The African National Congress, the print media and the development of mediated politics in South Africa

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Abstract

Modern politics are largely mediated politics, experienced by the great majority of citizens at one remove, through their print and broadcast media of choice. Any study of democracy in contemporary conditions is therefore also a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues

— McNair *Journalism and Democracy.*

This article shares in broad terms the global assumptions summarised by Brian McNair in this epigraph. However, it is mindful of the need, recognised by a recent text on 'de-Westernising' media studies, for a 'contingent and variable understanding of the place of the media in society' and for 'a greater sense of difference and variability than is usually registered in media theory' (Curran and Myung-Jin Park 2000, 15). It is in this spirit that the article tries to apply insights about mediated politics to contemporary South Africa. More specifically, it is guided by curiosity about the collision between national political systems and cultures, and various universalising forces in political values and ideology, as well as in the technology and political economy of the media. It is commonplace now to recognise, across the whole range of news and entertainment in the media, that globalisation is not all one-way traffic (Curran and Myung-Jin Park 2000, 7–8). Similarly, despite global trends in political communication that have been labelled *Americanisation* (Negrine 1996), national political cultures can be resilient and stubborn in the way they accept, adapt or reject the processes of mediated politics.

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Introduction

Politics in South Africa are subject to the influence of mediated politics, through osmosis, conscious imitation and deliberate encroachment. Yet the result is not

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seamless and unproblematic importation, but rather effects that may be described – according to perspective and taste – as adaptation, refinement or deformation.

The point is that where there is a combination of some form of liberal democracy with consumer-orientated media, especially where English is the language of the political class and, in addition, society and the economy are open to globalising influences, then an increasingly mediated political public sphere will develop. However, there can be many national attributes of politics, ideology, culture and economy, which will adapt and retard such developments. This is the situation in South Africa where the African National Congress (ANC) the dominant force in politics and government, appears at times to reject and at others to adopt and adapt mediated politics. The resulting contradictions and ambiguities spell considerable uncertainty for media and political practitioners, and as a result are of considerable interest to analysts and observers.

One specific theatre in which the uneven development of a mediated public political sphere can be observed in post-apartheid South Africa is in the conflicted relations between the ANC government and the political print media. At best, the ANC's relationship with the political press has been distant and neurotically suspicious; at worst, pathologically hostile.

Among the controversial issues involving the press, the ANC (and other 'transformative' bodies such as the Human Rights Commission (HRC), have been points of conflict such as the

- question of a submission by newspapers to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) accounting for their role and conduct during the apartheid years (1997)
- subpoena issued by HRC head Barney Pityana to white editors, summoning them to answer allegations of racism in the media (2000)
- bitter ANC reaction to newspaper speculation that the death of Parks Mankanhlana, former press aide to former South African president Nelson Mandela, was due to AIDS-related causes (2000)
- court action for defamation brought by the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper against Cabinet Minister Jeff Radebe (2000/2001)
- apology secured by cabinet minister and close presidential confidant Essop Pahad from the *Sunday Times* newspaper, for its coverage of the arms acquisition deal 'scandal' (2001)
- ANC's combative reaction to press criticisms of President Thabo Mbeki's leadership and character in the course of coverage of his policies on, among other things, HIV/AIDS and Zimbabwe (from 1999 to 2000).

The various sins of the political press, as reflected in the eyes of the ANC from these disputes, include following a skewed agenda of news values and 'Afro-pessimism' – both caused by ingrained racism – as well as overstepping the bounds of personal

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privacy, lacking due deference and respect for a democratically elected government (and national liberation movement) and professional incompetence[1].

The significance of this relationship is not in the mere facts of hostility and disdain. After all, in other democracies with free presses, governments and media do not much like or trust each other. Arguably, democracy can be all the healthier for this. However, two things set South Africa apart from other constitutional democracies who – like South Africa and its government – profess to recognise the importance of a free press for democracy. The first is the degree to which the government's hostility is systematic, continuing and open. The second, and for the purposes of this article, more important feature, is the absence of any significant effort on the part of the government and ANC, as it were, to advance into the media's own territory and deal with problems created for it by a free and critical press by means of extensive professionalised political communication and news management.

The tense relationship between the print media and the ANC government has tended to be understood – certainly by the antagonists themselves – in terms of allegations by the government of incorrigible racism on the part of the press, and counter-accusations from newspapers and critical commentators of creeping authoritarianism on the part of the ANC. This article goes beyond these terms of engagement and sees these tensions in the light of three tendencies, which include but are not confined to the reflex racial suspicions (whether 'real' or purely instrumental) of the ANC and the political fears of the press and liberal critics of the government.

First, 'legacy pathologies' of the public sphere and mediated politics in South Africa (including inequality of access and white domination of journalism and management) have provided fertile grounds for tension. Second, the ANC is clearly uneasy about 'generic pathologies' in the culture and values of mediated politics as they are practised in the developed world, and which critics have extensively documented there (see, among many, Gurevitch and Blumler (1995)[2]). Thirdly, it is possible that tensions surrounding the contested role of the print media in South African politics represent more than a clash of culture, the imperatives of racial transformation and ideological difference between the liberalism of the press and nationalism of the ANC (important though all these factors are). They point to basic dilemmas about the forms democracy should take as it is consolidated in South Africa. If this is indeed the case, the ANC can be seen as caught between the rival demands of mediated and popular democracy.

The effect of all this is that if South Africa is becoming a mediated democracy, it is one in which national particularities play an important part in shaping and about which no automatic predictions, based on extrapolations from the experience of more mature mediated political societies, can or should be made. These national particularities can be grouped under three headings: (1) the balance of political forces in South Africa; (2) the nature of the public sphere in South Africa; and (3) the nature of the ANC as a political movement. Before discussing the influence of these features, however, it will be useful to make some observations about mediated politi-

cal societies. The scope of this article does not allow for a full-blown comparison of mediated politics in developed and developing democracies. However, some salient characteristics of the former can be noted to contextualise South Africa's development in this direction.

The basic conditions

To begin with, there are several basic conditions of such development. The first requires constitutional arrangements that recognise liberal democratic rights and political processes of representative government. The second is a society sufficiently populous, complex and advanced to require a division of labour in which politics are professionalised. This increasingly means not only in the persons of public representatives, decision makers and the public policy technocrats who support them, but also in an increasingly numerous, professional 'interpretative class' whose members serve as intermediaries between politicians and the public (or audiences). The third basic condition is an economy that is able to support media institutions that are abundant, diverse and accessible to the whole population. This is a minimum condition of a credible public political sphere. A fourth is a political system that is not only pluralist, but also sufficiently competitive to set up reciprocal needs between the media and political parties. Under these basic conditions, mediated democracies develop as a response to one of liberal democracy's most basic dilemmas, that is, how – under the conditions of limited participation that mass society, the division of labour and liberalism's own logic between them impose – to recreate or at least mimic the authentic relationships and direct experiences that give the mythology of political democracy its enduring legitimising power.

Degrees of mediation

Of course the condition of being a mediated society is not absolute. It is possible in a representative democracy for a flourishing infrastructure of 'secondary participation' – mobilisation through parties and unions for political education and socialisation, elections and solidarity purposes, as well as through civil society for civic purposes – to coexist with high consumption of media products. For instance around 1950 in Britain, political party membership and readership of the political press were both much higher than they are today. In effect, for democratic societies there is always a balance of coexistence between participation and mediation. This balance is always a matter of debate and there can be quite vigorous disagreement on how it should be measured and the way in which the evidence is assessed.

Trajectories of mediation

Societies develop as mediated democracies in different ways and at different rates of development. In general, two forces are at work. The first is the pressure of so-

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cial, economic and political change. Increasing affluence, deregulation of the media, ideological convergence of parties and political de-alignment may all combine in complex chain reactions to favour the development of mediated politics. The second force is the direct cultivation of mediated politics by governments and political parties as a conscious strategy, especially in collusion with media institutions. In practice of course, the two forces are inextricable, but comparison of Britain and the United States of America (US) suggests that the balance between them may differ from society to society. In one, the development of mediated politics may be relatively seamless and 'natural', in terms of the social values, economic system and political culture. In another, the process may be punctuated by quite assertive acts of will by governments and/or political parties, which hurry the development along.

In the US, so many features of society, the economy and political culture favoured the development of mediated politics that it has seemed, on the surface at least, a natural outgrowth of them (see, e.g., Norris (1998) and Newman (1999)).

In Britain, increased affluence, political de-alignment, and technological and organisational change in the media industry all played their part. However, assertive and radical acts of will on the part of politicians also played their parts. Initially, what might be called the mediated revolution in British politics took place not because ideological difference was fading, but because, under Margaret Thatcher, it was being reasserted. In the same way, the development of professional capacities for media management, image branding, political public relations and control of internal communication by the New Labour Party has been another assertive act of strategic will in pursuit of radical objectives. In this case, the imperatives of reconstituting the Labour Party wholesale in pursuit of 'electability' have taken mediated politics to new heights, or depths (Gould (1999) can be read as a founding text for these things).

Adversarial collusion

For mediated societies to develop in any deep and ramified sense, politicians and the media have to reach mutual recognition on the need for relationships that are both collusive and adversarial. This is not new. The principle that in liberal capitalist societies the media and politicians need each other and use each other, but should not be seen to control each other, is as old as mass media and democracy. However, some novel features can be detected in the way mediated politics have developed in advanced industrial societies over the last 20-odd years. In the first place, the collusion is less a matter of media endorsing and promoting particular political parties (although, subject to limitations noted below, this is obviously still a feature). It is more the joint development and management of a system of news creation and dissemination that neither of the parties to it can (nor, for reasons of the system's overall credibility, *wishes to*) control completely.

Within this overall trend, four departures from the past are traceable. The first is that parties have to work much harder and more professionally to gain and hold media support. A natural accompaniment to this is that such support may be impermanent and subject to withdrawal. The second departure is that the media as a whole will adopt an adversarial approach to politicians as a class, treating them as an elite who should be subject to close populist scrutiny and to whom no deference and little enough respect are due. The third development is that as parties work harder and more professionally to present themselves, media – if they value their credibility – have to work much harder to distinguish news from spin and pseudo-events. This leads directly to the fourth and arguably the most novel effect, the rise of 'meta-coverage' of politics in the news, in which the spin is the story and parties are rated, as in the performing arts, for the skill, ingenuity and professionalism of their self-presentation (McNair 2000, 171).

In addition, there is a cultural basis for collusion – which does not exclude public hostility to each other – in that, as both the political and media worlds have professionalised, they have drawn together (Osborne 1999). It is not uncommon, in Britain and the US especially, for people to divide their careers between the two worlds. They are increasingly likely to be the products of the expanding education specialisations that feed both worlds with information and persuasion professionals. Arguably, media and political people are also culturally bound together by their insider's knowledge of the system's imperfections, wedded to the self-interested imperative of keeping that information to themselves. In this sense, media and political worlds to some extent constitute a single, closed world, apart from the audiences of voters and readers/viewers. It is an uneasy and compromised world of co-option and mutual exploitation.

Two other factors make for collusion between the political and media classes in the construction of mediated politics. The first is that the two worlds are symbiotic. In societies marked by extensive media penetration, and reduced political and civic participation parties (and individuals) need a high media profile. In a media culture defined by 24-hour broadcasting and the extension of print to a virtually 24-hour operation through the Internet, a constant, cheap source of news is also required, as well as an increasingly extended and relaxed definition of that commodity. In fact the latter development – the broadening of what constitutes 'news' – is one of the most obvious ways in which the collusion of the media and political worlds is seen.

The remaining factor is often alleged, but rarely – if ever – publicly acknowledged by politicians and media alike. It is the factor of direct trade-offs, in which favourable treatment is accorded to media businesses, notably in areas such as the regulation of the media, by parties and governments, in return for favourable treatment in press and/or broadcasting.

It should be emphasised that it is essential for the credibility of both parties that neither should appear the creature of the other. It is also important that each should insist that, in orientation and disposition, its primary relationship is with the audi-

ence/electorate rather than with its (largely unacknowledged) partner/adversary. In short, any suspicion that politicians and media do constitute a closed and collusive world of insiders should be resisted. It is in this light that the abrasive and intrusive populism of the tabloids, the knowing deconstruction of spin through meta-coverage that has become integral to the quality media and the regular explosions by politicians on the iniquities of the media should be seen. They are all in denial of the Faustian compact that binds them.

Hostility to mediated democracy

Critical awareness of the collusive and pseudo-adversarial relations of politics and media in mediated societies is one source of motivation for hostility to the deeper development of mediated democracies. This is heightened by portrayal of media and politicians as forming a self-enclosed, self-interested insider elite. Criticism also comes from other (mainly academic and media industry) sources, which label pathologies such as 'dumbing down' and 'infotainment' as inevitable accompaniments to mediated democracy. For instance, one typical academic critique summarises these pathologies in trenchant terms (Franklin 1997, 4) that refer to a

> more general tendency in contemporary journalism, evident in both print and broadcast media, to retreat from investigative journalism and the reporting of hard news to the preferred territory of 'softer' and 'lighter' stories. Journalism's editorial priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has superseded the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism . . . Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; 'infotainment' is rampant'.

A third line of attack comes from those who deplore the power of a new class of party media strategists – especially those who operate from power bases close to party leaderships. Their increasing influence is said to bring another set of pathological conditions with it. These include turning policies and party identities into commodities and a parallel decline in leadership and conviction politics at the expense of an obsession with consumer choice. Perhaps most importantly, the development of sophisticated media strategies, especially the imposition of uniform requirements for media performances by all party representatives, is believed to stifle internal party democracy. In this way, media advisers and strategists come completely to overshadow parliamentarians and grassroots activists.

It is not difficult to see in these criticisms generic pathologies of mediated politics, which an organisation such as the ANC would feel ambivalent about, poised between the worlds of pluralist party politics and managerial government, on the one hand, and, on the other, liberation movement vanguardism with its stresses on heroic tasks, great projects, authentic sharing of life experience and comradeship.

Political communication in contemporary South Africa

The subject of political communication has received no systematic analysis and discussion in South Africa since the transition to democracy in 1994. Insofar as the political roles of the media have been discussed (Tomaselli 2000; Teer-Tomaselli 1993; Jacobs et al. 2000; Haffejee 2000), it has been solely in terms of ownership and broad policy discussion (Horowitz 2001) as well as matters internal to the media industry itself such as the racial transformation of the workforce. What is largely ignored in writing about South African politics and media today is the 'political' side of the relationships that constitute the competitive struggle to influence and control popular perceptions of key political events and issues which takes place in all democracies nowadays among politicians and spokespersons of other interests and causes wishing to shape public policy (Blumler and Gurevitch 2000, 157).

Even, as a component of political science literature, whether authoritative specialised study (Schlemmer and Johnston 1995) or general survey (Lodge 2002),[4] political communication receives scarcely any attention and where it does, the focus is on the media, rather than the politics end of political communication (Jacobs 1999).

This omission reflects the fact that Anglo-American trends of mediated democracy have been slow and patchy to develop in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa. The ANC – the dominant political force in the country – has been reluctant to accept the need for ongoing organisation and management of political consent in a mediated sphere of politics. It prefers that the political sphere remain distinct and privileged, reported on by the media from the sidelines and, at the same time to claim an authentic, unmediated relationship with what it variously calls *the people*, *the masses*, or *the majority*. The media are seen as unnecessary to this relationship and are unwelcome in it. As a corollary, the ANC is equally reluctant to accept the professionalisation of political party communication strategies (and the increasing political influence of those who practise them), which is a marked feature of many, if not all liberal democracies under contemporary conditions. Above all, it has been reluctant to co-operate with the media in the construction of a jointly occupied political space in which they compete with others in a daily struggle for the reproduction of favourable political perceptions and the management of negative ones.

None of this is particularly surprising, since, as it will be argued below, many of the socio-economic realities and some, though not all, of the political features of post-apartheid South Africa run counter to the conditions that favour the development of mediated democracy in other liberal democracies. In addition, the dominant mythologies of the ANC – how it conceives of the nature and purposes of politics, how it sees itself and how it sees other political forces – also clash with the assumptions on which mediated democracies are based. Some aspects of society, politics and the economy do favour mediated democracy, though.

The situation is confused and patchy, and the ANC itself is ambivalent about, rather than straightforwardly hostile towards mediated politics. The key to the am-

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bivalence is that it has to recognise the influence of mediated politics to important constituencies both locally and globally, not least the central symbolic importance of mediated democracy in, and for, the powerful democratic states of the developed world[5]. At the same time, the forms mediated democracy has taken in these places, especially the lengths parties and governments have to go to win and hold media attention, are alien to the ANC's own self-conception as a liberation movement and the equally powerful symbolic importance of popular democracy that is essential to its mobilising mythology. This article will argue that the ANC as the governing and dominant political force in South Africa is caught uncomfortably between the demands and imperatives of popular and mediated democracy.

Mediated politics and the transition

On the face of it, a symbiotic relationship between political parties and the media should have been encouraged by South Africa's emergence from racial authoritarianism to democracy, and from state control of political communication through censorship and propaganda to the creation of a political public sphere. The passage through negotiations for the transition to democracy and the development of public policy in the first years of democratic government (for an account see Horwitz (2001)) left South Africa well endowed with the conditions for the growth of mediated politics. The Constitution enshrined liberal democratic values in the protection of freedom of expression and the commitment to the Freedom of Information Act further entrenched values supportive of a vigorous public sphere. The preferred model for a public sphere which emerged – notably in negotiations for a new broadcasting dispensation – expressed a clear preference for a mixture of public service and market provision as against state control or unfettered market dominance. The model of government that was chosen offered clear, though not necessarily intentional, encouragement for the kind of public sphere that has come to characterise developed democracies. It involves a high expectation of accountability combined with low provision for participation and a high degree of representation. The form of representation is dominated by parties – partly as a result of the list system of proportional representation – and rather impersonal and bureaucratic. With this goes fencing off of government into a technocratic sphere inhabited by public officials and policy specialists. These functionaries may – should – be responsive to media and popular intervention, but do not share their domain with either. Indeed, they expect respect and deference from both and guard the boundaries of their domain jealously. Indeed the essential criticism of the ANC from the left (e.g., trade unions and popular movements) is that (like any government, especially one with a substantial popular mandate) it demands a strong degree of autonomy in policy making and insulation from pressure applied by activist social movements (see, e.g., Bond 2000; Saul 1997, 2000).

To sum up, the transition celebrated the centrality of accountability in a competitive political system, secured by the confirmation of the media as an independent

political force. It also confirmed politics as the realm of the legitimately elected representative (though crucially at the level of party rather than individual) and the expert. In this paradigm, the citizen is essentially a spectator, making decisive interventions at election time and compensating for passivity at other times by access to abundant, high-quality information through the media. It would not be unreasonable to expect a culture of media and politics to grow out of these assumptions, which would in itself become an area of specialised expertise, partly shared and partly contested between politicians and journalists.

Several other factors complemented these basic assumptions; indeed some were directly derived from them.

An existing media infrastructure

In the first place, the material infrastructure for a democratic political public sphere already existed in South Africa when democratisation got under way. During the later apartheid years, the state-controlled broadcaster and the print media achieved a high degree of penetration and influence with the white electorate. Indeed, one of the notable features of white politics between the onset of the crisis of the mid-1970s and the end of apartheid was the wholesale mediation of its discourse. Arguably, the only way in which a majority could be created and reproduced in the white electorate for 'reform' (in all its tortuous manifestations) and ultimately for surrender of power was through the extensive transformation of the dominant Afrikaner nationalist portion of it. This was a transformation from an ethnically mobilised population (Adam and Giliomee 1979), buttressed by a civil religion (Moodie 1975) with extensive first-hand experience of politics in a ramified network of organisations, to an increasingly privatised and secular group. As Afrikaners came to see themselves increasingly in occupational, technocratic and material lifestyle terms, the media became increasingly important as the source, not only of information, but experience of politics (Giliomee 1982; Giliomee and Schlemmer 1989). The National Party government under P. W. Botha and F. W. de Klerk was quick to capitalise on this transformation and use state domination of the media – through persuasion as well as direction and regulation – as a crucially important weapon in fighting off the challenge of right-wing resistance to 'reform' and negotiation.

In this sense, white politics had already become heavily mediated, though not democratic. The logic through which the transition to democracy unfolded in this, as in other sectors of society and the economy, was that the bridgehead should be extended, that is, the experience of mediated politics, hitherto largely a white preserve, should be made inclusive of, or at least available to, the whole population. For this to happen, all concerned have realised that two conditions had to be fulfilled. The first is that the media would have to adapt to the possibilities and opportunities of democratisation, not only by taking advantage of freedoms that were previously denied, but also by negotiating a common and inclusive culture of political and media relations.

In any democratic society, the space created by formal rights and freedoms is not empty space; it is filled with negotiated conventions and practices, and cultural assumptions some of which may be unproblematic, others contested. Political, social, cultural and commercial pressures all combine to shape such a culture of political and media relations. The second condition is that media could not continue to be owned, managed, staffed and consumed so overwhelmingly by the white minority. Access and diversity were, and are, the keys to transformation of the media to contribute to the development of a political public sphere.

While making allowances for the need for transformation, there were grounds for supposing that the liberal democratic contours of the negotiated settlement and the existing media infrastructure could be put to good use in a reconstituted system of political communication. Between them they could act as a basis from which to extend a more democratic version of the existing model of mediated politics, which already embodied most white citizens' experience of politics, to a greater and greater portion of the new, more inclusive polity.

Socio-economic development

A second ancillary factor that made the development of mediated politics seem a logical outgrowth of the democratic settlement was the hope of socio-economic development. Less readily recognised than the insistent calls for transformation of the 'white' media was a very important corollary, that is, unless there was substantial progress in removing socio-economic barriers to access, even 'transformed' political media (in the sense of staffing, management, ownership and orientation) would be remote from large numbers of the population. As long as media are funded either on a public service basis (through licence fees) or commercially, barriers to inclusion can remain for large numbers of the population who are impoverished. Similarly, low educational levels need not be a complete barrier where radio and television are important media; nonetheless, the higher the level of education the more chance of sampling a range of media and mastering them with confidence. In this sense, it should have seemed a logical development that the redirection of priorities and focus on reconstruction, as well as specific measures such as affirmative action and black economic empowerment, would broaden the base of the population who could be included in an expanding system of mediated politics.

Opening to the world

A further impetus to the development of mediated politics is the influence of trends and developments from outside South Africa as a result of the end to the country's isolation. The effects of globalisation on the South African economy are directly acknowledged and debated, but less attention customarily is paid to the fact that national political systems, especially politico-media cultures, have also become more porous. This effect is accentuated by South Africa's traditionally strong anglophone elite

political culture, which, since the demise of Afrikaner nationalist rule, has become dominant linguistically. It is also deepened by the continuing (albeit now reduced) political interest from outside, which was stimulated by the moral significance of the struggle against apartheid and the drama of the negotiated settlement. The fact that South Africa still receives disproportionate coverage for a middle-income developing country of no particular geo-strategic significance is attributable to three things. It is widely perceived as an important emerging market, one of the most significant players in the international relations of the developing countries of the South and one of two key states in Africa. The net result is that, for good or ill, South Africa is drawn into an anglophone global media world, both as an object of interest and as a player. As a player, the South African government in particular has to deal with the global media's terms of engagement, exploiting them if possible, countering them if not. The values and practices of this world inevitably become factors in South Africa's own political communications system, as models to adopt, adapt or reject. One direct way this happens is by the participation of foreign investors in the South African media industry. With or without foreign ownership, commercial practices, programming and content values associated with success elsewhere may be copied. These might range from newsroom staffing levels, deskilling and multiskilling, which herald the decline of the specialist reporter, to a tendency towards infotainment (talk shows featuring politicians) and interactive programming (phone-ins and audience participation in the studio). Other indications of how a political communications system may become porous include the participation of overseas media and campaign advisers in political communication strategies, for example of South African political parties, as well as the direct access by South African consumers to global media products through satellite television and the Internet.

The effects of these things are not easy to summarise, but it is reasonable to assume that the importation of values and practices from societies whose politics are heavily mediated strengthens similar tendencies here and sets up points of conflict with the ANC's very different institutional and political culture. It is also worth noting a couple of other possibilities, which will be considered at greater length later. The first is that access to global media products on a commercial basis accentuates what has come to be known as 'information inequality'. The second is that the triangular relationship between local media, global media and the South African government can be a complicated and difficult one, especially where questions of South Africa's image are concerned.

Current developments

The argument so far has been that there have been general and particular reasons for anticipating the development of a mediated political public sphere in South Africa. Elements of continuity and change have combined in the negotiated settlement and during the first years of democracy to create these expectations.

What has, in fact, happened is that mediated politics have developed in a somewhat patchy and haphazard fashion. The ANC, perhaps because of its sheer size and advantage of government incumbency, and certainly because of the ambivalence of its commitments to be both a managerial, modernised governing political party as well as revolutionary liberation 'movement', has been wary of the possibilities of mediated politics. The nature of the political challenges to it has also been influential in reinforcing the twin effects of scepticism and hesitancy.

The opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) has moved much more quickly, openly and aggressively than the ANC to develop the kind of focused media and campaign strategies characteristic of mediated politics. Using focus groups to direct targeted advertising and media strategies that combine rapid response rebuttal with self-conscious image building around its leadership, it has successfully remobilised whites and other minorities by appealing to them as consumers, rather than on the basis of any deeper or longer-lasting attachment. Its achievements in using this approach to appeal to African voters have been disappointing and in the wake of the 2004 election, the party announced an extensive rethink of its image and political messages (*Sunday Times* 30 May 2004). However, this is likely to deepen and extend its commitment to political marketing, public relations and reliance generally on mediated politics, since, given its own nature and the terrain so effectively colonised by the ANC, there is no other way for it to go.

The DA's mediated, consumer-orientated approach represents one challenge to the ANC. Another comes from reawakened popular politics of direct action. This has two forms. The first is from single-issue groups such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), one of several 'AIDS world' groups that have been at odds with the government over its policies on the epidemic. The second is the broader-spectrum, anti-globalisation coalition of churches, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the ANC's own alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The popular politics of the ANC alliance and broader activist groups challenge the ANC on the grounds that it has become remote from its core constituencies and truly representative only of a multiracial elite that has been the main beneficiary of political and economic change.

The impression given by the ANC at the moment is that it is halted between these two political cultures, unable to accept the full implications of either and left with a contradictory hybrid of both. The first is liberal democracy, involving under present global conditions gravitation to mediated politics. This involves adversary collusion with media, which, in turn, means potentially unpalatable side effects. These include ceding, to some extent at least, the claim to direct, authentic, transcendent relationships with 'the people', in favour of day-to-day accountability and the permanent, ongoing reproduction of its own authority in and through the media. This means sacrificing its entitlement to the high degree of deference and autonomy in setting the political agenda that it currently expects, while allowing an intrusive role to

information classes (both inside – as its own strategic experts – and outside as media adversary/collaborators) in getting the message across. Gurevitch and Blumler (1995, 279) succinctly summarise the price parties and governments must pay under mediated politics as they struggle to set and control the agenda:

> [T]hey must tailor their messages to the requirements of journalists' formats, news values and work habits; and because this is thought to demand anticipatory planning, fast footwork and a range of specialist skills . . . a significant degree of 'source professionalisation' has emerged. By this we mean *the ever deeper and more extensive involvement in political message making of publicity advisers, public relations experts, campaign management consultants and the like.* (emphasis added)

The other alternative is some form of popular, participatory democracy, in which the ANC becomes more directly responsible to those constituencies with which it has (or should have) direct, unmediated relationships, without the intervention of media gatekeepers and technocrats as well as government and party spin doctors. Although this conception of popular politics is one of the various traditions that contribute to the mythology of ANC political culture, it is by no means the only one and the prospect of embodying it in current political practice also risks uninviting side effects. The most serious of these is the threat to the autonomy of the political sphere on which the ANC, unsurprisingly, given its large electoral majority, places great store.

The political public sphere in South Africa: information inequality and cosmopolitan versus parochial cultures

The political public sphere in South Africa consists of the broadcasting and print media who devote significant time and space to the coverage of politics. In terms of raw audience figures, broadcasting clearly dominates. Radio is accessible to 88 per cent of the population – principally in the form of the public broadcaster, the SABC – and close to 70 per cent of the population have access to television, also overwhelmingly provided by the SABC (Duncan 2000, 1). This makes for extensive coverage: 'The SABC controls 19 radio stations, attracting 20 million listeners daily. Radio News produces 2,000 news programmes a week with a combined airtime of close to 300 hours. The SABC's television service consists of three channels . . . attracting a daily audience of about 12 million viewers' (*World Press Review Online* 2001).

By contrast, the circulation of daily and weekly newspapers is limited. Calculations of sales and readership do not amount to an exact science, especially when assessing what constitutes contribution to a political public sphere, within these raw figures. However, one can say with confidence that consumption of print media is not high in a comparative global context. Calculations based on figures produced by the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) suggest a readership for daily papers in South Africa of just over 8 million. This is 31 per cent of the population over 20 years of age (or 26% of the population aged over 15 years)[6].

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Two things should be borne in mind about these figures. First, if we are concerned with contributions of the print media to a political public sphere, then it is probably wise to discount the readership of the country's largest and fastest-growing daily paper, the tabloid *Daily Sun*, since it carries no political news, analysis and comment whatever. This brings daily readership down to 6.3 million, which is 24.7 per cent of over-20s (20.7% of over-15s). Second, the SAARF figures are based on what could be regarded as optimistic projections of six to seven readers per newspaper purchased. Daily sales of newspapers are around 1.3 million (or, with a narrower focus on the political press and excluding the *Daily Sun*, about 1.1 million). Adding together all the SAARF figures for weekly and Sunday readership gives a total of about 18.7 million. However, the same qualifications that have been noted for the daily press apply (including the status of the *Sunday Sun*, whose readership, according to SAARF, is 1.9 million) with the added issue of multiple purchases of titles by consumer or household. It is also worth noting that the *Mail & Guardian*, which has figured most prominently and regularly in the roll call of conflict with the government, accounts for only about 1.3 per cent of the Sunday/weekly market. It bears repeating that calculations of sales and readership are rough and ready, and that influence can far exceed (or fall short of) what raw figures suggest on the face of things. Nevertheless, in the light of these figures and allowing for some inconsistencies, the verdict of *1998 World Press Trend*s seems of continuing relevance: 'South Africa now has the second lowest number of titles in the world in relation to population size (Indonesia has the lowest). The circulation or penetration of newspapers relative to population size is the fifth lowest in the world (after Thailand, Pakistan, Indonesia and Mongolia)' (Duncan 2000, 3).

This report also records that '[f]ewer than one in five adults read a daily newspaper and fewer than one in three reads a weekly' (Haffajee 2000, 3). According to the *World Press Review* 2001, only 36 per cent of South Africans use the print media as a source of information. By contrast, according to Brian McNair (2003, 171–172), 80 per cent of British adults read a daily newspaper and 75 per cent a Sunday title.

Inevitably, any consideration of the nature of the political public sphere in South Africa should begin with the legacy of exclusion and the imperatives of transformation. This legacy is of a public sphere that is historically geared – in ownership, management and orientation to audience interests and tastes – to the white minority. Moreover, the continuing effects of apartheid's wider legacies are felt still after reorientation of public policy, constitutional protection of freedom of expression and partial transformation of ownership and personnel in the media industries. The most obvious effects are exclusion by poverty, restriction by illiteracy and fragmentation by language and regionalism. According to a senior government communications policy maker, what we have is: 'Pluralism and diversity for a small number of people. Seven million people are completely out of the media loop. This is especially true of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape' (Pillay 2000)[7]. Significantly enough, these provinces

consistently return among the highest percentages of votes for the ANC at all levels of elections.

Apartheid legacies continue to perpetuate information inequality. The progress made so far with transformation has partly alleviated and partly complicated the problem. Racial inequalities in access to the political public sphere (especially in the sense of being able to make meaningful use of it) are still very important. However, they are being compounded by the growing differentiation between black 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. The former are defined broadly by access to city life, education and formal employment, while the latter are defined by their exclusion from these things.

It is possible to argue that South African print media belong to a wider, global information order (in ways that the public broadcaster does not) on two broad grounds. In the first place foreign participation in ownership is a prominent feature of the South African print media. Independent Newspapers, the Irish-based group headed by Tony O'Reilly, is the biggest newspaper group in the country, publishing 15 daily and weekly titles, and dominating the metropolitan English language market. Independent has over 30 per cent of the whole newspaper market, while Pearson (*Financial Times*) owns 50 per cent of the influential publications Business Day and the weekly magazine *Financial Mail*. Until 2002 the United Kingdom-based *Guardian* owned the *Mail & Guardian*. At a minimum, this means the parent newspapers frequently run stories written by South African staffers and, in addition to the well-established practice of syndicating, South African titles frequently carry stories, opinion and comment from their parent papers. Aside from mutually swapping stories, foreign ownership is likely to reinforce a common basis of news values and culture of comment. This is quite difficult to pin down and it would be wrong to underestimate the determination of South African journalists to be South African. Nevertheless, it would be surprising if there were not elements of a common journalistic culture and considerable crossover of newsroom practices, even among those who are not in the sprinkling of Rhodes Scholars and Nieman Fellows currently in South African newsrooms and boardrooms.

In addition, there is a broader information world which covers South Africa, including foreign correspondents, news agencies, ranking and political risk organisations like Standard and Poors and specialised information consultancies, which serve the business as well as growing government and international organisation markets for information. All of these rely heavily on the South African press. It is not difficult to see how a title like the *Mail & Guardian*, which is no more than a niche market newspaper in domestic terms (circulation 42 000), can be very influential in cosmopolitan terms. Its investigative and sometimes abrasive style – often portraying politicians as an elite, out of touch with ordinary people – is closer to cosmopolitan cultures of news and comment than most of South Africa's mainstream newspapers (see note 4 on the Independent Group). Availability through the Internet multiplies this factor of influence.

This discussion of the political public sphere in South Africa has focused on two things, the continuation of information inequality and the overlap between the South African public sphere and a global information world. For the purposes of the themes of this article, it can be argued that these characteristics have hampered and distorted the growth of mediated politics in South Africa. Several points can be made about information inequality. The first is the simple fact that the information inequality, which is associated with socio-economic exclusion, restricts the audience and market for media products, and hence the scope of mediated politics. The effects of information inequality do not end there, however. For governments and parties to accept the media (however reluctantly) as partners in the ongoing reproduction of public discourse and consent, they have to be convinced of the power and influence of the media with the electorate and the universality of public access to the media. Without these things, the media lack the credibility and authority that induce politicians to conclude pacts of adversary collusion with them. This is almost certainly a factor in keeping the ANC at arm's length from the print media. To compound the problem, the print media remain largely orientated to the electoral constituencies in which the ANC fares worst – whites and other minorities, and the cities – and distant from the rural poor, who vote overwhelmingly for the ANC (except in KwaZulu-Natal).

Relations between the ANC and the print media are also complicated by the influence of South African newspapers outside the country and their place in the global information order. ANC politicians frequently criticise South African newspapers for their 'Afro-pessimist' coverage, which feeds into investment ratings, market confidence in the currency and the prospect of foreign direct investment. For instance, the government's ten-year review of its own performance attributes the lack of foreign direct investment to 'poor information and the inclination of the media to portray the South African story as a confusing drama, rather than a saga of steady improvement' (PCAS 2003, 35). This too helps to stifle prospects for the development of a deeper version of mediated politics. It is worth noting, however, that this argument could be turned completely around. It would make as much sense to say that the problems of information inequality and the cosmopolitanism of the South African press could be reasons for greater and more intense interaction between the ANC government and the newspapers. To explain why this does not appear to be the case, it is necessary to look first at the political balance of forces in South African politics today and then at other aspects of political and media cultures in South Africa.

The balance of forces in South African politics today

In some respects, it is easy to relate the balance of forces in South African politics. The ANC achieved close to two thirds of the votes cast in each of the first two democratic general elections and surpassed that figure in the third. It is dominant at all three levels of government (i.e. national, provincial and local) including those

cities and provinces (Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) where between the 1994 and 2004 elections it was denied or had to share governing power. So extensive is the ANC's preponderance of power that some authorities see South Africa in danger of developing the pathologies of a one-party-dominant state (Giliomee and Simkins 1998), while others are more sanguine (Lodge 1999, 2002). What this preponderance means for politico-media relations, however, is that in the absence of genuine competition, there is no great incentive for the dominant party to cultivate the media and no great incentive for the media to cultivate the opposition. One of the principal building blocks for the development of mediated politics is thus removed.

However, there is a double temptation to see the media in a different context from the norm of mediated political societies, that is, for the media to see itself, or be seen by others, as the 'true' opposition and the guarantor of accountability, in the absence of strong parliamentary opposition. Conversely, under these circumstances, there is a temptation for the government to see the media as out of step with the great majority of the population and a virtually subversive force. The racial question, the skewed nature of the print media sector of the political public sphere and the influence of critical local media on overseas opinion are all helpful to personalising relations in this way.

In these ways then, the balance of forces works in fairly straightforward ways to compound the suspicions and increase the distance between government and the political print media. But the balance is more complex than the crude voting figures suggest. Effectively, the ANC government faces three kinds of opposition, each of which poses a very different kind of challenge and forces the ANC to defend itself on quite different ground. In the first place, the print media – in varying degrees – canvasses the danger of the ANC becoming a political elite, made remote by the distance and prerogatives of office from the direct concerns of ordinary people, for whom the newspapers become champions. This kind of 'opposition' is characteristic of media that do not have major ideological or even policy differences with governments, but practise vigorous populist interrogation of mismanagement, corruption and other pathologies of political systems that do not feature genuine competition. When the British Conservative Party had been in power for over a decade, the press took up 'sleaze' as its rolling preoccupation, signalling that the government had grown flaccid in an uncompetitive environment. Even before the end of Tony Blair's first new labour administration, the ongoing story was 'spin'. It was not so much length of time in office, but the government's huge majority that prompted stories about its remoteness. Of course, in neither case did the media have much to quarrel with the government over ideology and policy.

Aside from the media, the other two forces at odds with the government are the orthodox parliamentary rival, the DA, and the loose coalition inside and outside the ANC alliance, which proposes a more radical alternative to the ANC's economic policies. Each represents not only policy and ideological differences, but also quite different views of the nature and ends of politics. Effectively, the DA represents a

'consumer' political culture, where there is (or should be) a political marketplace functioning on situational and shifting choice, where parties claim to represent abstract values and managerial competence. The alliance left represents a version of a 'comrade' political culture, stressing long-term solidarity, shared life experience between voters and representatives and popular access to decision making through activist social movements. It is in the middle ground between the two, where the ANC has to face in both directions at once, that the contradictions which beset both mediated politics and the development of a political public sphere in South Africa are most fully worked out.

The ANC: building a consumer society with a comrade ethos?

One of the most powerful constructs in the vocabulary of South Africa's contemporary political culture is that of 'comrade'. The appropriation, manipulation and claim to embody this persona and ethos are essential to the politics of the ANC alliance. It should come as no surprise, however, that the concept of 'comrade' is a contested one. The more pervasive and influential a political concept is ('democracy' is the universal example) the more open to interpretation it becomes. Despite this, the comrade ethos has not received much analytical attention (but see Adler and Steinberg 2000). What follows is an attempt to relate its various manifestations to the rival conceptions of consumer and mediated politics.

When the idea of comradeship is invoked politically, it is fair to assume that the following features are in play. First, relationships are direct and authentic, based on shared experience and perhaps common participation in struggles. Representation is understood to be a matter not (or not merely) of custodianship and advancement of interests, but symbolising and embodying life experience. It is on this basis that individuals and movements claim the confidence and trust of others. Political identification is not so much the choice between alternative parties, but the realisation of destiny. The contrast with mediated politics is quite marked, in the sense in which the media play roles of gatekeeper, interpreter and auditor in order, among other things, to help political consumers make their choices. Of course this does not mean that the comrade ethos is altogether alien to mediated politics; the mass media can be used to foster and deploy a comrade ethos, as they can be used for any political purpose.

The second feature is a focus on heroic rather than managerial politics. In this sense, large projects, teleological narratives and an emphasis on sacrifice are prominent, as in this extract from a campaign speech by Thabo Mbeki to an audience in rural Transkei: ' ''We hear your cries because they are legitimate cries. You must put your trust in us. We have buried too many of the sons and daughters of this region in Angola, Zambia and other places to forsake you,'' he says, and the crowd roars with approval' (Malala 1999).

A further effect arises out of a combination of the first two, which clashes directly with the common expectations of mediated politics as they are developing in other

liberal democracies. That is an expectation of deference, which in theory attaches itself not to the party or individual elected officials, but to what they represent; the pervasive shared experiences of the people, the scope of the tasks and the importance in human terms of their realisation. However in practice it is difficult either for politicians themselves or for the media to separate sacred history from all-too-fallible individuals; so the grey area of respect and deference is a fertile terrain of acrimony when comrade ethos overlaps with mediated politics.

Three of the characteristics help define the generic comrade ethos in politics. First, it is an exclusive status, separate from the universal category of citizenship and potentially in conflict with it, when a government exploits the ethos to achieve power and then has to govern impartially as arbiter of competing interests and identities. It is not difficult to see tensions of this sort in the politics of the ANC alliance. Second, following from this point, a political movement organised around the concept of comradeship requires members not to see themselves in terms of individual and/or sectional interests. Again, this is a source of tension in alliance politics. Thabo Mbeki alluded directly to the issue in a speech to the SACP in June 1998, in the context of criticisms of the government's macroeconomic policy from the alliance left:

> Do we have the right to call one another comrades, signifying a commitment to our fellow combatants for liberation – *Amafel'andawonye* – or are we calling one another comrade simply because we are no longer used to calling one another Mr., Mrs. or Ms? [. . . I]t may very well be that some among the ranks of our Congress movement believe that the struggle for national emancipation is over. If this point of view prevails, the forces which we all represent . . . must now advance their own partisan interests outside of our historic mission and alliance [. . . and] then we must indeed say farewell to the Congress movement. (Singh 1998)

Third, the comrade version of politics extends what is the legitimate purview of political consciousness and action from the narrow confines of liberal democracy. The comrade is a political being in a much wider sense, in his or her civil and working life. This is made clear by the ANC's professed intention of 'deploying comrades' to dominate all significant sectors of society and the economy. Again it is not difficult to see how these things conflict with the premises of mediated politics and a political public sphere in a liberal democracy. They cut across the organising principles of individual, universal citizenship, rational choice and self-interest, as well as the separation of politics into a separate sphere of life, which underlie the typical mediated politics of developed liberal democracies.

The point is not that the ANC chooses a wholesale comrade ethos to the exclusion of all else. It has embraced 'managerial politics' with enthusiasm, eager to show that its technocrats and policy makers are capable, responsible and responsive to current 'realities'. It oscillates between self-portrayal as the unifying and arbitrating force in a diverse and divided society on the one hand, and the revolutionary vanguard of a newly liberated people which is still oppressed by poverty on the other. Some of

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these tensions are acknowledged frankly in party discussion documents (e.g., ANC 1998):

> The ANC has, correctly, sought to professionalise its capacity to fight and win elections. We need to constantly improve on this capacity. This requires dedicated and year-round attention to mass media messages, the projection of key leadership personalities, constant polling and all of the techniques of modern, multi-party electioneering. *However these must be complement and be woven into our movement character as opposed to supplanting it.* (emphasis added)[8].

These are not the only sources of confusion. The policy of black empowerment with the avowed aim to create a class of African entrepreneurs, when seen in the context of social mobility and rising inequality among black South Africans, stretches the meaning of comradeship and fraternity to the limits. Not only the trade unions and communists are confused when they feel that the comrades in the alliance are being sold short by the adoption of orthodox macroeconomic policies. Business and investment communities find the juxtaposition of free market reforms with military rhetoric and tainted commandist jargon confusing too. For instance, 'democratic centralism' is frequently invoked, presumably in defiance, or ignorance, of its soviet associations (Ellis and Sechaba 1992, and for a recent discussion see Lodge 2000).

The truth is, however, that there would be heavy political costs in making the ANC's political culture more consistent and streamlined by leaning more decisively in the direction of either consumer or comrade directions. The former would risk abandoning the ANC's past, ceding it to whatever radical, populist coalition cared to pick it up and exploit it. The latter would clash obviously and ominously with the ANC's chosen policy of transforming South Africa by making it a successful, competitive emerging market in a capitalist world economy. To do so successfully means more than 'deploying cadres' and exhorting comrades to create a patriotic bourgeoisie. It involves everyone at all levels of society internalising the values of individual choice and rational self-interest, hardly the most fraternal of prospects.

In these respects, South Africa's political culture is becalmed between two tendencies, one of which appears in a fairly pure form in the DA and both of which coexist uneasily in the ANC. It is in the inability to realise either more fully that the specific developing forms of mediated politics and the political public sphere in South Africa are most fully seen. As South Africa enters its second decade of democracy, the relationship between the ruling party and the print media continues to be uneasy. The ANC remains poised between reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of mediated politics and determination to preserve the mythology of direct, unmediated and uncontaminated relationship with the undifferentiated (and romanticised) 'masses'.

The attempt to harmonise the two is symbolised by the recent appointment of ANC heavyweight Murphy Morobe to a post coordinating communications for the presidency. According to media reports, he will direct responsibility for tackling head on the poor relationships between the presidency and the media, as well as making

sure (in Morobe's words) 'that the president has the pulse of ordinary people' (This Day, 19 May 2004). Meanwhile, the determination of the ANC to short-circuit the print media's claims to be the gatekeeper and interpreter of the political public sphere is carried by the online publication ANC Today, and in particular the 'Letter from the president' which is frequently used by Thabo Mbeki to denounce the iniquities of mediated politics[9] and celebrate the bond between the party and the masses.[10]

Conclusion

This article has tried to contribute to a broader and more 'political' interpretation than is usually offered of the distance and tensions between the ANC and the print media. Although the ANC does vary its line on the media according to circumstances, at worst it regards newspapers as hotbeds of reaction and racism. Journalists and editors, for their part, regard the ANC at worst as having one-party ambitions to stifle and suppress freedom to criticise and hold the government to account. At best, each regards the other as incompetent in communicating with each other and the public. These are real perceptions and this article does not dismiss them. But it has tried to fill out the picture around them by noting trends in democratic politics elsewhere, establishing that such trends are transnational in character, but arguing for the specific national political, social, economic and cultural particularities that are shaping them in South Africa. In noting the effects which the balance of political forces, the nature of the public sphere and uncertainties of political culture have had on the development of a political public sphere in South Africa, the article has tried to make a contribution to the comparative study of what is becoming a universal phenomenon, mediated democracy.

Notes

1. For a recent report of continuing tensions in a broadsheet daily, see R. Munusamy. 2004. Government, media walk the tightrope in tense relationship' *This Day*, Johannesburg 21 June.

2. These authors (p. 285) refer to a 'crisis of legitimacy' in journalism.

3. However, for a vigorously argued contrary view, see McNair (2000, 171–172), who claims that a 'demystificatory, potentially empowering commentary on the nature of the political process' is emerging and argues that 'increased accessibility of contemporary political debate and heightened accountability of political elites' are beneficial effects of intensified mediation of politics.

4. Lodge devotes a couple of paragraphs to political news and journalism, which note the political caution of the country's biggest newspaper group, Independent Newspapers. While expressing concern at the ANC's attempts to intimidate black journalists as surrogates for whites (the central issue in the *Mail &Guardian*'s defamation case against the government), he concludes that '[t]he vulnerability of the South African press has more to do with its own shortcomings than with the government's attitude towards it' (p.171).

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5. Western reactions to the destruction of press freedom in Zimbabwe are a reminder of this.

6. Calculated from 2001 Census figures for population by age groups (Statistics South Africa 2003, 27)

7. Presentation by D. Pillay, Government Communication and Information System at Democracy 2000, Information, Power and Democracy, a workshop hosted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, October 2000.

8. For an optimistic, insider's view of the dual character of the ANC, see Turok (2000).

9. See, for instance, Vol. 1 (1) 26 January 2001 (inaugural issue, which proclaims the need for the ANC to have 'direct' communication to circumvent the 'minority' media); Our country needs facts, not groundless allegations, Vol. 3 (31) 30 May 2003; 'In search of enemies', Vol. 4 (23) 11 June 2004.

10. See, for instance, The voice of the people cannot be ignored, Vol. 2 (43) 25 October 2002.

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ANC *see* African National Congress.

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PCAS *see* Policy Coordinating and Advisory Services of the Presidency. 2003 p. 35.

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SAARF *see* South African Advertising Research Foundation.

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