $K_{\alpha} = .667$  considered minimal) (Krippendorff, *ibid*). In other words, the reliability test results, approached from both conservative and fairly liberal angles, reflect a high level of reliability and credibility of the dataset.

In addition to the quantitative content analysis of mainstream news articles on SONA2015, in-depth interviews were conducted with activists from the civil society group the Right to Know Campaign (R2K). This group was established in 2010 in response to increased threats to freedom of expression in South Africa. The organisation describes itself (see [www.r2k.org.za](http://www.r2k.org.za)) as 'a democratic, activist-driven campaign that strengthens and unites citizens to raise public awareness, mobilise communities and undertake research and targeted advocacy that aims to ensure the free flow of information necessary to meet people's social, economic, political and ecological needs and live free from want, in equality and in dignity'. Because of the concerns about freedom of information and public awareness of parliamentary activities that arose around the SONA events, R2K was an appropriate choice of civil society organisation to explore with regards to their interaction with the media in the context of a democratisation conflict.

Interviews with activists from this civil society organisation regarding their activities around the event, formed a critical component of this study. The interviews primarily sought to establish the respondents' perceptions of the state of democracy in South Africa (in light of the conflict), their role in the conflict and their definition of the conflict (including their sense of the causes and possible solutions to the conflict, and their communicative and mobilization strategies during the conflict). Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with five R2K activists in Cape Town and Durban. These interviews followed the format of interviews in other countries that formed part of the broader four-country project mentioned above, which had as its aim the exploration of the media-democracy link in transitional democracies. Interviews were conducted in a neutral public venue and lasted 60-90 minutes. Participation was voluntary and interviewees 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.

## **Findings**

### **Salience of the SONA Story**

In order to contextualize the discussion of the coverage of the SONA conflict by the selected media, it is important to locate this conceptually within the framework of media *framing*. This approach holds that media coverage of events and conflicts takes place within certain, established, ideologically-driven frames. The media frame, as Gitlin (1980) reminds us, is what makes the world beyond direct experience look

natural. He defines frames as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories of about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (p. 6). According to Scheufele (1999), the creation of frames is moderated by variables such as ideology, attitudes, and professional norms and is eventually reflected in the way journalists frame news coverage. Because the ultimate aim is to present the news events from a particular worldview (and in the process inviting the reader/audience to interpret the news/events in a given way), the allocation (or otherwise) of salience and voice in news stories is an integral component of media framing. Typically, framing in news media adopts two forms, namely episodic frames and thematic frames (Iyenger & Simon, 1993). The former—the most commonly applied by media, focuses on public issues in terms of specific events such as conflicts or disasters without giving much attention the broader context of these events. Episodic frames often make for good visuals for the media. A thematic frame, on the other hand, “places a public issue in some general or abstract context” (Iyenger & Simon, 1993, p. 369)

In both framing cases, salience occupies a critical component. Broadly defined, salience refers to “relative importance of an object—a public issue, public figure, or any other topic—in the media or among the public” (Chyi & McCombs, 2004, p. 22). As studies in agenda-setting have shown, the issue of relative importance is not given, neutral or value-free. Among competing issues or events, some get accorded more salience than others. Within news media, for example, salience at a micro-level refers to such things as placing or positioning of specific news items within the body of the bulletin or newspapers. Stories that take up prime pages such as the front page are considered the most important by the editorial teams.

In this study, salience was coded in three categories. These included high, medium and low salience. High salience referred to articles located on the front pages of newspapers; medium salience referred to articles located in the political sections of the newspaper, and low salience stories were located in the non-political, lower sections of the papers. The SONA story was predictably accorded high salience among most of the newspapers under study, especially within the first days and weeks of the conflict. This is because the conflict attracted a lot of public attention (the conflict was unprecedented in post-Apartheid South Africa) just as it also attracted substantial media attention even outside of the newspapers covered.

As Figure 1 below shows, high and medium salience, were the dominant features. In the case of the 43% of stories coded ‘uncodable’ in respect of the ‘salience variable, it must be noted that this was because the stories were sourced from the Lexis Academic database, which does not indicate page numbers. However, this does not detract from the fact that in the majority of cases where salience was coded, high and medium salience, were the defining features of coverage.

Figure 1: Salience of the SONA story among selected newspapers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High	43	22.2	39.1	39.1
	Medium	40	20.6	36.4	75.5

	Low	27	13.9	24.5	100.0
	Total	110	56.7	100.0	
Missing	Uncodable	84	43.3		
Total		194	100.0		

### Voices in SONA coverage

News sources play an important role in shaping news. As Stuart Hall (1978) argued in his discussion of the social production of news, sources are the ‘primary definers’ of news. At the same time, and as is the case with salience, sources are subject to gatekeeping processes, both in terms of identifying them as sources in the first place as well as the actual content of what they make available to journalists. The question of which voices are given salience and which ones are left out is therefore a very important one in studies of media framing. In this study, the coding of sources was designed to indicate who has access to the media agenda by being presented with a direct quote. We limited our focus to the first three sources quoted directly in the stories. The sources were coded on two accounts; namely gender and location or status. The latter referred to a range of categories from state actors such as government ministers, to non-state actors such as civil society organizations, to individual citizens. Although there were differences between the newspapers in terms of their coverage, what was more interesting for this article were the broad similar patterns.

Figure #2 below shows the key voices in the coverage of SONA2015 by the selected newspapers:

Source Order (direct quotations)	Gender (Valid Percentage)	Voice (Valid Percentage)
<b>Voice 1</b>	<b>Female: 18.6</b> <b>Male: 69.9</b> <b>Generic: 11.5</b>	<b>Govt Authorities: 47</b> <b>Opposition MPs: 29</b> <b>Other citizens: 24</b>
<b>Voice 2</b>	<b>Female: 11.1</b> <b>Male: 83.3</b> <b>Generic: 5.6</b>	<b>Govt Authorities: 38</b> <b>Opposition MPs: 42</b> <b>Other citizens: 20</b>
<b>Voice 3</b>	<b>Female: 25.0</b> <b>Male: 70.8</b> <b>Generic: 4.2</b>	<b>Govt Authorities: 33</b> <b>Opposition MPs: 57</b> <b>Other citizens: 10</b>

Across the 11 newspapers, two trends can be noticed in terms of coverage of the SONA conflict. The first is the predominance of male voices as sources of direct newspaper quotes in all the three voices in the stories. On average, male sources constituted 75 percent of the identified sources in the stories, while female sources constituted only 18 percent. The other noticeable trend is the foregrounding of

mainly opposition Members of Parliament and government officials and/or ruling party politicians on the other. Opposition MPs enjoyed most voice, at 43 percent, with the government/ruling party at 39 percent and ‘other citizens’ at 18 percent. What is clear from this pattern of source selection and citation is the framing of the SONA conflict as a predominantly political conflict pitting predominantly male members of the opposition against predominantly male members of the ruling ANC party. The media’s orientation towards the opposition - a possible conflation of the ‘watchdog’ role of the media with that of a political opposition role - is also suggested by these findings.

**SONA coverage and perceptions and evaluations of democracy**

Given the fact that this article is part a larger project on media, conflict and democratisation, it pays attention to the ways in which the SONA conflict was presented by the media and also the perceptions about the state of democracy in South Africa in the context of comparable conflicts in other transitional democracies. The aim is to assess the perceptions and attitudes held by the media towards the state of South African democracy in general, given that it is marked by similar conflicts and tensions arising in other transitional countries.

**Figure # 3 below illustrates the evaluations of institutional aspects of democracy**

<b>Evaluation Score</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Mixed, ambiguous	20
Negative evaluation	52
Strongly negative	15
Positive evaluation	13
Total	100

The coding for evaluations of the state of democracy was based on related itemised mini-variables (elements of democratic practice) such as governance, transparency, rule of law, independence of the courts, media freedom, checks and balances, etc. In each story, coders coded for whether any of these aspects were mentioned or referred to in the context of the conflict. What emerges from this study is that over two thirds of coded stories which made reference to the state of democracy in South Africa were negative, while only 20 percent of the stories were positive.

**Causal Interpretations of SONA Conflict**

It was important that the study looked at the media’s interpretation of the causes of the conflict. The media’s interpretation of the conflict - its causes, main actors and purpose - was also likely to influence its framing of the conflict and the salience awarded to it. Here attention was drawn to two most commonly cited causal interpretations, namely political institutions as well as the rule of law. Figure #4 below illustrates the causal interpretations of the conflict:

**Figure 4: Causal Interpretations of the SONA Conflict**

<b>Causal Interpretation</b>	<b>Valid Percentage</b>
<u>Political Institutions</u>	
Political Institutions (general)	29.3
Political institutions-too weak	22
Political Institutions-too authoritarian	3.7
Corruption of political elites	37.8
Divided elites	3.7
Other	3.5
Total	100
<u>Rule of Law</u>	
Judicial system, rule of law in general	92.6
Law enforcement	4.4
Others	3
Total	100

The data above shows that the conflict was framed as a manifestation of weak and compromised political institutions (in this case, Parliament, the executive, etc.), corrupted political players (in this case President Jacob Zuma’s Nkandla scandal), and also as an issue to do with the rule of law. This was arguably in reference to the involvement of the South African Police in the violent eviction of the EFF MPs from Parliament, and perhaps also in reference to the illegal suspension of network coverage within Parliament precincts to prevent the television broadcast of the ongoing conflict. The conflict erupting at the SONA events therefore seems to have been interpreted by the media as a symptom of a larger democratic malaise.

### **Language Use in Covering the SONA Conflict**

This study also paid attention to language aspects of conflict coverage that include bias, emotion and polarising speech. Bias in this instance was understood in a broad sense (not just partisan bias) to include, for example both explicit and implicit support for a particular conflicting party at the expense of the other (s), while polarisation refers to use of negative language to describe the other party. The emotions variable referred to the use of adjectives and reference to feelings in the stories. This article makes no claim to having a close-ended, uncontested, if scientific definition of all these terms, but uses them as a variable merely to give an indication of the deployment of language in the news media in the coverage of a democratisation conflict.

**Figure #5: Emotion, bias and polarisation of coverage of Sona Conflict**

<b>Aspect of language</b>	<b>Valid Percentage</b>
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<u>Emotions</u>	
Detached	45
Some emotional language	44
Very emotional language	11
Total	100
<u>Bias</u>	
Neutral	24.2
Balanced	26.8
Somewhat biased	33.5
Very biased	15.5
Total	100
<u>Polarisation</u>	
Moderate speech	29.3
Somewhat polarising speech	51.5
Strongly polarising speech	19.2
Total	100

The results above present a picture of a fairly emotive conflict. While 45 percent of the stories could be categorised as ‘detached’, 55 percent contained both some emotional language and some inflammatory acts of speech. The same applies to bias and polarisation. Nearly half of the stories coded were either somewhat biased or very biased, while over 70 percent of the stories contained polarising speech. The findings from the newspaper coverage suggest that the media framed the SONA conflict, perhaps predictably, as an *episodic* frame, a dramatic conflict in Parliament. Naturally this attracted high salience on the media agenda as this was unprecedented in the post-Apartheid democratic Parliament. The predominant citation of male voices in reporting this conflict arguably conforms to several studies that have shown that media reportage tends to give men more voices than women. Because the event happened in Parliament most of the voices were those of politicians. Also of interest to note in the framing of this conflict is the general negative appraisal of the state of the country’s democracy by the media under study.

### **Findings from the Interviews**

With respect to the qualitative interview data, of particular interest to this article are three broad frames that emerged from the interviews, namely, the perceptions of the role of Parliament in democracy, perceptions of the state of democracy in the country, and perceptions of the relationship between media and civil society in struggles for democratization.

### **Perceptions of the Role of Parliament in Democracy**

Because the SONA conflict occurred in the locale of Parliament, the supposed fulcrum of democracy, it was perhaps to be expected that the respondents reflected on the health of this institution in the context of the conflict. Activists interviewed felt that the integrity of Parliament as a critical institution of democracy was under threat, with activists citing 'securocrats' as the source of the threat. 'Defending' parliament in these circumstances was therefore considered an urgent civic and political duty of the citizen. A journalist reflecting on his coverage of the conflict, said his reporting sought to "shape the public conversation around it so that it's not really about the ANC vs the EFF but it's about the institution of Parliament being brought under pressure to deal with conflict in more conflictual ways" (SA Interview#3). An activist from the R2K said: "For the first time you've got a real pointed conflict that the mechanism of Parliament needs to resolve and that's very exciting and a very good thing for our democracy" (SA Interview#1). However, the same activist argued that for Parliament to deal with this, it had to be freed or rescued from the 'capture' of securocrats.

### **Perceptions on the state of democracy in South Africa**

There was a sense among the respondents that the state of the country's democracy after two decades was worsening, rather than improving. In this case some activists argued that South Africa was slowly sliding towards authoritarianism. The installation of signal-jamming equipment in Parliament and the promulgation of the Secrecy Bill were in particular cited by both activists and journalists as extremely worrying signs of the slide into authoritarianism. One activist said; "Our democracy is in danger, as long as we do not have strong civil society organisation this government will take us to slavery." The SONA conflict, noted the activist, was inevitable "because the way government is running our new democracy is unacceptable". (SA Interview#4)

Although the solutions to the conflict were defined as 'engagement' with the state, the respondents felt that this kind of engagement was unlikely to happen because the government was unwilling to do so. One activist described a government that was reluctant to "come to the party...they are arrogant, they control state machinery, they use securocrats to block us, and they intimidate our activists on the ground" (SA Interview#1). The sense of an atmosphere of mutual mistrust, if not hostility, between the state and civil society pervaded the interviewees' responses to the issue of the state of democracy in South Africa.

### **Relations between the media and civil society in struggles for democracy**

The topic of relations between the media and civil society was another interesting issue that emerged during the interviews. Although this sample is too small to draw statistical generalizations, it raised some interesting issues for further consideration. The key issue which emerged was that while both the media and the civil society groups considered themselves 'fighters' for greater democratisation, their relations were complex. Some R2K activists, for example, argued that the media pandered to elitist interests and in their reporting either genuflected to the ANC government (the SABC in particular), or to the corporate elites (the mainstream commercial media). This was viewed as negating the cause of the majority of the poor, especially in the context of an unequal country. However, it was also interesting to note that on certain 'democracy conflicts', the media and civil society would turn allies. This was so especially in the SONA case and the fight against the 'secrecy bill' before it. As one

of the R2K activists noted, the SONA case presented “one of the very rare cases where you find advocacy journalists as allies”. The activist continued: “I was watching it live on TV and my phone was ringing, journalists inside the press gallery themselves, blowing the whistle and calling on Right2Know to assist”. In the urgent court application to stop the signal jamming of Parliament, for example, both media and civil society groups were applicants (R2K, SANEF and Media24) (SA Interview#5)

And yet in some conflicts, civil society groups felt that the media were simply not reliable allies and therefore sought to find alternative platforms to communicate their messages. An activist from R2K, for example, said: “In response to mainstream being infiltrated by government and business, what we have done is we have started our own publications on secrecy; there’s a publication called *Big Brother*, it is well researched, you get all the information on how other states are spying on us and our state collaborating with other states in terms of spying on activists. We also have our own tabloid that talks to the struggles of different communities in different provinces...” (SA Interview#2).

## **Conclusion**

The SONA event was awarded great salience by the South African print media. It was covered as a prominent news story, and later served as a reference point for further discussions. The events seemed to have been used by the media as an illustration of a broader trend towards a creeping pressure on freedom of speech and deterioration of key democratic values. As such, the coverage of the event provides important insights into how the media sees its role in relation to democratic process and institutions, and how it assesses democratic values such as freedom of speech. In its coverage, the media mostly gave voice to politicians from the political opposition, most of them male. Although the limitations of this particular analysis would caution against too broad generalisations, this orientation by the print media as manifested in its coverage of the SONA events, seems to bear out the criticism often directed at the South African print media, namely that they favour elite perspectives and support a political orientation towards the political opposition. In this regard, the SONA events provided an opportunity for South African print media to support what seems to be a general disillusionment with the state of democracy in the country. This pessimistic view is supported by a key representative of civil society, namely the Right to Know campaign, for whom the SONA events signaled worrying trends with regards to the pressures on freedom of speech and democratic participation. Interviews with members of R2K suggested that the SONA events were proof of South Africa’s slide towards authoritarianism. Taken together, the analysis of media coverage and the interviews with civil society activists suggest an alignment between media agendas and civil society activist goals around issues of freedom of speech, arising out of a shared concern about the state of South African democracy.

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