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Print media coverage of service delivery protests in South Africa: A content analysis

Abstract

Since the end of apartheid, there has been a steady increase in service delivery protests in South Africa. This term refers to a range of protests, increasing in frequency since 2004, related to the inadequate provision of services, most often water and sanitation. Given the frustration expressed by citizens using protest as a form of communication, this study explores the nature of print media coverage, exploring how these protests are framed in relation to democracy.

Through a quantitative content analysis, this paper thus describes print media coverage of the protests. International studies have shown that mainstream mass media often subscribe to the protest paradigm, which includes delegitimisation and demonization, highlighting the negative consequences of protests. Given the significance of the media as sources of collective knowledge and people's perceptions of reality, this paper explores these issues in the local context, exploring how a sample of mainstream South African newspapers portray these protests, and what kind of interpretations and value judgments are offered to frame the conflict.

Keywords:
Service delivery, community protests, media framing, conflict, democratisation

Introduction

The South African transition from an authoritarian state to a democracy in 1994 has often been heralded as peaceful and smooth when viewed in institutional and procedural terms. Despite regular, largely peaceful elections, a negotiated Constitution and democratic institutions such as a Constitutional court, dissent about the dividends of democracy for the majority of the country's citizens, together with widespread perceptions of government corruption, has resulted in ongoing protests. High levels of unemployment, housing, water and sanitation, electricity, corruption and municipal administration, health and crime, have all been listed as reasons for the protests, which started in the early 2000s. The protests have become a daily occurrence (Pieterse and Van Donk 2013, p. 109), increasing sharply in a short space of time. It is important to note that many of these protests - - cumulatively grouped under the rubric of 'service delivery protests' are not all about the delivery of actual basic services but just as much about the closing down of democratic/institutional space and process when communities try to raise issues related to services and corruption.. An average of 2.1 protests per day were recorded in the five years between 2004-2009, to the extent that these uprisings have been termed a "rebellion of the poor" (Alexander 2010, 2012). Although protests are mostly peaceful, they are increasingly turning violent (Brown 2015, p. 14) – both in terms of the protests themselves and the response by the state. Research indicates that police killed 43 protesters between 2004 and 2014 (Grant 2014). State-sanctioned violence has even been directed at children protesting the lack of teachers at schools, as happened in Port Elizabeth recently (ENCA 2015). In this case, live ammunition

was reportedly also used against members of the media reporting on the event (News 24 2015). The protests are probably best understood within the context of the end of apartheid, "best understood not as a miraculous historical rupture, but as a dramatic phase in an ongoing struggle to resolve a set of political, economic and social contradictions that became uncontainable in the 1970s" (Marais, 2011, p. 2). The uneven development of South African cities and townships was amplified during transition to democracy in the 1990s. Bond (2000) argues that the ANC's adoption of neo-liberal economic and social policies can be blamed for this uneven urban development, as redistribution of urban resources was not on the agenda, leading to unemployment, municipal cut-offs of water and electricity, substandard housing, transport violence and crime, were worse than ever before. The protestors are largely black South Africans, with inequality in South Africa driven by two income gaps: between the multiracial upper class and everyone else; and between a middle class of mostly urban, black and white, employed workers and a marginalized class of black unemployed and rural poor (Nattrass and Seekings, 2001). Given the history of apartheid, there is strong correlation between race and household income, with high levels of interracial and intraracial inequality (Nattrass and Seekings, 2001). There has been little racial integration in South Africa and South Africans continue to inhabit social worlds largely defined by race, and which is deeply unequal, in terms of the distribution of income and opportunities (Seekings, 2008).

Alexander (2010, p. 32) writes that it would be "an oversimplification to explain the protests in terms of poverty as many of the poorest parts of the country, notably the rural areas, have been free of protests; and, to the contrary, there has been considerable unrest in Gauteng province, where services tend to be better than elsewhere in the country". The reasons for the protests, and their framing as being simply about service delivery, have thus been contested. Paradoxically, many of these protests have occurred in impoverished settlements where some services had been delivered (Tsheola 2012). Some individuals believe that the protests are politically motivated, as attempts by political factions to destabilize government, but there has been no evidence of this. However, political analyst Dale McKinley believes that in some cases intra-party conflict within the ANC has been manifest as service delivery protests, and that in some cases this has led to increased media coverage (personal communication, 29 May 2015; see also Von Holdt et al. 2011 for empirical research demonstrating this). In most cases, the community protests have been organized by social movements or have emerged as spontaneous community protests, and not under the banner of any specific political organisation. The spontaneous, organic nature of the protests seems to typify them as citizen-driven uprisings. Citizens are raising issues around housing and service provision and "attempting to exert political influence through the development of a collective, community voice, as distinct from formal local politics" (Alexander 2010, p. 37). The protests can be seen one strategy in what Brown (2015, p.61) refers to as 'repertoires of disruption' that citizens can make use of in order to 'enmesh notions of status into ongoing practices of empowerment and self-realisation' (Brown 2015, p.59) – in other words attempts to move beyond a notion of citizenship as a static indicator of status to a practice that gives meaning to political freedom. While there have been efforts to change the lives of South Africans for the better, this has not always been successful due to the legacies of history, specific policy choices, or malfunctioning systems; and by 2000 the pace, scope and quality of change was lagging, with the number of households

connected to the electricity grid or with access to potable water and refuse removal systems, severely lacking (Marais, 2011).

Insisting on a broader description of these protests than merely about service delivery is not to say that the protests are disconnected from citizens' experience of such deficient service delivery. The current South African government inherited service delivery backlogs from the apartheid era that disadvantaged millions of South Africans. Of 284 municipalities, 71% were unable to offer sanitary services to 60% of their residents, 64% failed to remove refuse from 60% of homes, 55% could not provide water for 60% of properties, 43% could not provide electricity for 60% of homes, and 41% could not provide housing for 60% of their residents (Mpehle 2012). Seeing these protests as community protests means that they are not *only* about the delivery of services, but express a deeper discontent with the fruits of democracy, more than twenty years after the end of apartheid. At the same time, the majority black population, while now having rights in the form of the vote, remain disenfranchised in terms of access to economic opportunity, and this, together with the failure of the new ANC government to deliver on campaign promises to provide jobs and housing, has resulted in growing discontent. The fact that communities take to the streets in an attempt to make their voices heard, raises questions about their ability to speak out in other forums, or the failure of other mechanisms – such as the media – to pay adequate attention to the plight of the majority poor citizens in the country. Alexander (2010, p. 30) notes that various protests around the country may not necessarily be connected, but that there is probably a 'demonstration effect' with activists in one area following events in another, mainly through media coverage. Different approaches to understanding the relationships between the poor and political actors like the state, capital and civil society have emerged in the literature, but points to a relationship between the post-apartheid state and its citizens that goes to the heart of the post-apartheid dispensation (Brown 2015, p.45-46).
Although service delivery has become the rallying point for protests, service delivery as such should therefore be seen as a manifestation of a deeper disillusionment with post-apartheid democracy. As Heller (2009) has pointed out, the establishment of formal democratic institutions in South Africa has not ensured that subaltern citizens have been able to impact on policymaking in the public sphere. The protests should therefore be seen, at least in part, as an attempt by marginalized citizens to make their voices heard. The media coverage of these actions would be of great importance, as it could either amplify the voices of those citizens who have been left on the margins of the public sphere, or further silence them by portraying their protests as illegitimate or undemocratic. At issue is also what kinds of political actions are considered as legitimate by the media and the government. Is it only 'rational deliberation' in the Habermasian sense, or is the language of emotion, outrage and activism also recognized as political speech? For the latter to be the case, a transformative approach to politics (Dobson 2014, p. 167) would have to be adopted by the media, within which acts of protest and disruption would be considered legitimate forms of political activity that have the potential to enable action on the part of the state (Brown 2015, p.19). Such an approach would recognize the power relations inherent in institutional political engagement and seek to listen beyond expressions that are considered forms of rational deliberation to include also those voices that may sound irrational or passionate (Bickford 2011, p.1025).

For some critics, the media itself contributes to the bifurcation of post-apartheid society between those citizens that have access to platforms where they can voice their concerns and influence policy-making, and those that remain excluded from the public sphere (see Wasserman and Garman 2012 for further discussion). Sparks (2011), for instance, compares South Africa to other transitional democracies when he states that only economic and political elites were empowered through democratisation, but not ordinary citizens and their organisations. He takes issue with teleological theories of "transitology" (Sparks 2011, p. 6) that transpose the role that media play in established liberal-democratic democracies to new democracies such as South Africa. Sparks points out that in many emerging democracies, including South Africa, renewal and transformation have gone hand in hand with a continued focus on elite audiences and a high degree of elite continuity in media institutions. The position of the media within the democratic transition in South Africa has given rise to many normative debates about what the ideal role should be for the media to play in the deepening of post-apartheid South African democracy. These debates included views on the media's role in supporting "development" and the "nation-building" state. Protests pertaining to the nature of the democratic settlement in South Africa and the persistent exclusions of subalterns from the public sphere can be are characterised as 'democratisation conflicts' similar to those that have arisen in other transitional democracies. The focus of this article falls specifically on violent protests, where participants engaged in physical acts, which either caused physical harm or could result in this. This included events where protesters burned down buildings, looted shops, threw rocks at motorists, burned tyres to block roads, and so on. The conflict event is thus ongoing, from 2004 through to the present. Dale McKinley points out that there is data to show that only a minority of protests in South Africa have been violent, but that the media coverage has been dominated by those few protests that have been violent (personal communication, 29 May 2015). This raises issues of a symbiosis between the protests and media coverage, with the latter frequently shaping the form that protests take on. The further question arises whether protests might be conducted to include acts of conflict or violence in an attempt to gain media attention, given that conflict is a key news value[1].

By using the term 'community protests' to refer to the range of civil uprisings, the paper thus acknowledges that the protests are about more than just delivery of services, but are more deeply rooted in inequality and general socio-economic discontent and citizens' sense that government is not hearing or responding to their plight. The protests were staged by organic formations of individual citizens as well as by a range of community-based organisations and social movements. The community protests include service delivery protests but also other public protests such as those orchestrated by farm workers and mineworkers over wage disputes, as well as the so-called 'poo protests' in which township residents dumped human faeces on the steps of the Western Cape legislature and at Cape Town International Airport during 2013 to protest a perceived lack of attention to the needs of the poor (including

[1] The concept of news values refers to the classic study by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and since then developed by others such as Schulz (1982) to refer to the factors that journalists use to decide what events are 'newsworthy' and determine their selection of news. The 12 factors identified by Galtung and Ruge are: Frequency, Threshold, Unambiguity, Meaningfulness, Consonance, Unexpectedness, Continuity, Composition, Reference to Elite Nations, Reference to Elite People, Reference to Persons, Reference to Something Negative (see O'Neill and Harcup 2009).

poor service delivery). As Jain (2010) argues, 'a more expansive definition of community protests would be helpful in comprehensively capturing and studying the phenomenon of civil unrest in South African communities'.

Since the media are considered the most important source of information about politics for most people, they can shape the dynamics of conflicts and the relative success of conflict parties (Vladišavljević 2015, p. 2). Which conflicts the media report on, which ones are ignored and how conflicts are represented, can have a profound impact on the outcome of conflicts (Vladišavljević 2015, p. 2). For these reasons, this paper seeks to establish how the South African print media reported on community conflicts. Although all news media have a role to play in democratization conflicts, newspapers in South Africa continue to have a powerful agenda-setting function because of their elite status. Politicians and the government take newspapers seriously because they speak to elites - to the extent that they display a middle-class bias that initially showed little interest in the grassroots community uprisings (Friedman 2011).

The way media frame these protests is of great importance for the way the media's contribution to the deepening of the post-apartheid public sphere is assessed. In the xenophobic conflicts that have erupted regularly in recent years, the South African media has also failed to publicise warnings by academics and civil society which could have averted or lessened these conflicts (Brown 2015, p.70). The question could also be asked whether media coverage of community protests serve to escalate violent conflict or contribute to peaceful engagement. To describe protestors as uprisings by unruly mobs, for instance, would relegate them to the realm of the irrational and delegitimize them as attempts by citizens to participate meaningfully in democratic deliberation (see Wasserman and Garman 2014). The label 'service delivery protests' often used by the media has the potential to undermine the ability of media audiences to gain an understanding of the wider context of these protests and to engage in the debates about what they mean for the post-apartheid democratic dispensation. The regularity with which protests take place has caused them to cease satisfying the news value of 'unexpectedness' (Harcup and O'Neill 2009, p. 164) and therefore they are often relegated to the status of traffic reports on radio news bulletins - listeners are told which barricaded roads to avoid instead of informing them what the protests were about. This bland and matter-of-factly reporting of protests not only demonstrates the perspective from which most mainstream media observe these events (what Friedman [2011] called a 'view from the suburbs'), but also renders of protesters as voiceless and unable or unwilling to engage in constructive debate. The protests could, in contrast, also be an expression of the frustration of citizens who feel that they have 'a vote but not a voice' and 'are talked about but do not speak' (Friedman 2013).

The central question this paper seeks to address is how South Africa's mainstream print media report on these community protests, and what this reporting tells us about the media's view of post-apartheid democracy.

This paper is part of a major study on media representations of democratization conflicts. Within the context of South Africa, the paper is interested in the ways in which the citizens' struggles for access and participation in a highly unequal society

emerging from an authoritarian past find expression in the media. As Marais (2011) notes:

> A wealthy country by continental standards, South Africa is also one of the most unequal societies on Earth. It has more luxury car dealers than any country outside the industrialised North, yet almost half of its population lives in poverty and more than a third cannot find waged work. An average assistant manager punching the clock in the service sector would need to work more than 102 years to earn the average annual salary of a corporate CEO and 520 years to match the take-home salary and bonuses that the top paid banking-industry executive earned in 2009 (p. 7)

Although it is problematic to draw a simple cause-effect connection between inequality and conflicts, research in South Africa and other countries suggests that these conditions of poverty and inequality are fertile ground for conflict. [Reference].As noted above, how the media frames these conflicts and struggles by citizens is of importance, not least because it serves as an indicator of the role that the media play in a given society.

This paper uses media framing and framing analysis as theoretical point of departure. Broadly defined, framing refers to the ways in which media interpret, report and explain events and processes. As Norris, Kern & Just (2003), observe, the essence of framing is "selection to prioritise some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events" (p.11). Selection and salience are key components of framing. Entman (1993) argues that, by giving salience to aspects of perceived reality, framing seeks to promote "a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 53).
According to Gitlin, frames are composed of "little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (1980:6).

What is clear is that media framing is neither a neutral nor value-free phenomenon. In the South African context, the mainstream print media are highly commercialized, and therefore largely driven primarily by the imperative to generate profit. In chasing after higher Living Standard Measure (LSM) categories, the mainstream media often have to package their news in frames that speak to whims and caprices of wealthy audiences. The emergence of commercial tabloid media have to some extent provided different perspectives on news and politics, as these are experienced by mostly black working class audiences (Wasserman 2010). In cases that involve democratization conflicts, as covered in this paper, the commercial media are likely to frame these from the perspective of their targeted elite audiences, raising the question of whether the media are not negating their traditional normative roles as the 'fourth estate' in pursuit of commercial gain.

Methodology

This article is based on a quantitative content analysis of 251 news stories drawn from four newspapers: *Business Day*, *Mail and Guardian*, the *New Age* and the *Daily Sun*. The sample of newspapers was intended to reflect a range of South African dailies, weeklies and tabloids, thus reflecting the range of newspaper types on offer as well as the range of constituencies these newspapers target as readers. Although non-

commercial community print media may provide alternative accounts, this study focuses on commercial print media which have a larger influence on political agendas and debates. This can be surmised from the attacks by the government that have been aimed largely as the commercial print media, implying that these are the publications that government take seriously and influence policy decisions (see Ndlovu 2015), despite lacking resonance with the lives of many ordinary people (Garman and Malila 2016)

The newspapers were thus selected as a fairly representative sample of South African mainstream commercial print media – *Business Day* and *Mail and Guardian* as newspapers catering to more elite readers and perhaps more critical of government; The *New Age* as representative of a print media outlet perceived as pro-government due to its ownership structure, the *Daily Sun* tabloid newspaper, catering to a working class audience with a much lower LSM.

In terms of ownership, two of the selected newspapers are part of large conglomerates, while the other two are owned by smaller groups. The tabloid *Daily Sun* is part of Media24 a subsidiary of Naspers, the biggest listed media company in Africa, with interests both on the continent as well as in China and Europe. *Business Day* is part of the Times Media (Limited) group, another of South Africa's dominant 'big four' media companies (the other three are Media24, Caxton CTP and Independent Media Group). The paper's parent company owns several other newspapers, including the *Sunday Times,* the country's biggest weekly, and has interests in sectors that include gaming, entertainment, hotels, etc.

Of the four selected publications, the *Mail and Guardian* stands out as a critical, 'independent' publication with a strong investigative journalism pedigree, launched as an 'alternative' paper in the 1980s during the Apartheid era, and continuing with its critical tradition well into democratic South Africa. Owned by entrepreneur Trevor Ncube, the paper has in the recent past struggled with funding in the context of declining economics of newspaper publishing. The *New Age,* on the other hand, is a recent publication (launched in 2010), which is owned by the Gupta family. Although the New Age is the only daily newspaper owned by the Guptas, it is part of a vast assortment of businesses that stretch from mining, computing, aviation, among others (see for example, http://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-07-the-beginners-guide-to-the-guptas). The paper is generally supportive of the ANC government under President Jacob Zuma, and enjoys generous advertising support from both central and local government departments despite having very limited circulation. The Gupta family is generally considered to be very close friends of the president, and is even rumoured to wield an influence over key political decisions (see e.g. Thamm 2016). Although the *New Age* is a commercially-owned newspaper, it could also be seen as the closest mainstream print media (apart from the government's own publication *Vuk'uzenzele*) comes to a state-oriented publication.

Content analysis has traditionally been used as a quantitative method allowing researchers to look across a large number of texts and involving "counting and measuring quantities of items such as words, phrases or images" (Hesmondhalgh 2006, p. 120). The chosen methodology of content analysis was thus appropriate to get a broad sense of the type of reporting found in the selected newspapers.

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.

After several detailed discussions of the variables and revisions of the codebook, coding was conducted by four coders. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using a sample of 50 stories. 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 Kalpha= .701. This notwithstanding, they still fell within the 'good' category (where Kalpha = .800 and above is considered 'very good', Kalpha= .700 and above 'good', and Kalpha= .667 considered minimal) (Krippendoff, 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. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the final coded data. Data analysis included statistics appropriate for nominal-level data.

Results

Most stories on community protests appeared in the political section of the newspaper, thus not always on the front page of the newspaper – 68.5% of stories appeared with medium salience (i.e. within the main section of the newspaper). With respect to the main voices quoted in the stories, most (72%) quoted a male voice/source first. In terms of reporting the causes of the conflict, 88.8% of the stories attributed the service delivery conflict to the prevailing political culture, with economic causes as the second most cited cause (79.9%). [See table 1]. The highest number of stories (35.1%) on service delivery was found in the tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Sun*.

It could be argued that the presence of the majority of the stories in the political section of the newspapers is indicative of the fact that community protests are no longer 'front page news'. Instead they are to be found within the newspaper, almost as a matter of routine. This kind of salience can create a hierarchy of importance, with community protests no longer at the top of the agenda. Issue salience has been a key aspect of agenda-setting theory, with researchers showing how media emphasis on specific political issues raises their salience in public opinion (McCombs and Shaw 1972).

While a larger number of stories were to be expected from a daily newspaper in comparison to the weeklies, it is of particular interest that the *Daily Sun* appeared to give more coverage to the protests. This tabloid is the most read newspaper in the country, despite critiques of tabloid journalism as being sensationalist and focused on

entertainment rather than news values. This gives value to supporters of tabloids who argue that tabloid media articulate the politics of the everyday for those readers for whom formal politics are often far removed from their lived experience (Wasserman 2010).

Cause of conflict	Percentage of articles that reported this as a cause of conflict
Political culture	88.8%
Economic	79.7%
Political institutions	70.9%
Judicial	34.3%
Identities	3.2%
International	1.2%

Table 1: Media coverage of service delivery protests and attribution of causes of the conflict

In terms of media coverage of the main actors involved in the conflict i.e. citizens, the newspapers under study most often reported on them as being action-oriented, with 79.4% of stories in the sample commenting on the violent nature of the protests. There was some variation in how each newspaper covered the conflict, with the *Mail and Guardian* portraying the most negative evaluation (see table 2 below). The *Daily Sun* portrayed the protesters most positively, followed by *Business Day* and *New Age*. Moreover, the *Mail and Guardian* described the protesters negatively, frequently referring to their incompetence, while interestingly, *Business Day* described them as principled. Given the above analysis, it is not surprising that the tabloid newspaper covered protesters positively, as their focus is on grassroots citizen focused news. The *Mail and Guardian*, targeting a more middle-class audience, would thus be more critical.

Media Outlet	N	Evaluation (standard deviation)
Business Day	49	2.88 (.781)
Daily Sun	86	2.09 (1.164)
Mail and Guardian	39	4.03 (.843)
New Age	65	2.94 (1.074)

Note: The points on the five-point scale were: 1 – Strongly positive, 2 – positive, 3 – balanced, 4 – negative, 5 – Strongly

Table 2. Differential media coverage of the service delivery protests

Most of the articles in the sample (90.8%) referred to perceptions of democracy, more specifically the role of institutions in democracy, with most (89.9%) focusing on the role of governance. The second most frequently reported aspect of democracy was its role in society (85.7%), with the majority of stories (56.3%) referring to the role of the economy in democracy. Most stories (83.7%) also referred to how democracy related to the individual, with 55% referring to issues of citizenship, including participation, voice, and empowerment.

Perceptions of democracy were evaluated on a 5-point scale as follows: 1-srongly positive, 2- positive, 3- mixed, 4- negative and 5- strongly negative. The media's perception of democracy was quite low, with the perception of the role of institutions 3.94 and the sub-variable governance, which included representation, accountability and efficiency represented in most cases, with a negative mean perception of governance (3.96). Perceptions of democracy and how these relate to citizens were mixed, though most cases within this category referred to citizenship. In terms of the evaluation of democracy with respect to society, there was a general negative trend, and most stories (114 of 192 in this category) evaluated democracy with regard to economic factors.

Different media outlets portrayed democracy differently. On average, the *Daily Sun* portrayed democracy in South Africa negatively (4.05) compared to the other three media outlets whose average evaluation of democracy was mixed with average evaluations around 3.5. These averages represent the average evaluation of the three democratic variables: Institutions, Individuals and Society**.** Institutional aspects of democracy were rated the most negatively by the *Daily Sun* (4.45), but received mixed portrayals from *Mail and Guardian*, *Business Day* and *New Age* with scores of 3.97, 3.65 and 3.61 respectively. Individuals aspects of democracy were portrayed in roughly the same way across all four media outlets with scores ranging from 3.23 – 3.40. However, the societal aspects of democracy were portrayed the most negatively by the *Daily Sun* (4.29), followed by the *Business Day*, *New Age* and *Mail and Guardian* with scores of 3.79, 3.59 and 3.44 respectively. Overall, it appears that the *Daily Sun* was the most critical of the aspects of democracy. See table 3 below.

Media Outlet	**Perception of democracy**	**N**	**Evaluation (standard deviation)**
Business Day	Institutions	54	3.65 (.71)
	Individuals	53	3.36 (.81)
	Society	43	3.79 (.64)
	Average		3.6
Daily Sun	Institutions	67	4.45 (.93)
	Individuals	57	3.40 (1.33)
	Society	55	4.29 (.98)
	Average		4.05
Mail and Guardian	Institutions	36	3.97 (.70)
	Individuals	35	3.29 (.79)
	Society	36	3.44 (.70)
	Average		3.56
New Age	Institutions	62	3.61 (.75)
	Individuals	61	3.23 (.78)
	Society	58	3.59 (.73)
	Average		3.48

Note: The points on the five-point scale were: 1 – Strongly positive, 2 – positive, 3 – balanced, 4 – negative, 5 – Strongly negative.

Table 3. Differential media coverage of the service delivery protests

Conclusion

The rise of community protests in South Africa is an important part of social and economic transition. It is symbolic of a new era of political struggle in South Africa, with the vast majority of the population no longer swept away by the romantic notion of a democratic government with the former liberation movement as the ruling political party. These uprisings in South Africa are transforming the political landscape and have drawn attention to the fragile nature of the hard won democracy, particularly since cleavages of class still follow racial fault lines of the old apartheid regime. The increased importance of civil society in driving the protests is creating the opportunity for stronger opposition to the ruling party and is also deepening the democratic debate. Socio-economic and political discontent cannot be disentangled in this conflict case, which is causing widespread instability in the South African political landscape. The increasing discontent with corruption implicating the ruling party contributes to ongoing public displays of disaffection and disillusionment**.** The community protests represent a form of bottom up resistance, which raise issues of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, the political realm is shaped by media coverage of the protests – when the media focuses only on violent protests, or frames protests as nothing more than a traffic disturbance – it shapes the nature of how these groups are given voice in mainstream media.

This study, though limited in scope suggests that the protest paradigm that emerges in print media coverage of international conflicts, is also prevalent in the South African context. Moreover, it suggests that mainstream print media largely mutes the voices of citizens on the margins of the public sphere, and that the language of emotion and activism (is often not recognized as legitimate political speech.

This finding can be related to the orientation of the mainstream commercial media towards a liberal-democratic normative model of the media's role. This orientation sees the media's role primarily as a 'watchdog' of democracy, to keep government accountable and to criticise abuses of power. As in other new democracies, this orthodox view can also in South Africa hold the potential to aggravate tensions and conflicts, as it tends to privilege the voices of those who already have access to mediated communication and who are therefore in a position to set the agenda for the media's attacks on government (Voltmer 2006). Our analysis confirm the criticisms of the assumption that the South African media necessarily contributes democratic deepening. The largely one-dimensional coverage of community protests by the mainstream media, and their marginalisation of the voices of the poor, reinforces Friedman's (2011) point that the South African commercial media favour the perspectives of an elite. A civil society organisation like the Right2Know campaign (www.r2k.org.za) has arguably done much more to educate citizens and grassroots communities about their right to protest, create awareness about state surveillance and raise support for media freedom than the mainstream media has. Media that prioritise profit-seeking among elite audiences can further widen social and political rifts between the haves and the have-notes. E Alternative media spaces are opening up, mostly online, where alternative perspectives are starting to be heard (for instance the online investigative and analytical publications such *Groundup*, *Daily Vox* and *The*

Con). The South African mainstream print media need to adopt new strategies to listen to the voices of the poor and the marginalised, to move beyond issues of immediate concern to their target market, and to represent a wider range of viewpoints if they want to claim a continued role in the deepening of post-apartheid democracy.

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