How Good is the South African Media for Democracy?
Mapping the South African Public Sphere after Apartheid.

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Abstract

Most recent surveys of South African media are positive about the changes since the end of apartheid. These include: the media's protection by the country's Constitution, freedom to criticize government, unprecedented access to state-held information, the breaking of the state's monopoly over broadcasting, and diversification of commercial print media with the introduction of new titles and changes in the until-now exclusive racial ownership patterns. However, a closer look at these developments suggests that they are really not that far-reaching or have not led to the expected greater representation and the expected positive effects on democratic participation. In fact, the state-sponsored or market-led changes, while on the one hand, introducing much needed and long overdue changes have on the whole not resulted in the expected opening up of the media. My paper engages with a blind spot in much of the current writing by media scholars in South Africa as to the failures or difficulties of these reforms and suggests that the 'defects' in the make-up of the media industry must be understood in terms of the neo-liberal content of the political and economic transition and the dominance of a restricted liberal 'rights-based' political rhetoric, which have permeated the content as well as institutions of the public sphere.

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Introduction

There is ample reason to be upbeat about the transformation of South African media.[2] In fact, most surveys are positive about the wholesale and quite remarkable changes in the media environment since the end of apartheid (cf. Horwitz 2000; Berger 1999: 113). The most important of these are: the media's protection by the country's Constitution (Republic of South Africa 2000), freedom to criticize the government, unprecedented access to state-held information, the breaking of the state's monopoly over broadcasting, and diversification of commercial print media with the introduction of new titles as well as changes in the until-now exclusive racially based ownership patterns. Even the Internet, relatively underdeveloped up to now, presents new possibilities (Wasserman 2001).[3]

However, a closer look at these developments suggests that they are really not that far-reaching and have not led to the expected greater representation or the expected positive effects on democratic participation. In fact, the state-sponsored or market-led changes, while in some ways introducing much needed and long overdue changes, have on the whole not resulted in the expected opening up of the media. This chapter therefore engages with a blind spot in much of the current writing by media scholars in South Africa as to the failures or difficulties of these changes. It suggests that the 'defects' in the make-up of the media industry must be understood in terms of the neo-liberal content of the political and economic transition and the dominance of a restricted liberal 'rights-based' political rhetoric, which have permeated the content as well as institutions of public debates into major policy and political issues. .

The Transformation in the Media

At the core of the improved legal context for media is the 1996 Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression and information to all South Africans. The Promotion of Access to Information Act passed in 2000 entrenches the right to access to

(government) information. The Independent Broadcasting Authority Act of 1993 mandated the setting up of a broadcast regulator that had the result of breaking up the state monopoly over broadcast media. As a result the first private, free-to-air terrestrial television station e-tv, was introduced in 1999. The introduction of e-tv also broke the public broadcaster's (the South African Broadcasting Corporation or SABC) monopoly over news broadcasts. Since 1993 the IBA licensed more than 120 community radio stations and the number of privately-owned, commercial radio stations grew from one to twelve. The Broadcasting Act passed in 1999 reinforced the independence of the public broadcaster and for an end to its existence as a state broadcaster as opposed to the more desired public broadcaster. The new law sets objectives (monitored by national parliament) with regards to programming and responsibilities around news and public affairs programming. Another important aspect of government policy was the installation of the Government Communications Information Systems (GCIS) in 1998. The GCIS has a mandate based on section 16 of the Bill of Rights to communicate on behalf of the government to those not reached by the public or private broadcasters or the printed press (Republic of South Africa 2000).

Ownership changes did not only impact broadcast media. The five corporations, all-white monopoly of the commercial print media has since been re-organized to now include one foreign-owned group, one print media group majority-owned by a black investment corporation, and another partly owned by a black-controlled corporation (and a foreign partner). Ownership changes had a domino effect in how well the staff of media organizations reflects the demographics of the country. Before 1994 the majority of the South African population was hardly or not all represented in the media. Staffing figures showed mainly white males working in newsrooms. After 1994, staffing figures started to change and more black and female journalists, editors and managers were appointed. With the human resource changes came new debates over media values. Two general positions emerged: one a 'constructive', developmental, and more sympathetic approach favored by the new government and its allies in the media (see Horwitz 2000) and a watchdog, oppositional approach to the media on the other, favored by media professionals and the political opposition (Horwitz 2000). One final consequence has been the broadening of media audiences to incorporate more black viewers, listeners and

readers. In addition, the government set up a Media Diversity and Development Agency, with the assistance of the privately-owned press, to assist small and medium-size publications and to break the racial stranglehold on print media.

Analyses of the pattern of press ownership indicate that even though there has been a diversification or de-racialization of ownership from five major corporations in the past to six groups in the present, it has had limited effects on democratizing the public sphere (Krabill and Boloka 2000). The structure of the print media - circulation, distribution networks, the price structure and advertising – is, some minor changes aside, all aimed at retaining the racialized (white) readership. That has manifested itself in the failure of new black-owned and black-run print media as well as state-supported initiatives to get off the ground in the industry. Probably the most depressing case is the slow demise of community radio – which at its height counted 120 stations, but even optimistic assessments indicate that not more than 50 stations are functioning properly or have sufficient financial back-up to survive. This suggests that the question of de-racialization of the print media - while key to democratizing the media in South Africa - does not solely lie with ownership, but equally with the nature of the structure: that is, publishing and printing and other factors rose above. [4] As critics like Krabill and Boloka (2000) and scholars such as Horwitz (2000) note, what has changed essentially is the colour of the monopolies, with no major transformation in the manner in which the media houses operate. Print media corporations are still driven largely by profit motives and, significantly, by a liberal ethic. Print media owners, unlike the broadcast media, have so far been successful in resisting any state regulation in dealing with skewed ownership patterns. Politically influential, they view any regulation as equal to state interference and the government has been aware of the impact of any state regulation talk on the health of the economy (Republic of South Africa 2000).[5] In terms of employment practices, a recent UNESCO-funded study of affirmative action in the media shows that both female and black South Africans are still underrepresented, particularly in the top levels of the media (cited in Krabill and Boloka 2000: 67).

It may appear as though the picture in broadcast media looks much better. The fact that broadcast reform was largely state-led had a lot to do with such an optimistic view. However, as is the case in broadcasting elsewhere, the new Government has downscaled

direct state support in the form of subsidies to the public broadcaster, instead encouraging it to become self-sufficient. In effect, the state now encourages the public broadcaster to fund its programming largely through advertising. In television, the results have been major cuts in programming, and its replacement with infomercials, rebroadcasts of cheap imported programs, and a re-racializing of the audience into 'market' segments that coincide with the racial divide and the emerging class divisions within the majority black population. The radio stations sold off by the SABC to new private owners have to compete for advertising; the result is that programming suffers and there is no incentive for these radio stations to appeal to poor people who are unattractive to advertisers. Community radio stations - punted as the solution to the problem of reaching and representing communities who are not attractive to advertisers or to carry content not driven by the primary purpose of providing audiences for advertisers – struggle as their main sources of financing (state subsidies and foreign donors) are not as forthcoming as before.

Supporters of the "transformation" process – as it understood in mainstream terms - often decry their critics for 'playing the race card' (as Guy Berger [1999: 104] does when he disparagingly referred to President Mandela and other 'left-wing critics'). To claim that there has been mammoth change in South African media in the first five years of the country's democracy, depends more on the deplorable state of the media under apartheid than the current state of true transformation (Krabill and Boloka 2000: 85). Krabill and Boloka point out that even the market-sponsored reforms were not spontaneous, but took place against the background of possible sanctions by the state and through state enforcement of affirmative action, black economic empowerment, as well as employment equity policies. In short, the promise of democracy promised by media changes is not materializing.

The 'Neo-Liberal' Transition

The problems of the public sphere, and specifically the media environment, must be located in an examination of broader political and economic processes. This implies challenging the dominant interpretations of the South African transition and arriving at a

more radical reading of that transition. I also argue that the domination of an impoverished liberal rights rhetoric in policy and political debates cripples empirical work that wants to engage with this dilemma.

The transition to democracy in the early 1990s was part of a tremendous global democratic expansion of liberal democracy. Indeed, liberal democracy has been put forward as the global panacea for securing order and stability in fragile and deeply divided societies. As both John Saul and Heinz Klug points out separately: this limited form of democracy shows 'concern for the sensibilities of capital' by deflating the state and limiting the scope of democratic gains to the political sphere (Saul 1999; Klug 2000).

The worldwide democratization movement was also accompanied by the universalization of a conception of human rights and democratic constitutionalism as a legal process that sets definite limits on the exercise of political power. This has profound effects on the content and parameters of democratic debates. As South African constitutional scholar Heinz Klug has argued: 'One hallmark of this process of democratization was the formal adoption of bills of rights as the essential marker of constitutional change in the emergence of each new democratic regime' (Klug 2000: 1). This embrace of human rights and constitutionalism forms the core of a growing international political culture fashioned out of the political hegemony gained by the collapse of state socialism at the end of the Cold War and framed within the liberal paradigm of individual human rights and multiparty democracy.

This liberal (neo-liberal) constitution-making framework emphasizes not only the rule of law, requiring an independent judiciary with powers of judicial review, but also demands a constitutionalization of many other institutions and areas of governance as a means to limit the destabilizing impact of politics. In this way, competing interests and political agendas are resolved or reconciled through technical-legal means rather than political means (Johnson 2000). The tremendous breadth of this 'third wave' of democratization has led most scholars of democratic transitions to assert the universality of democratic principles and human rights and their basic compatibility with diverse religious and cultural traditions.

More critical scholars have correctly pointed out that in fact what has become hegemonic in international political culture and discourse after the Cold War is in fact a particular brand of democracy, and specific conception of rights fashioned by the West (Saul 1999). In the post-Cold War era, the recent democracy and rights discourse has been heavily influenced by neo-liberalism with its emphasis on individual rights and a shrinking of the state. The post-Second World War response to the violation of human rights produced a movement that could insist on the recognition and promotion of human rights through a social democratic state and international and domestic institutions, and emphasised the claims of the democratic collectivity. In contrast, in the post-cold war era, the rights discourse has emphasized individual freedom and property rights, and has sought to limit the powers of the state (Klug 2000). Whereas the dominant liberal democratic tradition historically emphasised both liberty and equality, in its neo-liberal guise the struggle for equality has been almost entirely replaced with a struggle for individual freedom and liberty. The emphasis on human rights displaces the discourse on power with that on individual rights.. Apartheid has been dismantled and the agenda for human rights realized in South Africa without transfer of economic power from the minority to the majority.

Democratization has become the 'common sense' explanation of the new politico-economic realities in South Africa, among journalists and politicians, in both popular surveys and in autobiographical accounts (cf. Mandela 1995; Sparks 1996; Waldmeir 1998; De Klerk 1999). The majority of such accounts identify a 'dual transition' - that is at the political level a remarkable transition from an authoritarian, racial state to some form of liberal democracy, underscored by one-person one vote; and at the economic level, a transition from a highly contained and unmanageable apartheid economy to one based on free market principles. The proponents of the second level of the transition favour a market-friendly economic transition and talk about redistribution through growth and the expected returns accruing from South Africa's participation in world markets.

Such accounts are usually optimistic about the changes and prospects for post-apartheid South Africa (though sometimes guardedly) and take the connection between the two transitions for granted. Many accounts of the 'liberalization' as well as the 'consolidation' phase of the transition liken it to a 'miracle'.[6] They highlight the consensus nature of the

transition and place a heavy emphasis on the idea of political compromise. More importantly, they credit the key role of individuals in the African National Congress (particularly Nelson Mandela) and the former apartheid government (then-President FW de Klerk) in ensuring a 'smooth transition' (cf. Sparks 1996; Waldmeir 1998).[7]

Embedded within these analyses is a narrative that infers a 'win-win' outcome for the major social forces in South Africa: organized labour, business and the major political representative movements that dominated South African politics throughout the last half-century (the National Party and the African National Congress and the social, economic and racial constituencies organized around it or allied to it). The logic is that agreements between three social partners will result in collective gains.

While the impact of the changes in South Africa cannot be minimized, nor the fact that despite the presence of major, disruptive political violence democracy was ushered in on 27 April 1994, the accounts above do not do justice to the nature of the transition.[8]

More recently, a challenge has emerged to the academic mainstream that debunks the myth of a mutually advantageous political and economic settlement and which critically assesses the workings of post-apartheid democracy. This critique derives largely from among left academics in the South African academia as well as in non-governmental research institutes closely tied to organised labour and provides theoretical and research back-up to a nascent post-apartheid social movement that identify clear linkages between the negative effects of globalization and local processes that deepen social and economic inequalities. One of its proponents has described this critique of the transition as a 'radical-analytical approach' (Bond 2000).

The main elements of this critique can be summarized into four points: (1) The much-vaunted political compromises concealed, and continue to conceal, substantive continuities with the past in social and economic power and policy orientations (this is its overarching critique). (2) At the core of the ongoing transition in South Africa is a neo-liberal political transition and at an economic level, the 'stabilization of capitalist relations' (Saul 2001). (3) Both the transition and post-apartheid politics are elite-driven. (4) The 'transformation' of South Africa's economic and political life has increasingly coincided with the constitution of new elites that largely recycle the old ones. This

includes actively encouraging the formation of a sizeable black middle class as a strategic necessity for ensuring stability, to ensure a stake in the de-racialized capitalist system for the new political elite and to act as a shock absorber between the black masses and the regime. [9]

Though these studies differ in the relative weight they give to different sets of actors or institutions/structures in explaining political change in South Africa, when read together, they provide a fuller and more realistic account of ongoing political change in post-apartheid South Africa.

Implications for Media

This analysis has important implications for the operation of media in post-apartheid South Africa and for the way we study the interaction between media and politics. It is also a critique of existing work within South African media studies and political science where no or little attempt is made to interrogate the link with political changes apart from the usual contextual statements in the introductory sections of such studies.

Obvious linkages between media developments and developments in the political arena and their implication for the operation of post-apartheid democracy in general, are still largely under-researched. While media scholars, with few exceptions, should be commended for their useful insights into the workings of the media system and the wealth of empirical data they create, their work inevitably suffers from a basic flaw: they either want to 'correct' the media system on the one hand, or on the other, look to deal with 'problems' or 'challenges' in the way communication systems operate within democracy. They set up analyses of problems/challenges within the South African media system against an idealized democratic political system.

As a result, proponents of such an approach fail to understand that these systems are not closed and that neither is the relationship between them a simple, causal one. At the core of their understanding of the political system is the liberal model. In the liberal model, the media is supposed to provide equal citizens with the information to participate in the political process. But the model cannot do that and should not be required to do that. It

should provide sites where citizens can engage in the political process. Instead, it has the effect of demobilizing people who are now reduced to participating mainly through elections (Pottie 2001) only and ends in a dialogue among elites with technical-legal debates over rights rather than the content of those rights.

Inequality in access to media and mainstream public discourse, the norm under apartheid, is thus reaffirmed under different conditions. However, it also has effects on the debate among the black majority and implications for the nature of their access to political life.

In the 1980s within the anti-apartheid, liberation context the dialogue on democracy was conducted between the ANC and the people organized under distinct, independent, politicised organizations, with an 'alternative media' of newspapers, and the emergence of portable video serving the racially oppressed (Switzer 2000; Tomaselli and Louw 1991). With the initiation of the negotiated transition to democracy in the early 1990s, this dialogue has shifted to being held between the ANC and representatives of white capital and the white bourgeoisie. As one observer notes, 'The irony is that the levels of involvement in political and civic issues were higher under the repressive machinery than under the new democratic dispensation' (Blake 1998: 45). The dialogue has thus been transformed from a material debate among the masses into a seemingly ideological (though no less material) debate among a political and economic elite. It is increasingly dominated by technical-legal questions of rights and individual freedoms with the result that ordinary people are largely by-passed by the debates and excluded from determining the nature of political and economic developments (Johnson 2000: 1). What has begun to emerge is an 'elite-pacted democracy'. Government becomes increasingly detached from the people and systematically aims to neutralize the scope and organizational capacity of popular movements (cf. Blake 1998).

The structure and operation of post-apartheid South African media both influences and is influenced by these changes in the public sphere. Prior to 1994, most forms of mass media held little or no legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of South Africans; however, many South Africans hoped for and granted greater legitimacy to media following the democratic elections. Yet mass media, the government and business share many of the same conservative views outlined above, particularly regarding socio-economic policy.

For example, the political leadership often attempts to remind media that they are on the same side of these debates, in spite of the press' claim on the title of fourth estate. Nelson Mandela, as early as 1992 (before he became President), was warning a senior journalist in an interview that ‘we are sitting on a time bomb...their enemy is now you and me, people who drive a car and have a house. its order, anything that relates to order [that's the target], and it's a very grave situation’ (Peet 2001). At other times, South African media could hardly be more enthusiastic for government's conservative economic agenda, which have thus far failed to live up to its promises of economic growth and job creation. The mainstream media often write in strident terms about popular opposition to these policies.

What does this tell us about the broader debate on democracy? Where it is taking place, between whom, and at what level? How good is the media for democracy? Abstract, ideological debates are attempting to maintain the status quo by replacing material debates on the substantive outcomes of democracy. The uproar among political and economic elite within news columns and on news bulletins over important ‘liberal democratic’ rights issues such as equality and freedom of expression (as it happened during the South African Human Rights Commission’s Inquiry into Racism in the Media) is ironically accompanied by a deafening silence on socio-economic rights, particularly as they affect the poor.

It has largely been left to ordinary citizens and grassroots organizations to push for socio-economic rights under the new democratic dispensation. Current popular struggles around issues such as privatization, housing, poverty and economic policy suggest that this could be the catalyst for a broader, more relevant discussion of democratic development and transformation in South Africa. Indications are that South Africa's poor majority is increasingly using their democratic citizenship, especially through the courts, to challenge non-delivery of services and public policies. If this trend continues, it will surely bring about a very different level of debate on which rights and whose rights are fundamental to democracy. It would also change where that debate is taking place.

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[1] This paper was written during a fellowship in the Fall of 2001 at the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies at the New School for Social Research, New York. Sean Jacobs is currently a doctoral student in politics at Birkbeck College, University of London.

[2] It is widely agreed that the health of democracy in the course of the twentieth century is linked to the health of systems of communication, though of course democracy cannot be reduced to issues of the media (cf. Habermas 1989; Rajagopal 2000; Dahlgren 1995). However, the dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of communication, and societal communication increasingly takes place within the mass media. Concern for democracy, therefore necessitates a concern about media.

[3] The Internet has great potential for the speedy dissemination of information by relatively independent organizations or even individuals. Entrance into the market is much easier. However, in South Africa access to the Internet is limited to a small group of wealthy people (most Internet users have access to the worldwide web from their offices). The majority of the people do not have enough money, equipment and education to access the Internet, so as a result the Internet is not (yet) an important disseminator of information.

[4] Steenveld (1998: 7) goes further in her critique of de-racialization of the print and broadcast media by arguing that the problem with the race essentialist view is that it attributes the cause of the problem to the color identity of the media, rather than to their economic foundation.

[5] This view influenced their approach to the SAHRC inquiry into racism in the media in 2000 (cf. Glaser 2000; Pityana 2000).

[6] In SA, liberalization roughly refers to the period between 1990 and 1994, and stretches from Nelson Mandela's release from prison through the constitutional negotiations that led to the first, all-race democratic elections in April 1994. The consolidation phase generally describe the period associated with 1994 to the present.

[7] Mandela retired as President in 1999 after serving only one term to be replaced by Thabo Mbeki, while De Klerk retired from party politics in late 1996. As a result, once Mandela and De Klerk left active politics, such analyses explain the successes or failures of the post-Mandela regime, to their absence from the political scene. The moral of the transition story is that South Africa was "fortunate" in having political leaders willing "to compromise away the dogmatic convictions of their followers". On the Afrikaner side, the heroes were FW de Klerk, who is said to have undergone "a spiritual leap" when he became leader of the National Party, and Constand Viljoen of white, rightwing Freedom Front, who was sensible enough to turn to parliamentary opposition after "the traumatic debacle of Mmabatho". On the African National Congress side, the compromisers were Nelson Mandela, whose objective remained no more and no less than majority rule, and Joe Slovo and the Communist Party, who are given "the lion's share of the credit" for sustaining the ANC's commitment to non-racialism (see Mamdani 1997).

[8] This is also the dominant account of the transition for observers from outside South Africa. Indeed, this perception has spawned a whole academic literature, including a growing industry of consultants, on conflict resolution and consensus building based on the South African experience. Specific examples? I am referring here of course to how the "lessons" from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been applied elsewhere and led to lucrative academic posts and prizes for the main personalities in that process. The same can be said for the constitution-building process and individuals and groups involved in violence monitoring, mediation and conflict resolution. Within the South African academia it has contributed to an

emphasis on the role of technocrats in explanations of ongoing change in South Africa. It also finds expression in approaches that favour corporatist explanations of post-apartheid South African politics of the three major players (the state, business and organized labor) locked into a set of agreements and co-managing the political change. Others, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs) characterize the post-apartheid policy sphere to a Dahl-like 'polyarchy' (cf. Dahl 1971) where interest groups of equal power vie for political space and by extension access to greater control over policy processes.

[9] In one of the better-known examples of this kind of critique, political scientist Dale McKinley (1999) focuses on the rise to prominence of a small neo-liberal clique within the ruling alliance - specifically the ruling party African National Congress - in determining the nature of key politico-strategic and economic policy. Development economist Patrick Bond (2000), points to the predominant role of domestic capital, particularly in determining the nature of macro-economic discourse (see also the work of US-based geographer Richard Peet [2001]). Political economist Hein Marais (1998) singles out a combination of inhibiting structural factors embedded in the politico-economic system coalescing with the actions of political and economic political elite. Finally, Canadian-based political economist John Saul (2001) in keeping with his large body of work on political and economic developments in SA, privileges the role of global forces intersecting with the actions of local actors. This approach to the South African transition comes with their shortcomings, though. They tend to be over-determinist in their analysis, and privileges a combination of structural factors and political actors that are as a rule held up as causes of political change; that is the ‘usual suspects’. Yet, apart from applying the more critical lens of political economy, they bring an innovative approach to understanding the nature of political change in South Africa. For example, in separate analyses, Bond and Peet - in their focuses on the interaction and collusion between business leaders and senior African National Congress politicians in the immediate periods before and after the 1994 election - provide important insights into the establishment of a hegemonic discourse on economic development that privileges the World Bank and local and international capital.