

State-media relations in post-apartheid South Africa: an application of comparative media systems theory

ABSTRACT

In 2004, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini published a landmark work of media theory entitled *Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics*. The theory, like the models it makes use of, has a high degree of relevance for South African media scholars. Primarily, the theory investigates the relationship between the state and the media, an interconnection of profound significance in the South African context, yet one that has not been explored sufficiently by scholars. This article, which focuses primarily on South Africa's print media sector, sets out the parameters, major dimensions and some indicators of the Three Models paradigm. It then presents recent research in which the theory is applied to South Africa. It concludes that South Africa's media system falls largely into the Polarised Pluralist model though it retains strong liberal model traits.

INTRODUCTION

In his essay on "Theorising the media-democracy relationship in Southern Africa", Guy Berger (2002: 22) finds that the hallmark of much of the scholarly writing on the topic is its reliance "upon unreflective, conventional wisdoms about the way that 'media' is an important element in democracy". Berger goes on to say, however, that "what is needed, arguably, is a more wide-ranging conceptual framework" and prophetically bemoans the limited scope of the landmark, but dated *Four theories of the press* (1956) by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm: "The quest is therefore for universally applicable concepts, which are relevant and explanatory in Africa and which designate broad processes and functions" (Berger, 2002: 22).

Fortunately for South African scholarship, a more wide-ranging conceptual framework – interestingly based on the work of Siebert *et al.* – has now entered global media studies. This is the comparative media theory published in 2004 by Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini (*Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics*). The framework provides a strong response to the concerns of Berger and of other scholars who have lamented the limitations of current critical methodologies, most particularly the dominant political economy paradigm (Laden, 2001).

Hallin and Mancini's work, which compares the relationship between the media and the political systems of 18 countries, has been hailed as one of the most important theoretical contributions to media studies in a generation (see Couldry, 2005; McQuail, 2006; Hampton, 2005; Graber, 2006 and Berkel, 2006). While a variety of reservations have been raised, including the lack of a developing nation within the sample of countries, none who reviewed or cited the work (by early 2007) failed to appreciate its place at the cutting edge of comparative media studies.

This article sets out to achieve two aims. First, it will introduce to South African scholars the tools and scope of what is called the Three Models paradigm. At this point, there has been no engagement with Three Models Theory locally. Second, it will demonstrate the results of recent research in which the Three Models paradigm was applied to South Africa.

It is necessary to say at the outset that I will be focusing almost all my efforts on South Africa's print media sector. This is not to negate the importance of the broadcast sector nor of the new media forms that have arisen in recent years. The broadcast element of a country's media system certainly features frequently in Hallin and Mancini's model. However, that aspect must wait for a follow-up investigation. I can say that the indications from my work certainly suggest a correlation exists between print and broadcast that does not contradict my conclusions.

In addition, scholars have noted the paucity of literature and research concerning contemporary Afrikaans newspapers (Botma, 2006). It is unavoidable that there is an emphasis on the English-language mainstream press in this work that reflects the topography of the available scholarship. I do mean by South Africa's media "system", however, all print media titles and their supporting organisations, including the growing community media sector, along with broadcast (television,

radio and community radio) and new media outlets. I will largely narrow my focus on to the news-oriented print media within the South African media system and trust that this will serve as an opening gambit in the far greater task of grappling comparatively with the entire system and its many elements.

It is also the case that while I have focused on South Africa's media in the post-apartheid era, some reflection upon the dynamics of what went on before is appropriate. Until the early 1980s, South African critiques of the press were indeed "few and far between", according to Keyan and Ruth Tomaselli and Muller in *The Press in South Africa* (1989: 39). The authors identified five broad categories of published studies in the pre-early 1980s period: "reminiscences of retired journalists and editors"; uncritical descriptions which by and large ignore the very existence of a black press; works within the "orthodox western Liberal framework" generally lacking analysis of structural conditions; the more rigorous works of writers such as Elaine Potter and Alex Hepple, which again exclude an analysis of the black-oriented press, while studies in the fifth category, incorporating structural analysis, "have only appeared since the late 1970s" and even then have been limited (Tomaselli, Tomaselli & Muller, 1989: 39-42).

While these categories are useful in summarising the type of studies undertaken with regard to the South African press in the apartheid era, they obscure more fundamental differences or similarities. Commentators are more generally split over the question, for instance, of whether the newspaper industry was helpful or harmful to the establishment or maintenance of the apartheid system.

Since the 1980s, there has been a steady growth in the quantity and range of South African critiques of the media. These correspond broadly with the different methodologies adopted globally. They include Lynette Steenveld's work using a culturalist approach (2004), Luthuli's support of textual and discourse analysis (2004) and the political economy research conducted by Grové (1996), Mabote (1996), Tomaselli (1997), Berger (1999), Krabill (2001), Boloka (2004) and Jacobs (2004). There has been no engagement with Hallin and Mancini's Three Models Theory by South African scholars and indeed only a handful of critiques in the global literature, mostly in the form of book reviews.

Just as Hallin and Mancini concede that in most countries, the media is not a single system (2004: 12), so South Africa bears this out with its own history. Scholars have identified three traditions that have evolved semi-autonomously of one another in the South African media. These traditions have been named the English-language press, the Afrikaans press and the black press. During the colonial and the apartheid eras these categories provided reasonably useful means for differentiating the varying political cultures, languages and histories that lay behind each tradition. But what was once conceptually porous has now become obsolete.

There are, for instance, many newspapers and magazines published in Afrikaans, but these are by no means the sole domain of the ideologues formerly known as the Afrikaans press. In fact,

Media24 – the largest of what used to be the Afrikaans press houses – is now a multi-billion rand, global media empire conducting business in several languages (including English) in more than 50 countries. Neither the black press, which in fact existed only as an indigenous language press, nor the English-language press can any longer be confined to the convenient but deeply flawed apartheid era categorisations.

In retrospect, it is probably more accurate to say there were only two media traditions in South Africa prior to 1994: one that embraced the principles and history of the Liberal tradition (most of which come from the group formerly known as the 'English-language press'), and one that sought to use the press to fulfill specific ideological, political and cultural objectives (mostly Afrikaans press and black press). This is not to say that the Liberal press was not subject to non-Liberal practices, or that the black or Afrikaans press was not capable of publishing fine, independent journalism. But if the categories of English-language, Afrikaans and black press were lacking badly by 1994, in a few short years thereafter they were totally overwhelmed by new developments and new realities. Commercialism, globalisation, direct foreign investment, black ownership and rapid technological change ensured that a new press was created for a new era. After 1994, and arguably for sometime prior to that, the terms English-language, Afrikaans and black press were redundant.

Along with reference to the considerable corpus of literature regarding the development both of the South African media and of its political system, this article (and the PhD from which it is derived) makes use of two unique resources. The first is the one-on-one interviews conducted with two dozen top-ranking South African media company executives and editors. One of these is referred to in this article. This roots the work in practicality and cross-tabulates the often observational, qualitative nature of the research with the first-hand experience of top-level management. This aspect of the methodology reflects Hallin and Mancini's approach that is also pragmatic and interview-driven. The second resource is the intimate familiarity of the author – formerly a parliamentary correspondent for almost 15 years – with South Africa's political system and with the country's transition from apartheid to democracy. The methodology is, therefore, a combination of qualitative insights and subjective understandings together with an excavation of appropriate literatures.

1. THE THREE MODELS THEORY

The Hallin and Mancini (2004: 8) Three Models paradigm is founded on the *Four theories of the press* (1956) of Siebert *et al.* which argued that a country's press always takes on the "form and coloration" of the social and political structures within which it operates. While there have been a range of critical engagements with work of Siebert *et al.* in the half century since it was published (including Schillinger, 1989 and Nerone, 1995), the end of the Cold War rendered much of Siebert's work obsolete, not least the Soviet press model. There have been further attempts to design tools for cross-national media system comparisons (see Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995), but none of the other works attempt anything like the scale of Hallin and Mancini's enterprise (which uses data from 18 countries), nor do they present a whole, new theoretical framework with which to conduct comparative media systems analysis.

The "primary focus" of Hallin and Mancini's *Comparing media systems* is the relationship between media systems and political systems (2004: 1). They ask whether it is possible to identify systematic connections between these two structures. They also seek to identify variations in the structure and political role of the news media, try to account for how these variations occurred, and ponder their implications for democratic political systems. They attempt, in brief, to answer the question Siebert *et al.* posed in 1956: Why is the press as it is?

Hallin and Mancini's answer, equally succinctly, is that the news media cannot be understood without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relationships between economic and political interests and the development of civil society, among other elements of the social structure (2004: 8). Comparing the media and political systems of 18 countries in Europe and North America, Hallin and Mancini found these countries could be clustered into three broad groups, or 'ideal types'. These they called the Liberal model, the Democratic Corporatist model and the Polarised Pluralist model. Each ideal type had a pattern of historical development and displayed features of a media-political matrix that many of its often geographically proximate 'member' countries shared.

Thus, for example, the countries of the Polarised Pluralist model are to be found in the Mediterranean region (Greece, Italy, Spain, France), had similar, late, contested transitions from Catholic absolutist states into industrialised democracies and developed an environment in which party politics and the media were frequently closely integrated. The Democratic Corporatist model is made up of countries from north and central Europe (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Germany) that tend to have a long tradition of limits on state power, strong social welfare policies and a history of Protestantism and Calvinism. This model is characterised by a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organised social and political groups. The Liberal model is made up of the United States, the United Kingdom and various connected territories (Canada, Ireland) in or around the North Atlantic. In these countries, commercial newspapers developed early and expanded with little state involvement. The relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media are common features.

Hallin and Mancini stress that these clusters are "ideal types" and are not meant to describe every trend and quirk of the countries that are clustered around them. They insist, furthermore, that the liberal model is not offered as a preferred normative ideal, but that the three models represent different traditions. Hallin and Mancini (2004: 11) contend that the primary purpose of the ideal types "is not classification of individual systems, but the identification of characteristic patterns of relationships between system characteristics". They argue that the characteristics that define the models are interrelated, that they result from a meaningful pattern of historical development and "do not merely occur accidentally". In addition, while they refer to media systems in their work, Hallin and Mancini do not locate their paradigm within systems theory *per se*, rendering an engagement with this scholarly school an interesting but irrelevant endeavour in the context of this article.

Hallin and Mancini's work is not unaccompanied by other contemporary contributions on comparative media analysis. Indeed, three other major works of synthesis were produced within the last two or three years that form the peer group for *Comparing media systems*. These are the work of McChesney (2004), Hardt (2004) and Starr (2004). None, however, constitute a substantive challenge to the breadth and depth of the Three Models paradigm.

At the heart of Hallin and Mancini's comparative theory are four "major dimensions", the tools by which they allocate different countries to the appropriate ideal type. These dimensions, which I will address in separate sections below and apply to South Africa, are:

1. The closeness of the links between political parties and the press (political parallelism);
2. The degree or level of state intervention in the media;
3. The state and stage of journalistic professionalisation; and
4. The state of development of a country's mass media market.

These four dimensions collectively constitute Hallin and Mancini's (2004: 21) "attempt to make sense of the patterns of difference and similarity ... and to link these patterns to the social and political context in which they evolved".

In recent research, I have applied the Hallin and Mancini model to South Africa's peculiarly idiosyncratic history and to the complex relationship between its media and its political system¹. Using the four major dimensions of the paradigm, my findings were as follows:

1.1 Political parallelism

The first of the Hallin and Mancini dimensions is termed political parallelism. The concept refers in essence to the closeness of the links between a political system and the media, and it examines the extent to which media systems reflect the major political trends and cleavages of the host country. Hallin and Mancini contend that a high degree of political parallelism, in which the media very directly reflect the spectrum and culture of a country's political life, is most often the hallmark of either the Polarised Pluralist model or, alternatively, of the Democratic Corporatist model. The dominance of market mechanisms and of the commercial media within the Liberal model suggests it is unlikely that a country falling in to the Liberal cluster – other than the 'exception', Britain – would have a media so neatly connected with formal or informal political organisation.

Hallin and Mancini identify two environments that suggest the nature of particular media and political systems: external pluralism, in which different media reflect the different tendencies on display in the political arena, and internal pluralism, in which media organisations tend to avoid institutional ties to specific political groups and attempt to maintain neutrality and balance in their content (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 29). Internal pluralism tends to indicate a low level of political parallelism, while external pluralism suggests a high level, according to Hallin and Mancini (ibid). There is, furthermore, a connection between political parallelism and journalistic professionalism. Where political parallelism is high, journalistic professionalism tends to be low (2004: 38).

¹ This paper is based on my PhD thesis, *The South African Print Media, 1994-2004: an application and critique of comparative media systems theory*.

I contend that South Africa enjoys a state of internal pluralism stemming principally from the media system's strong historical ties to the liberal model of the United Kingdom. While titles occasionally display partisan allegiances, such as at election time, on the whole South African newspapers do tend to avoid institutional ties with political parties and do attempt to maintain neutrality and balance in their content. They are not always particularly successful in the latter endeavour². This is due to the powerful influence on political life and discourse that has been exerted by the dominant majority party, the African National Congress (ANC), in the post-1994 era.

The South African print media is broadly supportive of the social contract imposed by a powerful state. This is founded on the emotive appeal of overturning the country's apartheid legacy and of embracing democracy, human rights and equality. These are all difficult notions to contest. The South African media, as demonstrated by the Human Rights Commission hearings into racism in the media, is deeply vulnerable to allegations of skewed news values, Afropessimism (racism), overstepping the bounds of personal privacy, professional incompetence and a lack of respect and due deference for a democratically-elected government (Johnston, 2005: 13).

'Opposition', when it occurs within the media, has more often to do with the errors of individuals within government – such as corrupt members of parliament or errant members of the executive – than with the state, the party or even policy as a whole. There is, therefore, a consensual position determined by the state and adopted by the media that reflects a poor level of internal pluralism. What might seem, or is projected as, neutrality and balance is, more often than not, tacit agreement with a status quo determined by the state and the ANC. This is not to say that South African newspapers are not on occasion outspoken about state excess or corruption and even support a strongly liberal discourse. Nonetheless, as I have argued, this is a discourse that does not challenge the status quo even though it might tackle individuals or groups acting within, or against it.

South Africa has a media system that is essentially internally pluralistic, though it exhibits strong contradictory forces as a consequence of the powerful single party state. Usually, according to the Hallin and Mancini model, this would indicate a low level of political parallelism. In South Africa's case, this is not necessarily so. Indeed internal pluralism distorted by a democratic hegemony may well reflect a high degree of political parallelism. This is because a self-consciously neutral press may still depict little more than a political context that is overwhelmed by the discourse, personnel and policies of the dominant political party and its allies.

Hallin and Mancini identify five media system indicators that test the closeness of a country's media to its political system, or the extent of political parallelism:

1. the degree to which newspaper content reflects the political orientation of the newspaper title or its parent company;
2. the degree to which media personnel are active in political life, or where career paths are shaped by political affiliation;

² See *Media Tenor* (2004). 'Media's perception of political parties in South Africa in the run-up to the national elections in April 2004'. Presentation of data by Wadim Schreiner, *Media Tenor*, Pretoria.

3. the partisanship of media audiences;
4. the role or orientations of journalistic practice; and
5. the voice and writing style of journalistic culture.

Where newspaper content directly reflects the political orientation of the title or company, where media personnel are active in political life and where media audiences and journalists are demonstrably partisan, this suggests a system in which political parallelism is high.

An investigation of each of these indicators compels the view that political parallelism is a strong feature of the South African environment. Newspaper content does reflect the political inclination of newspapers, their editors and holding companies, whether they admit to it or not. The data on election coverage is compelling in this respect (Media Tenor, 2004). It is true that this partisanship is accentuated by the dominance of one party in South Africa's political system. A number of authors have also argued how the economic imperatives of media's big business context also contributes to the 'manufacture' of a political consensus (McChesney, 1992; Bagdikian, 2000). It is clear that in South Africa, media personnel are active in political life and their political inclinations do often play a role in their career paths. Media audiences are partisan. And journalistic styles and practices do reflect the history and imperatives of a political, advocacy-oriented approach to the conveying of news and information.

This does not suggest that elements of the South African media do not take their Fourth Estate role seriously. It does however indicate that pressures are being brought to bear on the fulfilment of this role. Collectively the 'answers' posed to the questions implicit in the indicators confirm the ubiquity and depth of the connection between the media and political system in South Africa. In addition, the trends identified in the post-1994 period indicate a deepening of this political parallelism. This would suggest that the South African media system is anything but a classic, Liberal model example. There are too many aspects that are more appropriate in the Polarised Pluralist model where the interchangeability of media and political elites, the partisan nature of media audiences, the high levels of external pluralism and the low degree of internal pluralism are all common features.

1.2 State intervention

The second "major dimension" concerns the degree of state intervention in the media. The notion of intervention is far broader than the establishment of a regulatory or legal framework. The state naturally plays a significant role in shaping any society's media system, argue Hallin and Mancini, "but there are considerable differences in the extent of state intervention as well as in the forms it takes" (2004: 41). These forms include the development of media policy, the provision of subsidies and funding to the media, the extent of libel and hate speech laws, the ease of access to and provision of information, the regulation of media concentration and secrecy laws.

Hallin and Mancini contend that the greater the degree of intervention by the state, the farther away the media system is from the Liberal model. This is because high levels of intervention generally signal a lack of autonomy in public administration and the judicial system, a patron-based distribution system for social resources and a highly divided and contested political terrain served by an equally divided and partisan media. All of these occur less commonly in Liberal state-media systems than they do in either Polarised Pluralist or Democratic Corporatist models.

On consideration of South Africa's model, it is clear there is a pattern of increasing state intervention in the media. As Anton Harber (2002) has said, "there is a long history in South Africa of the combination of market forces and political interference wreaking havoc with our media and with the practice and quality of journalism". An example is the growing dissonance between the dictates of South Africa's constitutional dispensation and the actions of the state. Even within the deeply sympathetic framework of constitutional rights, many loopholes exist and countertendencies have emerged. Old apartheid-era legislation – such as the 1968 Armaments Development and Production Act and the 1982 Protection of Information Act – containing deeply anti-press restrictions have been used by the state repeatedly in the new democratic era (see Tomaselli, 1997: 8). This practice has sparked the ire of South African editors and a series of meetings have been held with the highest branches of the state, including the Presidency, in the as yet unsuccessful bid to resolve the issue (see Barratt, 2006).

Overall, and in spite of the data on the level of support for it from virtually all branches of the media, government has consistently expressed its exasperation and frustration with the mainstream media and its role in the post-apartheid, democratic order. This was most recently illustrated by the furore over the *Sunday Times'* reportage of health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, which, in mid-2007, fuelled fresh calls within the ANC for the establishment of a media tribunal better to regulate the media (Boyle, 2007).

It is evident that the South African state in the post-apartheid era has expressed a particular interest in a range of possible interventions in the country's media. That these interventions have often been frustrated does not signal the end of, nor even any particular strain on, the consensual relationship between the media and the state. Indeed, the state's antagonism is grounded in its demand for a media that is more efficient at delivering on the state's agenda. The urgency stems in part, too, from the gradual concentration of power within the state executive and its consequent anxiety to direct the polity. This phenomenon has been widely noted by academics and authors in recent years. Gumede (2005: 305) refers to it as "democratic centralism", or "vanguardism". According to Butler (2007: 44), "power has drifted from society to state, from provincial to national level, from the legislature to the executive, and within the national executive from Cabinet to Presidency".

Hallin and Mancini set up five indicators to assess state intervention: degree of concentration of capital in media markets (creating an environment in which cosy relationships develop between senior political and media players); a recent shift from authoritarianism to democracy and the resulting blend of a system's paternalistic, authoritarian (and traditional) inclinations together with more pluralist elements; a majoritarian system of government with a weak level of accountability; breakdown in formal journalistic organisation (as evidenced by the collapse of the South African Union of Journalists); and, the degree of pluralism in a society.

A consideration of the data in relation to the indicators suggests, once again, that South Africa would fall into the Polarised Pluralist model. This is in spite of the vestiges of Liberal model values and inclinations. Certainly, the balance of forces suggests an increasingly powerful, if democratic, majoritarian state. The media is under great pressure to resist a series of anti-press measures contained in proposed legislation, as well as a raft of old laws still resiliently inscribed in law. The media has entered into a number of controversies and debates that have served to heighten tensions with the state, including over the role of the press in a developing democracy. The majority party itself appears ambivalent about this, in spite of its inclusion in party policy and its enshrinement in the Constitution, and is inclined to more forcibly harness its envied social, political and economic power. The media has, in any case, and perhaps unwittingly in many cases, bought into the ANC political contract.

With each of the indicators, South Africa's system corresponds largely to a Polarised Pluralist model with some notable Liberal and corporatist elements. Such contradictions are a common feature of all individual countries populating the Three Models, as Hallin and Mancini have conceded. The roots for South Africa's placement in the Polarised Pluralist cluster derive not only from the structures and dynamics of the new political dispensation but reach back through the apartheid, colonial and pre-colonial eras to long-standing patterns of social and political organisation.

It seems true, in addition, that not only is South Africa located in the Polarised Pluralist cluster, but that it appears to be moving deeper into it. The vestiges of liberalism and democratic corporatism are being gradually but systematically reduced. This even suggests a new model of media and politics in which Liberal elements are held in retreat and perhaps even in permanent abeyance by the power of a mass-based ruling political party in an environment of emerging, loosely-accountable majoritarian democracy.

1.3 Media market

The third "major dimension" identified by Hallin and Mancini concerns the structure of the media market and the discernible rise of a mass press. For Hallin and Mancini, it is not so much the size of the market as its "relationship to its audience and its role in the wider process of social and political communication" that locates that market within the comparative systems matrix. The media markets of the north European (Liberal and Democratic Corporatist) countries

do have high circulations, but they also address a mass public. They are not necessarily engaged in the political world, but rather take part in a vertical process of communication. This entails mediating between political elites and the ordinary citizen. The press in these models may also have a horizontal communication dimension, though not to the same degree as the Polarised Pluralist countries. In these countries, newspapers are frequently addressed to a small elite. This elite is mainly urban, well educated and politically active and the press is engaged in a process of debate and negotiation among elite factions.

The South African press has a history of appealing to political and social elites. This was true of the missionary press right back at its origins in the 1880s when various titles (such as *Izwi la Bantu*) were produced by and aimed at missionary-educated black South Africans. Johnson (1991: 21) writes that the establishment of *Bantu World* in 1932 "spearheaded the shift from a local to a mass black press" (Johnson, 1991: 20). But, like other attempts to develop the black newspaper market, this too failed. Tim Couzens (cited in Johnson, 1991: 20) identifies three reasons that consistently led to the constraint of a mass, black press in South Africa: financial difficulties, a fear of political militancy (by the state and by advertisers) and the intervention of white entrepreneurs. The combination of these factors, together with the powerful monopoly held by the Argus company, Naspers, Perskor and South African Associated Newspapers (SAAN, later Times Media Limited) and close state vigilance and intervention, ensured no mass press developed in South Africa until *Die Son* was launched in 2002. In the few short years since then, the tabloid mass press has sprung up from nothing to a powerful dominance of the South African newspaper market.

Hallin and Mancini state: "So far as we know, no country that did not develop mass circulation newspapers in the late 19th to early 20th century has ever subsequently developed them." This is clearly not the case in South Africa where a brand new, mass circulation newspaper sector has sprung up within the last five years. There now is a clear separation between quality (elite) and a mass press. Hallin and Mancini argue this has great significance for the development of media as political institutions. This may prove to be the case.

A further benchmark for evaluating a media system's location in the matrix is its balance of local, regional and national newspapers. Hallin and Mancini suggest that the more significant the national newspaper sector is, the more likely a country is to have a politically differentiated press. Once again, until fairly recently, South Africa had strong regional newspapers, some national titles and a paucity of local papers. However, this balance has changed dramatically. According to J. Malherbe (personal communication, August 3, 2005) Chief Executive, Newspaper Division, Media 24: "Thirty years ago, community newspapers didn't exist, but only a few mainstream titles. Now there are many more community newspapers than mainstream".

The key characteristics of the Polarised Pluralist model, say Hallin and Mancini, are to be found in the closeness of political actors to the media, in the heavy focus of the media on political life and on the relatively elitist nature of journalism. All of these would suggest South

Africa falls close to, if not in, the Polarised Pluralist cluster. While the South African media market has some elements in common with the Democratic Corporatist model, such as a sophisticated pattern of civic life, this corporatism does not find its way into the print media in any systematic way. The South African media market also exhibits clientelism, significant shortfalls in mass literacy and inadequacies in access to the media, together with an emphasis on a regional and national press that prevent it from being a convincing member of the Democratic Corporatist cluster.

Similarly, South Africa has the mature commercial element of the market and the sharp separation of quality from sensational press that would signal it may form part of the Liberal media cluster. But, it also lacks the predominance of local titles, the limited state role and the informal regulation that are the hallmarks of the liberal press.

1.4 Journalistic professionalisation

The final "major dimension" of the Three Models paradigm concerns journalistic professionalisation. For Hallin and Mancini, this is a key indicator characterising the relationship between the media and the state. It includes a range of factors such as skills levels, autonomy and ethical standards. The state of journalistic professionalism is informative, they argue, regarding the maturity of a country's system of rational legal authority and is also illustrative of the degree within society to which journalists can be persuaded to perform political tasks (instrumentalism). It is, therefore, an important indicator of the overall autonomy of the press.

Journalists in South Africa have achieved a significant degree of autonomy within their news organisations. Their work process is largely collegial and there is a formal and hierarchical structure in most newspaper newsrooms by which almost all material is subject to review. While it is extremely rare for corporate management to dictate the political content of South African newspapers on a day-to-day basis, there exists an unwritten consensus among senior staff of the print sector that determines attitudes to different political players.

In the post-1994 period, South African journalists have less job security, while two national surveys have demonstrated that the quality and skills of South African journalists are currently of an unsatisfactory general standard (see De Beer & Steyn, 2002). The poor maintenance of skills levels in the sector has been matched by the painfully slow progress within the sector as a whole toward standardising and formalising professional journalistic qualifications. The lack of participation by ordinary journalists in strategic decision making at newspaper companies demonstrates a general lack of autonomy in the sector. This is highlighted by the decreasing importance and autonomy of editors who have been marginalised for commercial and political reasons.

Over the last three or four years senior South African journalists have repeatedly got themselves into difficulty with a series of high-profile incidents of political instrumentalism, plagiarism and poor ethical conduct which collectively have brought disgrace to the profession and diminished

its social standing. It is clear that while journalistic norms have evolved in South Africa over the years and that these are held consensually by many working journalists, adherence to – and enforcement of – ethical principles and practices are declining.

While the Press Ombudsman of South Africa has been leading the self-regulation of the press for many years, it is clear that the authority and scope of the Ombudsman's powers have been challenged from a number of quarters. The mainstream press in South Africa publicly embraces the principles and practices of the Liberal model in terms of public service orientation. But it is also evident that close connections exist between the media and the political world, and these are being developed rapidly in an environment that is sympathetic to this trend. The mainstream press has felt growing pressure from the state to adopt an orientation that is more in line with its public-service objectives and less adversarial to the democratic state. And while Hallin and Mancini (2004: 38) suggest that the development of journalistic professionalisation has historically eroded political parallelism, South Africa's experience is that political parallelism is in fact eroding journalistic professionalism.

Overall, and measuring South Africa's experience up against Hallin and Mancini's indicators of autonomy, it would seem evident that South Africa falls closest to the Liberal model in terms of its journalistic professionalism. However, there are clear signs of a deterioration of many of these qualities and a certain drift toward the Polarised Pluralist model. Indeed, South Africa already has much in common with this latter model.

2. CONCLUSION

The application of Hallin and Mancini's Three Models paradigm to South Africa produces a worrying and perhaps controversial set of conclusions. One might have expected that democracy would be the midwife of a media that is increasingly robust, diverse and professional: one that is growing in confidence and increasingly autonomous from political life. That has been the experience of many countries that have enjoyed decades of stable democracy. Instead, the trends and interrelationships highlighted by comparative media systems analysis suggest that South Africa's media is on a path that is far less agreeable. The evidence indicates the deterioration of journalistic professionalism (quality and skills levels), the collapse of journalist trade union organisation, the growing incidence of ethical blunders and the rising trend of state intervention and court actions, among others. This is in spite of the country's deeply Liberal constitutional framework with its powerful set of clauses protecting the rights and duties of a free press. How is this possible?

As Hallin and Mancini contend, every country's media system is the product of its particular and often complex history. Trends and attitudes that were in evidence decades or even centuries ago have a tendency to influence current circumstances. Technological, economic and political advances do not always reverse these underlying factors. Instead, they shape and adapt what follows. In this way, the future direction of the most Liberal constitutional democracy in the world can be changed by its history, and by the values and beliefs that it encompasses.

South African media scholarship has considered neither the applicability nor the usefulness of the Hallin and Mancini paradigm, mainly because of its newness as a perspective. Instead, it has relied upon more traditional methodologies – mainly political economy but also culturalist and text-oriented – to understand the change the South African media sector has undoubtedly undergone over the last decade-and-a-half. The result has been a corpus of work that presents a useful understanding of the dynamics and symptoms of change. But there has been little appreciation of the broader context. For this, there needs to be a comparative dimension. There is no other way to consider whether the patterns of change experienced in South Africa are unique, or whether they match the experience of other countries and their systems. There is indeed much that South Africa holds in common with other countries about the manner in which its media and political worlds have developed and in the way they interrelate. This is clear from the Three Models paradigm. Comparability also suggests predictability, a vital element when analysing a new and possibly fragile democratic system.

Sufficient data are alluded here to indicate that, of all Hallin and Mancini's models, the Polarised Pluralist one is the model that most closely resembles South Africa's current media system. Populated by countries like Portugal, Spain and Greece, the Mediterranean style of media system that Hallin and Mancini call Polarised Pluralist features a high degree of political parallelism, low literacy and readership rates, a late and contested transition to democracy and an authoritarian tradition of intervention by the state. These characteristics are all shared by South Africa. In addition, the media is used as a tool to intervene in the political world, there exists the political will and basic structure of a welfare state, legal actions against journalists are common, and the state's grasp often exceeds its reach owing to a lack of either resources or consensus.

In addition, there are close personal relations between politicians and media owners and often intertwining of elites. There is a heavy focus on politics in South African newspapers and the mainstream print media in particular is aimed at elites and political insiders rather than a broad, mass public. The local press is underdeveloped. The South African media has also historically served and participated in the process of national bargaining (most particularly during the transition period from 1985 to 1995) and is an important means by which elites exchange information, set agendas and test alliances. The history of conflict in South Africa, like in the other Polarised Pluralist countries, encourages high voter turnouts at elections and affiliational rather than issue-driven ballot placing.

There are a number of features that South Africa does not hold in common with the Polarised Pluralist cluster. There is no strong party political press in South Africa (though as I have argued most newspapers support the majority party). Unlike countries like Spain and Portugal, South Africa has strong commercial media markets and a tabloid press. The typical Polarised Pluralist political system which is made up of many contending parties often themselves made up of factions, does not describe South Africa's political topography. Furthermore, newspaper circulations are generally low and journalistic professionalism is much less developed than in other models. As I have mentioned, though, the Three Models paradigm allows a considerable degree of flexibility in applying the "ideal type" clusters.

South Africa's location in the Polarised Pluralist cluster, in turn, becomes the "explanation" for many of the features that can be discerned in South Africa's media: the deterioration of journalistic professionalism (quality and skills levels), the collapse of journalist trade union organisations, the growing incidence of ethical blunders, the shifting relationship between media and state, the rising trend of state intervention and court actions, the interconnection between state and media elites and the development of a mass, non-political press: these are all hallmarks of media systems populating the Polarised Pluralist model.

The features of South Africa's media system that do not match this model perhaps indicate the direction of change. Thus the strong Liberal elements are vestiges of the South African media's past (and, with intervention, perhaps its future). But the deeper South Africa sinks into the Polarised Pluralist cluster, the more predictable are the features of its media and political systems.

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