

## **Muting the voices of the protesters: News24's framing of the 2015 Malamulele service delivery protest in South Africa**

### **ABSTRACT**

The study interrogated *News24's* framing of the 2015 Malamulele service delivery protest in South Africa. The study sought to find out what frames were used, why they were chosen and with what effect. Twenty newspaper articles published by *News24* on the protest were purposively selected for inclusion in the study. The articles were analysed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Findings revealed that the reporters chose episodic frames which conformed with the protest paradigm and which depicted the protestors as violent, destructive, unreasonable and a threat to the economy of the local community and of the nation. The paper argues that the choice of sources and frames was largely informed by journalistic principles of news production and that this resulted in the voices of the protestors being stifled.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Service delivery protests have been a major defining feature of South Africa's democracy since 2004. After 2004, the number of service delivery protests rose annually, reaching record levels in 2009 and 2012 (Grant, 2014; Alexander, Runciman & Ngwane, 2014). According to Tapela (2013), service delivery-related social protests in South Africa had by then reached unprecedented levels. Statistics show that service delivery protests rose from 10 in 2004 to 191 in 2014 and fell slightly to 164 in 2015 (Municipal IQ, 2016). A total of 918 service delivery protests were recorded from 2004 to 2014, and 813 of these were between 2009 and 2014. Because of this unprecedented number of protests, South Africa has earned the notoriety of being labelled the protest capital of the world (Runciman, 2017).

In democratic societies such as South Africa, service delivery protests play a crucial role in amplifying the voices of citizens as they seek to recover and protect their rights. According to Cottle (2008), demonstrations and protests have played a crucial role in the development of democracy throughout history. Condoleezza Rice, the former Secretary of State of the United States of America, concurs when she agrees that people have a right to protest and that it is

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through protests that democracy thrives in a state (see Jefferson, 2006). At the core of each protest movement are grievances such as illegitimate inequalities, feelings of deprivation, feelings of injustice and moral indignation about the state of affairs, meaning that, to a certain extent, protesters have legitimate reasons for striking out against those who stand in the way of their attempts to reclaim their rights (Stekelenburg, 2015). Thus, the goal of protest movements is to effect some sort of change to achieve the desired social conditions (Freelon, 2016).

One such protest, which is the subject of this paper, took place in January 2015 when residents of Malamulele, a small rural town in Limpopo Province, South Africa, embarked on a seven-week service delivery protest. The protesters demanded that government should give them their own municipality, separate from Thulamela Local Municipality, which they claimed was side-lining them in the provision of service delivery (Tau, 2015). Residents claimed that Thulamela Municipality was disregarding areas dominated by Xitsonga-speaking people in favour of areas which are predominantly Tshivenda-speaking. The protest led to the closure of businesses and schools in and around Malamulele, resulting in some learners who reside in Malamulele failing to write their Matric supplementary exams (Tau, 2015).

So great was the level of protest that it received wide coverage from prominent media in South Africa such as *Drum Digital*, *eNCA*, *The Mail & Guardian*, *News24* and *The Citizen*. This was not surprising because, as Smith et al. (2001) point out, most social movements aim at drawing the attention of the mass media to amplify the impact of their protests and to shape public opinion in the protesters' favour. Media coverage of service delivery protests is vital because it is only through the media that the public comes to know about the protests and the issues surrounding them (Stekelenburg, 2015; see Municipal IQ, 2016, 2014; Mottiar & Bond, 2011; Cottle, 2008; Mander, 1999). It is also through the media that protesters gain or lose support and legitimacy for their actions (Cottle, 2008). This raises the question: How effective is the mass media in representing the aims and concerns of the protesters?

Using the Malamulele service delivery protest as a case study, this paper interrogates the way *News24*, framed the protesters and their grievances. The choice of *News24* was informed by the fact that it is not only South Africa's largest digital publisher, which covers both local and international news, but it is also owned by the biggest media house in South Africa, Naspers. Naspers is a broad-based concentrated multinational internet and media house whose global reach extends to 130 countries in the world (Naspers website, <http://www.naspers.com/about>). It was founded in 1915 to promote Afrikaner nationalism and later became a vehicle for apartheid and a propaganda machine for the National Party (Botma, 2008). With the advent of democracy in 1994, Naspers abandoned its ideological agenda and shifted to a business model focused purely on profit-making (Mosime, 2014).

Given that Naspers is a powerful capitalist institution in South Africa, the question arises as to how far the media companies which fall under its portfolio accommodate the voices of the marginalised, such as those of the protesters in Malamulele. According to Croteau and Hoynes (2014), the ownership of major corporations with vast portfolios of media companies (such as

Naspers), tends to marginalise a whole range of ideas and images that challenge the capitalist system within which the media company is thriving. Through frames and sources chosen by the media house, certain ideas are promoted, while others which are a threat to their profit margins are omitted. Thus, this paper also interrogates how *News24*'s business model is implicated in the choice of frames chosen by the media house and with what effect. The next section discusses the motivation behind the selection of frames and sources by media organisations.

### **1. FRAMING AS A STRATEGY TO INTERPRET EVENTS**

The way a media organisation frames a story is important and worth studying because it is through frames of reference that audiences interpret and discuss public events (Pointer, 2016; Tuchman, cited in Scheufele, 1999). Through the mass media, reality is constructed and public opinion on social issues is influenced (Boykoff, 2006). According to Kaufman, Elliot and Shmueli (2003:2), frames "act as sieves through which information is gathered and analysed, positions are determined (including priorities, means, and solutions), and action plans developed". Entman (1993:52) defines framing as the selection "of some aspects of a perceived reality, making them more salient in a text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, and casual interpretation of the item described". Entman (1991:6–7) adds that:

By providing, repeating, and thereby reinforcing words and visual images that reference some ideas but not others, frames work to make some ideas more salient in the text, others less so and others entirely invisible through repetition, placement, and reinforcing association with each other, the words and images that comprise the frame render one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others.

Thus, by choosing to use particular frames to tell a story, the media effectively channels the public's perceptions and opinions of the issue being reported on in a particular direction. Framing, according to Kaufman et al. (2003), provides meaning through selective simplification, by filtering people's perceptions. The framing theory assumes that the way in which an issue is portrayed in news reports can have an impact on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This resonates with Michel Foucault's (1980) thesis of subjugated knowledges in which he argues that, in a society, there is a whole set of knowledges which are suppressed or disqualified by disciplinary institutions as being inadequate or inappropriate. These knowledges are described as "naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity" (Foucault, 2003:7). Foucault's argument echoes Carragee and Roefs' (2004) observation that the media's framing of protests normally favours and amplifies the voices of the elite, in particular the political elite. Through framing, media effectively decide what knowledge or information will be deemed appropriate for publication and what knowledge will be suppressed. Members of the public rely on the media to interpret or make sense of ongoing events (Kaufman et al., 2003).

## 2. MEDIA'S FRAMING OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS

According to Benton (1997:137), news, in particular political coverage, is organised around pre-established storylines or frames. Boykoff (2006) concurs, arguing that the mass media have an identifiable lens or paradigm through which they report protest movements. This paradigm, which is described by some scholars as the protest paradigm, depicts protests as violent, dangerous and destructive, giving the impression that such incidents dominate the terrain of protest movements (Lee, 2014; Boyle, McLeod & Armstrong, 2012). McLeod and Hertog (1998, cited in Lee, 2014:2727) describe the protest paradigm as:

A pattern of coverage that focuses on the violent and disruptive aspects of the protest actions, describes protests using the script of crime news, highlights the protesters' ignorance, portrays protests as ineffective and neglects the substantive issues, invokes public opinion against the protesters, and privileges sources from supporting the government.

Lee (2014) describes the protest paradigm as a pattern of news coverage that expresses discontentment toward mass movements or protests. For instance, a study conducted by Lee (2014) in Hong Kong on newspaper coverage of protests from 2001 to 2012 shows that "several features of the protest paradigm such as emphasis on violence and disruption and de-emphasis of the protesters' voices were more likely to appear if the protests involved radical tactics" (see also Boyle et al., 2012). Similarly, White (1993) carried out research on the *New York Times's* coverage of political violence in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1980 and found that there were higher rates of reporting of Northern Irish conflicts when death was involved. Smith et al. (2001), also found that protests featuring arrests, violence and counter-demonstrations tended to generate coverage which focused on the violent events instead of underlying issues which led to the protest. Thus, some scholars conclude that, when covering demonstrations, the mainstream media focus primarily on incidents of violence and the negative attributes and consequences of the protests rather than on the large majority of peaceful demonstrators and the causes they promote (see Cammaerts, 2013; Halloran, Elliot & Murdock, 1970).

A significant number of studies have found that the media exaggerate the threats posed by protest groups through focusing on the negative attributes and consequences of the protests (Cammerts, 2012). By and large, the media coverage of protests gives prominence to the violent actions and the "anarchy" of a few protestors, which prompted McLeod (2007) to conclude that media reports on protests emphasise violence, property damage and expenditure of community resources. Stacer (2013) also conducted a study on the 2013 Brazil protests and found that the media uses exaggeration when covering protests. For example, *Fantastico*, a Brazilian television programme, portrayed the protests as violent, when, according to Stacer (2013), the protests were largely peaceful. Stacer's findings also showed that the media use under-counting. This is a framing device that focuses on disparagement by numbers to purposely depreciate the news event (Gitlin, 1980). *The Journal* newspaper, for example, reported that there were 100 000 people in the streets of Rio de Janeiro when, in fact, there were over 300 000 (Stacer, 2013). The media underestimated the numbers of the protestors in an attempt to diminish the citizens' power.

All these techniques are employed by the media to represent the protestors as violent, destructive and dangerous.

The protest paradigm often portrays the protestors as being in conflict with the police (McLeod & Hertog, 1992). The protestors are often depicted as provokers, while the police are cast in the responsible roles of trying to restore law and order. In the Brazilian protests, for example, Stacer (2013) discovered that police officers were mentioned in kinder words than protestors. They were mentioned only when chasing after protestors or when detaining violent protestors, while the latter were portrayed as violent. Yet, according to Stacer (2013), the police were responsible for heightening the violence. This same observation was made by Alexander et al. (2013), who claimed that most news reports on service delivery protests in South Africa ignored the role played by the police and some politicians in heightening the violence.

The protest paradigm also depicts protestors as an economic threat. To support this viewpoint, news coverage of protest movements tends to portray the country as if it is on the brink of bankruptcy, all because of the protests (Youssef, 2012). A study carried out by Duncan (2014) on sources used by mainstream newspapers in South Africa to report on the Marikana incident, found that they tended to use business experts who saw the protest as a threat to the country's economy and the livelihoods of the striking workers. A study carried out by McLeod and Detenber (1999) showed that the framing of the protestors made it less likely for the public to sympathise with their cause. Renstrom's (2012) study of the coverage of the Occupy Wall Street protest by the city's biggest newspapers, the *Times* and the *Post*, shows that the protestors were depicted as a menace and a disturbance whose repression the city desired. According to Renstrom (2012:22):

The discourse in the *New York Post* builds on the ideological assumption that there is a disconnection between the collective city of New York and the protestors. In the discourse, the city represents the in-group, "us", while the protestors represent the out-group, "them". The repression of "them", the protestors, is desired by the city which represents "us".

The protest paradigm has thus become the default template for reporters when covering protest movements. Boykoff (2006) argues, however, that this routinisation of protest reporting is not a result of a conspiracy amongst journalists, but rather a faithful adherence to journalistic norms, rules and values which guide journalists in their selection of news. Contemporary journalism, for example, puts a high premium on novelty and drama, prompting Stocking and Leonard (1990:40) to declare: "It ain't news unless its news". This means that a story which lacks drama would most likely not find its way into publication. Other values which influence the framing of stories are the fragmentation norm (Boykoff, 2006), which is the isolation of news stories from their origins and contexts, and the authority disorder norm, which is the tendency to rely on authority figures as sources of news to give credibility to the story (Bennett, 2002). Gitlin (1980) is also of the view that protests are often portrayed in a manner that reporters believe would appeal to their mass audience.

Adhering to these journalistic norms confines journalists' framing of protest movements within certain limits. The result, according to Iyengar and Simon (1993), is stories which lead to a

shallow understanding of the issues concerned. They describe this kind of framing as episodic: focusing on an immediate event or incident. For example, if protestors destroy a building or burn down a car, the report will simply report on the actual incident and give little or no attention to what caused it in the first place. The episodic frame is contrasted with the thematic frame, which focuses on the bigger picture by contextualising and interpreting the event (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Very often, protestors are aware that, to attract the attention of the media, they must generate an episodic incident in the hope that that newsworthy event will lead to a thematic framing of their cause (Smith et al., 2001). The downside of using episodic events to attract the media's attention is that the real issues surrounding the protest might get lost when the protest is framed as violent.

In the next section, literature on the choice of sources is reviewed.

### **3. CHOOSING SOURCES TO FRAME THE STORY**

The choice of sources can shape a protest message for an audience (Ashley & Olson, 1998). Not only does the choice of sources influence public opinion and debate, it also has the potential "to control how wider debate is framed" (Rafter, 2014:599). Sources are classified as either official or unofficial. Hoynes (2002:41) describes official sources as "a narrow set of elite voices" which is very often made up of heads of government, ministers and deputy ministers, official spokespersons (usually the public relations practitioners), experts, army generals, the police, business corporations and trade organisations (Gans, 1980). Official sources, according to Dimistrova and Kostadinova (2012), represent social institutions and associations; these sources usually hold positions of authority in their organisations and speak on behalf of institutions. Even with the dominance of new media technology, researchers such as Hansen, Ward, Connors and Neuzil (1994) emphasise that reporters' dependency on official news sources has persisted, or even increased. Bennett (2002) describes this as the authority disorder journalistic norm, which journalists adhere to when selecting what to include and what to exclude from their stories.

For journalists, the use of official sources is considered an indicator of credibility (Carpenter, 2008). McLeod and Hertog (1998) argue also that journalists rely on official sources to add prestige to their stories, to increase efficiency of news production, and to maintain an illusion of objectivity. Cromwell (2012) argues that official sources are also trusted by the media as sources of stories because they are considered newsworthy and their perspectives legitimate, while unofficial sources are regarded as untrustworthy and unreliable. Because of this journalistic norm, news stories are often elite-oriented (Rafter, 2014; Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Rafter (2014) argues that, in instances where the media use sources with similar ideological or political perspectives, the chances are very high that those sources would influence the public's perception and interpretation of the event.

Unofficial sources are persons who "are not at the higher hierarchy of society or organisations, but rather ordinary people or non-elites who become relevant sources because of their connections with certain news events as eyewitnesses, victims and families of victims" (Gans, 1980). According

to Youssef (2012), reporters who cover protest groups often choose bystanders as unofficial sources and these are not part of the protest and, consequently, rarely represent the protesters' views and are most likely to be opposed to the protesters. This implies that, even though the media at times include the voices of unofficial sources, these sources generally do not represent the protesters because the protesters themselves, those who actually face the predicament, are not interviewed. Thus, the chosen sources serve to filter out alternative voices, creating a frame or frames within which the event is interpreted and understood by the public. Excluding unofficial sources would thus ensure that the protest paradigm or template, which journalists adhere to in their reportage of protests, is maintained and the credibility of the story assured.

The research methodology used in the study is discussed next.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A total of 20 news articles from *News24* were purposively selected for the study. In purposive sampling, the sample is selected based on the researcher's judgement about which ones would be most useful for addressing the research questions (Babbie, 2010). To select the articles, key words such as "Malamulele" "protests" "service delivery" were used to search for articles online. To ensure that only the 2015 Malamulele service delivery protests were flagged, the researchers also included the search term "January/February 2015" – the period during which the protest took place. Specifying the period ensured that articles about an earlier protest which had taken place in 2014 would be excluded. Table 1 gives a summary of the articles that were selected. The table shows the article's date of publication, the headline and the sources consulted by the reporter.

**Table 1: Newspaper articles selected for the study**

Article no.	Date	Headline	Sources
1	12-01-15	Police keep close eye on Malamulele protest	Police spokesperson
2	14-04-15	Protests halt schooling in Limpopo	Police spokesperson Local resident
3	19-01-15	Threat Limpopo protest will be escalated	Task team secretary Police spokesperson
4	20-01-15	Limpopo protests affecting schools-alliance	Secretary of SADTU
5	20-01-15	Limpopo protesters await visit from officials	Task team secretary
6	22-01-15	Police monitoring Malamulele after protests	Police spokesperson
7	22-01-15	No more shopping at Malamulele town – until municipality granted	Eyewitnesses
8	28-01-15	Kruger gate closed at Punda Maria	Spokesperson (William Mabasa)
9	01-02-15	Only essential services for Malamulele	Limpopo police Malamulele residents

10	03-02-15	Probe into fire at high school	Limpopo police
11	03-02-15	Limpopo police probing cause of school fires	Police spokesperson
12	03-02-15	ANC sets up audit team in Malamulele	ANC provincial secretary MBD chairperson
13	04-02-15	Police to intervene in Malamulele	Police Minister's spokesperson
14	04-02-15	Schools, shops still closed in Malamulele	Limpopo police Police Minister
15	05-02-15	Another school torched near Malamulele	Colonel Otto
16	08-02-15	No school for 75 000 pupils as Malamulele shutdown continues	Education Department spokesperson, Task team secretary, Protest leader
17	16-02-15	Zuma warns protesting Malamulele residents	President Zuma
18	16-02-15	Malamulele pupils unable to rewrite Matric	Limpopo Education Department spokesperson
19	18-02-15	Education department condemns torching of schools	Acting Education MEC, Colonel Otto
20	20-02-15	3 arrested for Malamulele protests	Colonel Otto

To analyse the news articles, both quantitative and qualitative content analysis were used. Quantitative content analysis differs from qualitative content analysis in that the former “involves some counting and applies the scientific method rigorously”, while the latter involves “no physical counting of data” but tends to be “more critical in nature and can be used to penetrate the deeper layers of a message” (Wigston, 2009:4). Quantitative content analysis was used to count the number of times a particular source was used in the articles so as to ascertain whose voices were dominant in the news articles. The researchers systematically went through all the news articles and counted the number of times a particular source featured in the articles. The sources were then grouped into two broad categories, namely official sources and unofficial sources. Official sources were further sub-categorised into police, political parties, government departments and business leaders. Unofficial sources in this study included protest representatives, residents and eyewitnesses. To carry out the qualitative content analysis, the researchers read through the news articles and identified their themes. Qualitative data were then categorised and similar data grouped under appropriate categories. Three broad categories were identified, namely protesters as violent and anarchistic, protesters as a threat to the economy, and protesters as a threat to security. These themes are presented in the results section.



## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 Sources used in the news articles

An analysis of the selected news articles reveals that official sources, especially the police, were preferred by the reporters. Of the 17 different sources used by *News24*, 64.7% were official sources, while unofficial sources accounted for 35.3% (see Table 1 for a summary of the sources used). Official sources included the police, government departments, a Kruger National Park spokesperson, a demarcation secretary, an ANC provincial secretary and the former President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma. Official sources were quoted 23 times (79.3%), while unofficial sources featured six times (20.7%), showing that the voices of the official sources were dominant in the reports.

Of the official sources, police sources were the most preferred at 56.5%, followed by government sources at 30.4% and political parties at 4.4%. This means that the police were the most prominent source of information for the reporters and, because of that, their voices defined the service delivery protest. They gave updates about the state of the protest, what had been destroyed and what roles the police played in the protest. Unofficial sources used in the selected articles included representatives of the protesters, a local resident and an eyewitness. Of the six unofficial sources quoted in the news reports, four were cited in one article and the other two in two different articles, meaning that out of 20 articles analysed in this study, unofficial sources featured in only three articles. The analysis also shows that the eyewitnesses who were used to comment on the protest were not part of the protest; they were bystanders who were against the protesters.

### 5.2 Frames used in the news articles

#### 5.2.1 Protesters as violent and anarchistic

The dominant frame in the *News24* articles is of the protesters as violent and anarchistic. Throughout the *News24* news articles, protesters are depicted as violent and destructive. Article 2, for example, states that about 100 schools were affected and that 300 matriculants failed to write their Matric supplementary examinations because of the strike. Another article (Article 16) also highlighted the magnitude of this disruption when it pointed out that 75 000 learners were affected by the closure of the schools. Protestors are said to have torched a school (Article 15); they stopped teachers from attending to their duties (Article 2); the Kruger National Park gate at Punda Maria was closed to prevent tourists from being harmed (Article 8); shops were burnt and looted (Article 3); and three protesters were arrested (Article 20). In Article 6, the reporter states that the Limpopo police were monitoring the situation in Malamulele following days of violent protests, while Article 7 castigates the protesters for disrupting the lives of innocent citizens.

Official sources, such as the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), spokespersons from the Education Alliance, the Department of Education and the

South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), all condemned the actions of the protesters, were cited by the reporters. The spokesperson of the Department of Education is quoted as saying the protesters were "*committing crimes in terms of the School Act and that what they are doing amounted to a violation of the rights of the learners and was an offence punishable by law*" (Article 13). This effectively criminalised the activities of the protesters. Article 3 underscores the narrative that the activities of these protesters are criminal. The police spokesperson stated that "*The suspects will be charged with contravening sections of the Riotous Assemblies Act, the South African Schools Act and the Gatherings Act. They will face charges of incitement and intimidation*" (Article, 20). In Article 17, the former President is quoted as having said that the protest infringed on the rights of children as it prevented them from going to school.

#### *5.2.2 Protesters as a threat to the economy*

Closely linked to this frame is that of the protesters as a threat to the economy, which depicts protesters' actions as threatening both the local and national economy. In Article 7, the reporter expresses regret that most people who rely on shopping at Malamulele shopping centre were now unable to do so because of the protests. Article 3 also reported that protesters took to the streets, looted and burned shops, causing millions of Rands' damage. This closure of the business centre did not only inconvenience the community, but it also threatened the economy of the community and the country as a whole. Article 8 reports that the Kruger National park had to close its Punda Maria gate for fear that tourists or visitors would be attacked by the protesters.

#### *5.2.3 Protesters as a threat to security*

Some articles portrayed the protesters as a threat to the lives of many people in and around Malamulele. For example, the headline "Threat Limpopo protest will be escalated" (Article 3) underscores the danger of security being compromised by the strike. In the same article, the police spokesperson described the protesters as a threat to local security when she stated the following: "*We are still monitoring the area to maintain safety and security, and at this stage there is no violence*". The following statements also depict the protesters as a threat to the lives of people in the community:

*"Eyewitnesses expressed their concern on the protest and said should people try to travel to Malamulele they will be risking their lives. Only hospitals and police officials were allowed to work ..."* (Article, 7).

*"Also, teachers did not report for work, there is a group of committee leaders who are stopping people from entering the area, and most teachers are also afraid to be victimised"* (Article, 2).

The spokesperson for the Kruger National Park also highlighted the threat to security when he said that the National Park was forced to close the Kruger Park gate at Punda Maria because they feared that tourists would be harmed.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The study set out to find out how *News24* framed the January 2015 Malamulele service delivery protest. To achieve, this purpose, the researchers examined the sources used by the reporters, as well as frames they chose to tell their stories. Regarding the choice of sources, the study revealed that official sources, in particular the police, were preferred by *News24*. Whilst other sources were quoted in these stories, the most dominant were the police, followed by government officials. Official sources were quoted 23 times (79.3%) as opposed to unofficial sources who were quoted six times (20.6%).

This finding is not surprising because one of the journalistic norms which guides journalists in their choice of sources is the authority disorder norm (Bennett, 2002). Bennett argues that professional journalists rely on the authority disorder norm, which upholds authority figures as credible sources of news and as the only ones who have the power to restore order. Thus, it could be argued that *News24* journalists, like many professional journalists, were being guided in their choice of sources by the journalistic norms and values of their profession (see Boykoff, 2006; Bennett, 2002). Several studies also show that the media often favours official sources when reporting news since the news value of creating impact encourages a reliance on powerful sources (Cromwell, 2012; Youssef, 2012; Dimistrova & Kostadinova, 2009; Carpenter, 2008). By preferring official sources to non-official ones, *News24* journalists were behaving true to their profession which considers the views of official sources as being more valuable and credible than those of non-official sources.

Stories told from the perspective of ordinary or non-elite sources are very often ignored and their voices silenced as seen in the *News24* reports of the Malamulele protests. Very little effort was made by the reporters to tell the story from the perspective of the protesting community. Eyewitnesses who are quoted by the reports, in fact, condemned the protesters (see Article 7). The voices of the protesters are conspicuous by their absence in the news reports confirming Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark and Roberts's (1978:58) argument that:

The likelihood is that those in powerful or high-status positions in society who offer opinions about controversial topics will have their definition accepted, because such spokesmen are understood to have access to more accurate or more specialized information on particular topics than the majority of the population.

This is problematic because the over-reliance on official sources by both local and national newspapers means that unofficial voices are excluded from the news articles. This would result in underrepresentation of the interests of the citizens since the media regards unofficial sources as unreliable. Gongo (2007), for example, found that global news is based on a perceived consensus of those who create the news, while those who are represented in the news are rarely asked how they should be represented. This means that those outside the consensus-forming groups are subject to misrepresentation or to representation as "other" (Gongo, 2007:28). Johnson-Cartee (2005:236) describes the tendency to choose only official sources as "pseudo-like objective

reporting”, which, in his view, merely perpetuates “the status quo, because it does not criticise the existing social order.” This implies that stories told in the newspapers are biased towards elite sources and that the voices of the protesters are often excluded.

In the context of Malamulele, a rural town in democratic South Africa, this silencing of the voices of ordinary people compromises one of the major roles of media in a democracy, which is to provide a platform for all voices in society to be heard. Voltmer (2006) argues that media in a democracy should not only provide information for citizens, but should also act as a forum for public debate because citizens rely on the media for political information. Voltmer (2006:4) adds that “it is necessary for the media to hold political elites accountable and make them responsive to the people”. Asp (2007:33) argues that, “News media should freely and independently keep holders of power under surveillance and scrutinize their actions so as to enable citizens to form an opinion of their rulers’ performance”. In the case of the Malamulele protests, the voices of the citizens who were trying to express their dissatisfaction at the way they were being governed at local government level were muzzled and not given a chance to be heard. Instead, *News24* gave only the elites a chance to state their side of the story and, by so doing, delegitimised the concerns of the protesters. This imbalance between official and unofficial sources may result in the underrepresentation of citizens, or misrepresentation of reality and the delegitimising of the protesters and their causes (Carpenter, 2008).

Although it is true that giving priority to official sources over unofficial sources limits public debate and “narrows the range of voices [and] limit(s) alternative perspectives in public debate” (Rafter, 2014:598), it is also vital to understand that journalists’ choices are constrained by their professional norms, rules and values. The dynamics of news production have a strong influence on who speaks and who does not. However, such representation may raise questions as to why *News24* prioritised official sources; one may argue that it may be because of the need to give the government a platform to respond to its citizens and map a way forward in terms of resolving the challenges faced. Although there is a need to allow the government to air its views in relation to the matter, there is a need for journalists not to rely solely on official sources, so that the protesters themselves are given a platform to express their views freely.

Results also show that all the frames adopted by *News24* to tell the story of Malamulele conform to the protest paradigm, which depicts protestors as violent, dangerous and disruptive of the economic and social order. Frames such as protestors as violent and anarchist, protestors as a threat to the economy, and protestors as a threat to the security of the region, feature prominently in the *News24* reports. Studies have shown that the protest paradigm is a default template used by professional journalists when reporting on protest movements (see Duncan, 2014; Lee, 2014; Wasserman, 2014; Stacer, 2013; Renstrom, 2012; Boykoff, 2006; Smith et al., 2001; McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; White, 1993; McLeod & Hertog, 1992). Boykoff (2006) argues that professional journalists resort to an identifiable frame or template when reporting protests.

In choosing frames, professional journalists are also guided by the norms, rules and values of their professions, in particular the values of novelty and drama (Boykoff, 2006). This means that,

when producing a story, the reporter will select those elements which will draw audiences or readers because of their dramatic and sensational nature. Unfortunately, while the sensational and dramatic sells, it tends to confine journalists to the use of episodic frames which focus only on the event or incident (Boykoff, 2006; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). This not only trivialises the news content, but it also leads to a shallow understanding of the issues surrounding the event (Tiegreen & Newman, 2008; Boykoff, 2006; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). By focusing on the incident or event, episodic framing ignores important information related to the story; the news story is isolated from its context, making it difficult for the reader to see the bigger picture (Tiegreen & Newman, 2008; Blood, Putnis & Pirkis, 2002).

*News24*'s frames are thus episodic, as they focus on events such as the burning down of schools, teachers being stopped from doing their job, businesses being shut down, to name a few. However, beyond these episodes, the reports fail to contextualise and interpret the protest. There is very little attempt to develop the story beyond the physical events on the ground. The nearest to contextualising the story is the statement that the then president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, had visited Malamulele over a year previously, just before the May 2014 elections, and promised to resolve the issue. This is the only clue that the reader has that this is not a new problem and that politicians had ignored the cries of the people. However, the journalist does not attempt to interpret the events surrounding the protest.

The choice of episodic frames should also not surprise the reader because *News24* is an online news website whose business logic would not lend itself to thematic frames, the kind that seeks to interpret events and help the reader see the bigger picture. According to Smith (2007), online reporters have tighter deadlines than traditional journalists and are required to file copy at breakneck pace. Because of the so-called "push technologies", their stories are published as quickly as they are written or virtually as the event happens (Smith, 2007:148). The aim behind this fast pace is to beat the 24/7 television news channels and social media in breaking the news (Newman, 2011; Smith, 2007; Gillmor, 2004). This means that there is not much room for thematic frames in online news websites whose main aim is to break the story. The pressure exerted on professional online journalists to rush through the journalistic process of reporting stories because they cannot afford to wait lest they lose their audiences to competitors is all too real (Alejandro, 2010; Sagan & Leighton, 2010; Gillmor, 2004). *News24*, like any other online news website, is aware of the danger to its revenues that would inevitably come if it fails to keep or attract new audiences to its website. Reduction of audience size would see advertisers, who are a key source of revenue for all media, moving way to more lucrative online media outlets. This would be catastrophic for any media organisation as advertising is what pays the bills for print, broadcast and online media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014).

Thus, it could be argued that online news websites such as *News24* do not have the luxury of choosing interpretative frames when filing copy. To guarantee a healthy inflow of advertising revenues, online journalists are more likely to focus on the event rather than explore and interpret the events surrounding the stories.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The study set out to examine how *News24* framed the 2015 Malamulele service delivery protest and why those particular frames were chosen. The study revealed that all the frames chosen by the reporters conformed to the protest paradigm and portrayed the protest movement as violent, disruptive and a threat to the social order. The study also showed that the majority of sources were official, namely the police and government officials. The study concludes that choice of sources and frames used by *News24* should not come as a surprise as journalists are largely informed by the norms, rules and values of their profession when choosing sources and frames to use. It follows, therefore, that *News24*'s sources were mostly official as the rule in professional journalism is that a story will be more credible if it relies on official sources. Similarly, the choice of the protest paradigm to report on the Malamulele protest was guided by the norm that a newsworthy story should be dramatic and bizarre.

The study also concludes that the business model pursued by *News24* also influenced the choice of frames used to tell the story. The frames were episodic in nature to ensure a fast pace in filing copy. Online news websites depend on a business model that will ensure that they attract and retain large audiences on their sites in order to draw advertisers to them. To do so, they must build a reputation of regularly breaking stories ahead of their competitors, making them the first choice of news in a highly competitive environment.

Finally, the conclusions that professional journalists are hamstrung by the norms and values of their profession in the choice of sources and frames raises questions about how effective *News24* is in playing a democratic role in South Africa. The study concludes that *News24* is too constrained by journalistic norms and values as well as its business model to play an effective democratic role in South Africa.

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