

South African journalists' conceptualisation of professionalism and deviations from normative liberal values

ABSTRACT

In this article the question is raised of what professionalism means in the context of South African journalism, and if there are deviations from ideas of professionalism as defined in normative liberal frameworks of the news media in terms of how South African journalists perceive their own role in society and as to how they define professionalism.

The research is partially based on in-depth qualitative interviews with journalists from a cross-section of the South African news media, and asks questions about their own perceptions of professional values and their own role in society. The interview findings point to South African journalists articulating their role as one of neither watchdog nor lapdog – instead, the interviewees all articulate their role as based on competing imperatives, in which concerns for the audience and a broader articulation of the public interest take precedent over more liberal conceptualisations of the role of journalism in democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the role of the news media in post-apartheid society is hotly debated and contested and the mainstream news media has often clashed with the government over the role that the news media should play in the nascent democracy. The Government led by the African National Congress (ANC) has often asked that the news media take a more developmental stance on journalism, urging journalists to be more supportive of the ruling party's policy agenda and achievements (Daniels, 2012). This, while a large majority of South African journalists have emphasised their role as watchdogs of power, holding public officials accountable and exposing maladministration, facilitating debate and opening up the public sphere to a broader segment of the population; a debate often framed as whether the media should serve the 'national interest', as mainly argued by Government, or the 'public interest', as generally maintained by the news media and journalists themselves (Wasserman & De Beer, 2006; Netshitenzhe, 2002a & 2002b; Fourie, 2001; Jacobs, 2000).

Post-apartheid, the South African news media initially relied on a self-regulatory framework, and as of 2013 a co-regulatory framework with a Press Council consisting of equal representatives from the press and the public (South African Press Code, 2013). The South African Press Code takes its preamble from the South African Constitution of 1996 and also draws upon the framework of the International Federation of Journalists, firmly grounded in normative liberal theories of the functions of the news media in society and a media free from statutory regulation. However, this framework has been criticised for being too westernised and perpetuating Western, Euro-centric values that are unfit for local realities and cultural norms. Furthermore, the ANC-led Government has in recent years put proposals for new media legislation on the table. In 2010 the ANC proposed a statutory Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT) under the pretext of protecting the public, amidst accusations of failing professional standards. In addition, in 2011 the new Protection of State Information Bill (POSIB), commonly labelled the "Secrecy Bill" by its critics, was passed by the National Assembly and later by the National Council of Provinces. The Bill has now been passed on to President Jacob Zuma for final signing. The proposed legislation holds potentially detrimental consequences for media freedom in the country and seen as little else than a smoke-screen created to prevent the media from scrutinising corruption and maladministration in government. This emanates from a certain 'logic' within the governing party that the ANC, as liberation movement as well as a democratically elected party, deserves a more sympathetic press (Daniels, 2012:1).

In South Africa, as well as the rest of the sub-Saharan region, issues of professionalism have increasingly made their way into debates about the role of journalism. The transition from authoritarian rule to democracy requires radical new role orientations and rules of interaction between the news media and those in power (Voltmer, 2006:7), particularly in relation to strengthening ethics and codes of conduct to counter partisanship and bias in the news media. During the years of apartheid, journalism was literally framed in black and white and played a role either as a vehicle for advocacy against the apartheid regime or as a subservient servant of the regime (TRC, 1998). Post-apartheid, the news media, even though not a homogenous whole, has had to re-evaluate these role orientations.

Ogola and Rodny-Gumede (2014:227) argue that the debate about professionalism and quality news in the developing world raises fundamental conceptual and practical challenges. The idea of quality often assumes an universal understanding, a position that is misleading, as contextual factors of how quality is measured need to be considered (Ogola & Rodny-Gumede, 2014:227). The news media in Africa emerges from a history shaped by the continent's experiences with colonialism and, in southern Africa, apartheid and its aberrations. While experiences have varied from country to country, the news media has at the same time been implicated in the institutionalisation of the colonial project, as well as in its repudiation. As such, the role of the news media has often been ambiguous with implications for what has constituted, and still constitutes, professionalism and quality journalism (Ogola & Rodny-Gumede, 2014:227).

Building on these ideas, the question is if professionalism is always interpreted – and executed – according to the normative liberal values of the news media as thought to be the case in many liberal democracies, or if there are local, national, regional and cultural specifics that play a role in the way that professionalism is conceptualised. Are there particular contextual issues regarding professionalism as conceptualised by South African journalists that differ from normative liberal ideals of journalistic professionalism and ethics? How do South African journalists conceptualise professionalism and how do they look upon their own role in society? Is it possible to articulate a unique way of conceptualising professionalism in South Africa that talks to the context of a young, transforming society?

1. PROFESSIONALISM IN THE NORMATIVE LIBERAL TRADITION

While this article does not set out to provide an exhaustive outline of conceptualisations of professionalism in normative liberal traditions, it is worth noting some of the overarching ideas underlining conceptions of professionalism in Western liberal frameworks of journalism and the role of the news media in society.

Normative conceptualisations link journalistic professionalism to notions of impartiality, neutrality and objectivity and the meanings ascribed to them (Harrison, 2006:59). Objectivity, in particular, is seen as a professional ideology of journalism (Tuchman, 1978). It is by invoking objectivity that journalism can claim to be truthful and accurate (McNair, 1998:65). And as much as notions of objectivity have been queried, “it remains the backbone of professional claims in mainstream journalism” (Waisbord, 2013:76). In this regard, there are also normative expectations of journalism from the audience and Reese (2001:175) argues that the audience think society benefits if journalists adhere to certain roles and ethical conduct, and observe certain standards that do not violate the expectations of social order. It is in this sense that journalism lays claim to having a “public service orientation” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:36). As Watson and Hill (2000:36) argue, “rather than featuring in the public eye, journalism can be said to *be* the public eye”, since it reports to the public, conveying to it information, analysis, comment and entertainment while “equally purporting to *represent* the public; to speak for it in the public arena”. At the same time, journalism is in the business of representing to the public “the reality out there” (Watson & Hill, 2000:162-163).

It is also thought that the public interest or public service dimension serves as a counter-balance to control by both owners and political forces (Curran, 2002:97). As such, liberal theory holds that high levels of professionalism and abidance with ethical guidelines and codes of conduct act as a counter-force to partisanship and political bias in the news media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:36). As such, liberal theory has often asserted that a high degree of political involvement and high political instrumentalisation, as well as commercial instrumentalisation, is detrimental to professionalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:37-38). If journalists are to serve the public rather than particular interests, and act according to specific journalistic standards of practice rather than following agendas imposed from outside, they must act as neutral information providers and avoid identification with particular points of view (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:38).

Overall, Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that levels of professionalism are directly linked to and influenced by the political framework in any one country. From a normative liberal perspective, professionalism can be understood as – and assessed on – the levels of autonomy that the profession and its professionals enjoy, abidance by certain rules of conduct, as well as professional norms and orientations towards a public service ethos (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:33-37).

International and comparative studies of journalists around the world show that journalists often share a sense of professionalism (see Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver, 1998; Merrill, 1995; Splichal & Sparks, 1994). This might be related to issues concerning globalisation and a “homogenisation” of the media, namely a common global media culture (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:251) or even trends to an increased ‘Westernisation’ (Williams, 2003:107).

However, there are important variations in the degree to which distinct professional norms have evolved in different countries and systems around the world, the degree of consensus they enjoy among journalists, and their influence on journalistic practices (McQuail, 2000:255). While some journalists might see themselves as neutral conveyors of information, emphasising speed, accuracy and accessibility as key determinants of professionalism, others see themselves as participants in politics and as having an advocacy role (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:251) – a role that varies across cultures, polarised as either that of a neutral conveyor of information (a watchdog) or advocate (in the extreme, a lapdog) (Williams, 2003:107). The question is what the specific contextual issues are that play a role in how journalists conceptualise professionalism and their own role in society.

2. JOURNALISTIC ROLE ORIENTATIONS: LOCAL AND CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

In cross-national studies of journalists' role conceptions, it transpires that these are strongly related to political culture and the degree to which democracy is established (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:251). This includes issues concerning professionalism, as well as issues with regard to the interpretations of objectivity, impartiality and neutrality in relation to role conceptions and news reporting (cf. Hallin & Mancini, 2004:251; Williams, 2003:107; Weaver 1998; Merrill, 1995; Splichal & Sparks, 1994).

In their by now widely cited study of normative frameworks for journalism in the Western media, Hallin and Mancini (2004:39) highlight the concept of political parallelism – the idea of how closely linked the news media and individual journalists are to various sources of state power. They argue that it is not necessarily so that where political parallelism is high, professionalism is low (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:39). Hallin and Mancini (2004:39) quote Curry's (1990) study of journalists during Communist rule in Poland that shows that while journalists were working under conditions shaped by a strong political culture and an ideology upheld by an authoritarian regime, and while being mindful of journalism and its role in relation to the Communist agenda, they nevertheless developed a strong sense of professional culture (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:39). In this sense, advocacy and editorial commentary need not be contradictory to professionalism, and in the notion of journalism as a public service function there might be room for social commentary in relation to politics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:41). The question is how journalists negotiate these different role orientations and how they conceptualise their role in society and their understanding of professionalism in relation to politics.

In a study of Ugandan journalists, Mwesige (2004) shows that there is a discrepancy between the values that the journalists endorse and their actual practices. While most journalists adhere to what Mwesige labels “Western” values, and to what is essentially a liberal model of journalism, they nevertheless feel themselves pressurised under the contemporary political and legal framework to “play it safe” (Mwesige, 2004:87). Therefore, Ugandan journalists tend to report government affairs in the format of “who said what, when and where”, rather than adopting an analytical, interpretive framework for reading between the lines and making sense of government policies (Mwesige, 2004:87). Likewise, Ramaprasad's (2001) study of journalists in Tanzania shows that, while rating Western-style journalism as a high priority, the journalists were not adverse to a type of journalism supportive of national development. This trend is also confirmed by Hallin and Mancini (2004:261), who quote examples from southern Europe, where journalists often express allegiance to the notion of objectivity, while at the same time practising journalism in many ways at odds with the notion of political neutrality. In their exploration of journalism ethics in India and South Africa, Wasserman and Rao (2008) also show that there is a two-way relationship between global and local epistemologies and practices in terms of journalism ethics, and in this sense there is a process of “glocalisation” of journalism ethics, in which ethics are shaped by specific national and cultural contexts.

In South Africa, critics argue that the new democracy is being eroded by an all-powerful ANC (Duncan, 2014; Hadland, 2007; Gumede, 2005), and, as in many post-colonial societies, the distinction between the state and government has largely been eroded by former liberation movements that, once in power, have instituted one-party states with little or no opposition. Therefore the question of the role of the state as opposed to party political alignments vis-à-vis the news media, as well as contestations over media development are often interlinked and as such calls for reporting in the national interest is often conflated with the political party interest (Daniels, 2012:10).

Gumede (2007) argues that for most liberation movements – although they proclaimed democracy as a policy goal – democracy was not a priority. Gumede (2007) makes the argument that a lot

of liberation leaders falsely believe that democracy is not African, but “foreign” and “Western” instead. In fact, some African political leaders allege that authoritarianism is implicit in African traditional values, and that the respect for liberty, independent thought and tolerance is allegedly rooted only in Western liberal culture. Some scholars have, however, rebutted this argument (Tomaselli, 2003; Sen, 1999). Gumede (2007) argues that many of the African leaders who have bought into democracy have sadly viewed it in its narrowest sense, wrongly insisting that if only elections took place, their countries would be democratic. Others, again, argue that the standards for African democracy should be lowered (Gumede, 2007). All in all, Gumede (2007) argues that very few liberation movements put much effort into building relevant democratic institutions, so that the separation of powers, an independent judiciary and a system of checks and balances between branches of government are often just mere appendages.

The failure to establish relevant democratic institutions and proper checks and balances has consequences for the structure of the media and the role the media can play in the new democracy. Horwitz (2001:283) therefore argues that the culture of secrecy and partisanship that often characterises liberation movements makes it difficult to support a non-partisan and non-adversarial press, even after the political struggle is over. Bennett (1998) argues that liberation movements generally arise from societies where there is little civic group structure or social capital; as a result “many resistance movements flounder in the transition to democratic governance, owing to the absence of sustainable, everyday social organizations” (Bennett, 1998:202). As a result of the absence of a legitimate civil society, the crucial phase of constructing democratic institutions is hindered by the lack of local social contexts and community forums in which to anchor and process political communication (Bennett, 1998:202).

However, there are exceptions to this pattern. For example, in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, traditions of resistance are anchored in semi-autonomous institutions, such as churches, unions and the arts (Bennett, 1998:203). In South Africa, as in Poland, both the unions and the church have had a strong influence over the liberation movement. Sparks (2009:213-214) argues that South Africa stands apart from many other transitional and young democracies such as China, Russia and many Eastern European countries in this regard, as mass mobilisation through civil society and social movements have been able to put checks and balances on the way in which the news media sector has developed and been able to assert its independence, and kept the pressure up on transformation and diversification in the media (Sparks, 2009:213-214).

There is also significant evidence of agency on behalf of media organisations as well as individual journalists and editors. Jacobs (2003) argues that the post-apartheid news media have emerged as autonomous political actors in their own right, exercising considerable agency in relation to political power. As such, in the new South African democracy, elements of an old paternalistic, authoritarian system blend with more pluralist elements (Hadland, 2007:119).

South Africa did experience a period of unprecedented freedom of the media at the beginning of the 1990s and after the first democratic elections in 1994. However, before long, the ANC-led Government raised critique against the news media and former President Nelson Mandela

was the first to criticise the media for being too critical of the government and not supportive enough of the new government's policies (Mandela, 1994). Furthermore, the common criticism from Government has been that the South African media, the print media in particular, are elitist, racist, unpatriotic and carries an agenda set by those who wish to see the new South Africa fail (Hadland, 2007; Ibelema et al., 2004:307). Calls have also been heard for an Africanisation of journalism and journalism practices based on African epistemologies (Metz, 2015; Rodny-Gumede, 2015a; Fourie, 2011; Christians, 2004), recognising values other than those entrenched in normative liberal frameworks, as well as alternative forms of journalism and practices through ethics of listening (Wasserman, 2013) and Peace Journalism (Rodny-Gumede, 2015b).

Whichever models are adopted, and whether the news media take heed of calls for an Africanisation or ideas of serving the public or national interest, the demands on the media to transform are necessitated by the fact that journalists must take cognisance of diverse audiences in terms of language, culture and socio-economic background. In their daily work, journalists face the issues of race and racism, poverty, illiteracy, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the social and political reality of these problems. This is a reality that necessitates a new role for journalism and the media organisation as a whole.

What do South African journalists say about their own role in society and how do they articulate what professionalism means in the context of nascent democracy? Are there tensions between the liberal ethos of the watchdog role of journalism and alternative journalistic models for reporting that put local contexts and realities at the forefront of journalistic practices and professionalism?

3. METHODOLOGY

The data that forms the basis of this article has been collected from a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted with political and current affairs journalists from a cross-section of the English and Afrikaans language news media in South Africa in 2013.

The sample was drawn from an initial questionnaire sent to 40 journalists in the print and broadcast news media in 2013. Out of the 40 questionnaires sent out, 37 responses were collected. Out of this sample 23 journalists were eventually interviewed, all with experience in the newsroom, ranging from two to twenty-five years. One of the interviews was conducted via telephone. The data only includes responses garnered through the qualitative interviews.

Seven of the respondents work for the South African public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), in either radio or television and two work for e.tv, the only South African terrestrial commercial broadcaster. The remaining journalists work for regional and national newspapers, including: *Business Day*, *Cape Argus*, *City Press*, the *Daily Sun*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *Rapport*, the *Sowetan*, *The Star*, the *Sunday Independent* and the *Sunday Times*.

4. INTERVIEW FINDINGS: SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNALISTS' CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM AND THEIR OWN ROLE IN SOCIETY.

At first glance, many of the interviewees' responses seemingly conform to more traditional normative liberal conceptualisations of the role of the news media in society, with a strong emphasis on its centrality to democratic processes. This journalist, like many of her colleagues, says:

Journalism is central to democratic processes and serves to safeguard democratic institutions, of which it forms part. (*Business Day* respondent 2).

In this regard there is a clear emphasis on a watchdog role aligned to normative liberal conceptualisations of the role of the news media in democracy, exemplified by this journalist who says:

The watchdog function is important, corruption has become systemic in our society and as such the emphasis needs to be on investigative reporting. (*City Press* respondent).

Most of the journalists also see it as their role and duty to serve the public interest, and the debate around the public interest, vis-à-vis the notion of serving the national interest, comes up in most interviews. In this regard, most journalists emphasise that the public interest takes precedent over the national interest. This journalist says:

I do not think I report in anyone's interest, but the public. We do discuss these issues in the newsroom and as such I think that the public interest is what takes priority. (*Business Day* respondent 1).

Many of the interviewees also emphasise this with regard to new proposed media legislation, the new Protection of State Information Bill in particular, criticised for not including a strong public interest defence clause:

The big debate in South Africa around the Info Bill [POSIB], for example, has been around the inclusion of a public interest clause or defence. This would safeguard against a blanket clamp-down on information that should be freely available in the public sphere and we need to defend this. (*Sunday Independent* respondent).

However, most interviewees also point out that the public interest and the national interest are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This is exemplified by this journalist's response:

I do not think any of my colleagues here would disagree with the watchdog role and start quoting back the national interest as taking precedent over investigative reporting in the public interest. We report in the public interest, which might at times overlap with what perceivably could be in the national interest. Pressures are there from people with positions in government, or hacks in general, but it does not influence the way you think or report on issues. (*Sunday Times* respondent 1).

Another journalist agrees:

What is in the national interest is also in the public interest, especially given the fact that the public interest is hard to define in a society as diverse and multicultural as South Africa. Being critical does not mean that you are unpatriotic or unsupportive of the development goals of the government. As such, the public interest includes issues perceived as the national interest. (*Cape Argus* respondent).

Equally, there is a sense that the public interest needs to be weighed against other interests created through the new political dispensation and through the many legacies of the past. This journalist says:

South Africa needs good journalists that take their roles seriously. While the public interest is the only interest we should be serving, there are of course other considerations that need to be factored in. However, the national interest should not be one of them. I would rather say that we should listen more carefully to communities with little or no access to politics and decision-makers. We need to bring the two closer. (e.tv respondent 1).

Another colleague links this to the way in which the public interest historically has been very narrowly defined and not reflective of the broader majority of the population:

I do not think that the public interest excludes any other interest necessarily; our readership have become more much more diverse and I do think we need to make sure that we cater for as broad an audience as possible. In some ways, I think, we are stuck in outdated concepts of who the audience is. (*City Press* respondent).

This journalist takes this further and queries who the 'public' is in the 'public interest':

The public interest can only truly be a public interest if we recognise that the public has changed. A great majority of the population was never included in the way in which the public interest was defined, and probably still isn't, as such we need to rethink who the public is in the public interest. (*Sunday Times* respondent 2).

Another journalist links this to language barriers that prevent access for larger segments of the public:

We need to make sure that we cater for broader audiences; language is crucial, and if we do not develop a media sector that can cater for news media in languages other than Afrikaans and English, we will never truly reach a wider audience. While we cannot provide access, we can facilitate it. (*The Star* respondent 1).

Independent of the stance journalists take on the issue of how best to serve the public interest, as well as conceptualisations of who is included in the public interest, for many journalists the

burning question also seems to be how best to overcome the legacies of the past and how to create a new ethos for the news media. This journalist says:

Few of those who came out of the alternative press of the 1980s have actually remained in the media. The struggle then looked very different. Nevertheless, the problems that we are faced with today are of equal magnitude. And we actually need a new form of struggle journalism today. The story of South Africa is not as clear-cut anymore. Journalists have had to rethink their role as advocates and relearn how to engage with what they do. We need a journalism that can capture the new democratic dispensation from all angles. Today, such journalism is all too often missing. (SABC respondent 1).

Another journalist articulates the balance that needs to be struck between differing imperatives created in the new society:

While we need to be aware of the challenges confronting governance and institution-building in South Africa, the country is not helped by a news media that panders to politics and the agenda of government officials. We need a media that can scrutinise power and that is free to question governance and reform. This said, we also need to be ever conscious of our role in nation-building and the strengthening our democracy. (e.tv respondent 2).

In this regard, many journalists also acknowledge the criticism levelled against them from Government and the audience for elitism and a lack of understanding of the Government's transformation agenda. This journalist says:

There are always grey zones; it is rarely so that issues can be brought down to black and white, good or bad. We need to find a way of reporting that builds trust and maintains credibility...if the public, including Government, do not think we are doing a good enough job, we need to find a way to reach out and to take some of the criticism directed at us at face value. (*Rapport* respondent 2).

Similarly, a colleague argues:

Let's be fair in our reporting. We need to give credit where credit is due and to make sure that we do not alienate our sources or those we report on. (*Mail & Guardian* respondent).

Many respondents also emphasise the need for a broader content coverage and argue that while the demographics of the audience have changed, coverage has not necessarily been diversified. This journalist says:

You do wonder where the ordinary South Africans are, other than victims of crime. Where are the stories of how we rebuild our lives and the state of the Rainbow Nation? South African journalism leaves a lot to be wished for and many stories are missing... The

reality is that the vast majority of black South Africans remain extremely poor more than ten years into the “new South Africa”. Yet, the only black voices one reads or hears in the media are those of the tiny new elite. (*Mail & Guardian* respondent).

Another journalist also raises the lack of diversity of voices in the news media:

I do think there is a tendency to forget about the ordinary people and stories, what goes on in people’s every-day lives. This would be the role of the news media, I guess, in any society; however in South Africa we have real problems affecting the majority of the population. (SABC respondent 2).

This also raises questions of how best to serve a diverse and multi-cultural audience. This journalist says:

You can train almost anyone to become a fair journalist. However, you cannot teach someone passion and compassion. If you do not have these qualities, you will never be a good journalist. In South Africa, in particular, we need to realise that we have a responsibility to be compassionate with our compatriots and we have a huge responsibility to address the inequalities and injustices in our society. (*The Star* respondent 2).

Many of the interviewees also link the idea of serving the audience better to the need for transformation within the news media itself. This journalist says:

Transformation debates seem to have slipped off the agenda in later years; if we do not promote the diversification of the journalistic corps, we will not be able to reach a broader audience. (SABC respondent 6).

Another journalist argues that:

In the context of South Africa we need to look at race and gender and imbalances here. It is for all of us to be conscious of our past and to foster a new generation of journalists. Younger generations of journalists do not have the same baggage and come into the newsroom with values and ways of relating to others fostered in the new democratic South Africa. We need to learn from them rather than the other way around. (e.tv respondent 1).

The interviewees were also asked questions about ethics and here all journalists emphasise that abidance by ethical codes of conduct are of outmost importance for professionalism. One journalist says:

I do not think you can really call yourself a journalist if you do not have a solid idea of ethics. (*Sunday Times* respondent 1).

Another journalist links this with self-regulation:

We need to trust self-regulation to work and set the standards for the conduct of the media; it is preferable to most alternatives. Ethics should be high on the priority list of any serious journalist. (SABC respondent 5).

However, the journalists interviewed are also well aware of some of the criticism levelled against the South African news media for failing to adhere to ethical codes of conduct. This journalist says:

I do think we need to be careful about how we report on corruption and maladministration in government, as there is a risk that we end up painting everyone with the same brush stroke. There are many nuances that rarely come through in our reporting. As such, we need to take some of the criticism on board. (*City Press* respondent).

Many of the interviewees also link this to the need for training. This journalist says:

We take accusations of poor or low standards very seriously, and do spend time and money on training our journalists. Journalism schools have to take some responsibility here as well. I have young journalists coming into the newsroom who simply cannot write. I would say that this is the most basic of requirements. (*Daily Sun* respondent).

However, while most journalists argue that standards have to be raised and ethical codes of conduct adhered to, many also argue that public officials are using accusations of failing ethics as a smokescreen to dissuade journalists from covering maladministration and corruption. This journalist says:

Our media sector is vibrant and it has, in many cases, done an excellent job in uncovering corruption and mismanagement in government I do not agree that the news media's failing ethical standards are to blame for the ANC's stance on the media. The ANC uses the occasional ethical lapse in some elements of the media to justify action against the media, such as the 'Secrecy Bill', which has nothing to do with ethical standards. The discussion about the MAT and the Secrecy Bill are rooted in a defensive desire to limit investigative probing. (*Mail & Guardian* respondent).

As such, what comes through in the interviews is a negotiation of differing roles and imperatives. And, while there is a strong articulation of journalistic values aligned to normative liberal ideas of the role of the news media in society, there is also a sense that reporting needs to be mindful of new sensitivities created in the young democracy. These two journalists summed up many of the concerns raised in the interviews and also emphasised what needs to change, by saying:

We need to move away from lapdog journalism and give credit to government where it is due. The story is different today, and somehow content must reflect the will to undo the legacy of apartheid and deepen democracy. It should focus on the role of citizens and

their rights. The role of the watchdog is intertwined with that of educating and informing. (*The Star* respondent 1).

We need to understand that we live in a society with competing ideas about governance and reform and get rid of the middle-class biases so engrained in the way that the media is structured and public discourses shaped. Transformation needs to go deeper and we need journalists who understand the issues that are facing us all, and who can address these in ways that opens up the public debate to a bigger audience. (*Business Day* respondent 2).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS AN AUDIENCE DIRECTED TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF JOURNALISM IN SOCIETY

In post-apartheid South Africa, the debate about the role of journalism in society has seen the ANC-led government calling for the news media to play a more developmental role and support the transformation agenda of the government – and as such, report on what has been conceptualised as the national interest, often conflated with the party-political interest. The news media at large has countered these arguments and argued that the new democracy is better served by reporting aligned with the public interest as defined in many normative liberal frameworks of the news media. This article has asked whether this polarisation of views is always that clear-cut and if there are, in fact, deviations from the normative liberal ideas of serving the public interest that come through in the way that South African journalists conceptualise professionalism and their own role in the nascent democracy.

At first glance, most journalists interviewed articulate ideas around their own role in society in ways that seemingly conform to normative ideas of the news media entrenched in many western liberal democracies. In this regard, most interviewees emphasise their role as a watchdog of power entrenched in a public service ethos, with a clear focus on reporting in the public interest, as opposed to what could be perceived to be in the national interest as defined by the present ANC-led Government. However, a closer reading of the interview responses points to a more nuanced articulation of these juxtapositions, and the professional values articulated as core to South African journalists indicate a negotiation of a wider set of interests than those articulated through the normative liberal framework.

The interviewees all display an awareness of the complexities and sensitivities of the post-apartheid socio-political landscape. There is an explicit acknowledgement of the need for the news media to open up to previously neglected segments of the audience. In this regard, many acknowledge the critique from Government that the news media is elitist and only caters for a small segment of the South African public. There is also a clear acknowledgment that the public interest in South Africa – and who the public is – has been very narrowly defined, and as such has to be broadened to include and take cognisance of a diverse and multi-cultural public. In this regard, most interviewees also argue that coverage has to be broadened to focus on issues that concern audiences previously neglected and cut off from broader public debates.

As such, most journalists say that they want to be neither lapdogs nor exclusively watchdogs, and instead emphasise the need to listen to the audience rather than pander to ideas of what perceivably would be in the public and/or national interest. This also links to the way most interviewees acknowledge the criticism of failing ethical standards levelled against them, emphasising the need for strengthening ethics with the intent of maintaining credibility in the eyes of the audience rather than pandering to calls for practices that could be used to prevent investigations of corruption and maladministration.

Overall, the interviews point to South African journalists interpreting their role as one of facilitators of a broader transformation of the socio-economic landscape, with a strong focus on how best to cater for a diverse and multi-cultural audience. This is a journalistic role conceptualisation still to be properly explored and one that seemingly straddles and negotiates, as well as transcends, many of the ideas around journalistic role conceptualisations as set out in normative theorisations of the role of journalism in society, often polarised as either liberal or authoritarian, European or African, modern or traditional. As such, the debate around the role of journalism and whether or not journalism should serve the public or the national interest need not be polarised as one of either being a watchdog of power or a government lapdog. Instead, it might be in the public interest to accommodate even the national interest, as far as social commentary goes, and as most of the journalists interviewed said: the one does not exclude the other.

The exploration of how journalists articulate their own role and how they conceptualise ideas around professionalism is of utmost importance for broadening the understanding of journalism as a contextual and reflexive practice. And while political and historical influences on journalism and journalistic practices have been emphasised with regard to the news media, less research has been dedicated to understanding journalistic agency premised on journalists as citizens and participants in a democratic process both transformative and participatory. Research such as this can thus provide a more nuanced articulation of the role that journalism plays in any one society.

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