

Knowledge and Ideas in a Context of Power: Rethinking Media Policy and Reform in Southern Africa



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ABSTRACT

The discourse of media reform emerged in southern Africa in the early 1990s on the back of a 'democratisation agenda' supported by policies by Western donors. While much academic attention has been paid to the analysis of media reforms in the region within democratisation and globalisation frameworks, less sustained analysis has been made in examining the role of bilateral and multilateral donors, in conjunction with various Western epistemic communities, in pushing a neo-liberal media reform agenda, which this paper argues is a continuation of the developmental project that started in the 1960s. In addition, discourses framing media reform policies and the manner in which domestic (read southern African) policy elites are incorporated into this neo-liberal transnational project have not been subject to systematic inquiry. This paper will dialogue with two conceptual positions: coloniality theories and postcolonial approaches to argue that the 'media and democracy' agenda, as a modernity project, has been an imposition of ideas and priorities from Western actors to advance certain material interests. In conclusion, this paper provides alternative ways of (re)conceptualising media reform in southern Africa.

Keywords: Media reform, global actors, ideas, interests, coloniality, postcolonial theories

1. INTRODUCTION

The period between 1990 and 1995 witnessed a wave of political and economic reforms in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), which Huntington (1991) has termed the 'third wave' of democratisation. Politically, there were shifts from one party and military regimes to multi-party democracies. These shifts had their genesis in a complex and interlinked chain of events, both internal and external. The major impetus for democratic change was externally motivated and rooted in the changing conditions in international geopolitics after the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Political pluralism was accompanied by the liberalisation of economies in many African countries. The economic and political reforms entrenched the 'democratisation' agenda, which promoted broader media reforms in the print and broadcasting sectors in SSA (Hyden *et al.* 2002; Moyo 2006). Press freedom and media diversity became major concerns for

bilateral donors and international organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

A landmark development that placed press freedom and democracy on the policy agenda in SSA was the UNESCO-funded 1991 *Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic Press*.¹ Since then, two more media reform documents/declarations have been produced. In 2000, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and other media-related non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in the region campaigned for the launching of the African Charter on Broadcasting, which was endorsed by UNESCO. Both the *Windhoek Declaration* and the *African Charter on Broadcasting*² in turn fed into the influential *Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression*, adopted in 2002 by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights of the African Union. This declaration remains the main blueprint for desired media reforms in SSA and continues to serve as a benchmark for best practice media environments in Africa. In September 2011 the *African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) Declaration*³ was adopted at the Pan African Conference on Access to Information (PACAI).

This article is concerned with the relative neglect of questions concerning power in debates on media and democracy. The neo-liberal paradigm that has shaped media policy reforms in many developing countries has obscured the workings of power in a global political economy and disguised its ideological underpinnings. This masking does not leave room to problematize global structures directing knowledge production and media policy reforms. Academic accounts of media and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa have predominantly derived their analyses from two dominant approaches. The first one, liberal democratic and normative accounts primarily focus on political-legal issues such as freedom of expression and questions of state-media. The second is the structural approaches such as Marxist and political economy approaches that give a critique to processes of media deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation and commercialisation that came in the wake of globalisation in the early 1990s (e.g. see Ronning 1994, Tomaselli and Dunn 2001; Heuva, Tomaselli, K and Tomaselli R 2004; Banda 2006; Moyo 2006; Moyo and Chuma 2010).

Without dismissing their utility, these approaches have made little or no effort to problematize the role of actors, ideas and interests in shaping the media and democratic agenda. This paper contends that the dominant normative approaches to studying media and democracy are not adequate to problematise the role of bilateral and multilateral donors in pushing a neo-liberal media reform framework and to critically examine the discourse and ideas underpinning media reform debates. In addition, the role of NGOs, which who have been the main drivers of media reform in southern African, have also not been not been subject to systematic inquiry. The specific objectives of the paper are to contribute to new theoretical ways of analysing media policy reforms in southern Africa by drawing on a radical theoretical frame to:

- examine the role of donors and private think-tanks in media reforms;
- analyse the production of policy ideas and how this is tied to donors' material interests; and
- understand how policy actors and NGOs in the South appropriate dominant discourses on media reforms and act as 'translating centres' for this discourse.

In order to address the three objectives above, this paper draws on a new form of critical theory known as the decolonial thought, arising primarily out of Latin American scholarship in world-systems, sociology, literature and philosophy. Scholars within this approach take a different geopolitical positioning by introducing a critical alternative Latin American perspective to the long history of hegemonic, Eurocentric knowledge production (Wiltberger 2008). Theories under the decolonial approach attempt to deconstruct knowledge and power relations that characterise modernity, which is seen as a project rather than a natural, evolutionary stage in history. As this paper argues, the media and democracy agenda promoted by bilateral and multilateral donors is a modernity project.

The relationship characterising donors and recipients of aid in the South is therefore analysed through the prism of the coloniality approach. The paper also attempts to create a conversation between the decolonial approach and postcolonial theories, which fall under the broad rubric of post-structuralism. Decolonial scholars are critical of post-structuralist approaches for ignoring histories, subjectivities and experiences from subaltern locations (Grosfoguel 2007; Walsh 2007). As argued by Walsh (2007; 227), critical theorists informed by Marx and the Frankfurt School, ‘understood history, injustices and struggles in the context of Europe, a struggle marked by class, not by colour, modernity, not by coloniality’, and Mignolo (2005: 403) states that Marxism for instance was ‘blind to racial oppression and the reproduction of the colonial wound’.

Although the two approaches can be seen to be in tension, this paper uses them in dialogue as postcolonial approaches are useful in analysing the relationship between Western representation, material power and knowledge production. Through the lens of postcolonial theories, the material and ideological legacies of the colonial encounter that shapes and influences the relationship between donors and recipients is problematized. I argue that this asymmetrical relationship has implications for discourses shaping the media and democracy debates.

This article is structured into five sections: The first section outlines the two theoretical approaches guiding this paper – the decolonial and postcolonial. This is followed by a section that examines actors and interests in media and democracy debates. This section also problematizes and contests the dominant discourses of neo-liberal democracy and their link to media. This paper argues that ideas framing media policy documents are not neutral, but operate in a context of power. In section three, I therefore argue that actors, with the backing of material resources, propagate ideas and create a hegemonic understanding of social reality, leading to a situation where systems and discourses seem ‘natural’ and become beyond critique (Cox 1986). Ideas are transferred from Western actors to NGOs in southern Africa through technical assistance and several discursive channels. Section four demonstrates that media freedom NGOs in southern Africa act as ‘translating centres’ that help shape responses to efforts to consolidate the hegemony of the media reform agenda at the regional level. The paper ends with a call to rethink the media reform agenda theoretically and in praxis.

2. CRITICAL AND DECOLONIAL APPROACHES: COLONIALITY OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

Theoretical insights derived from critical and decolonial perspectives offer different vantage points from which to explore concerns of power in media reform policies. Using the term ‘coloniality’, coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (1991), decolonial perspectives attempt to understand the ‘continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administration’ (Grosfoguel 2007: 219). Colonialism is different from coloniality. Colonialism refers to political domination that existed under colonial institutions while coloniality denotes a pattern of widespread and deep-reaching operations of power that continues to produce, use and legitimise differences between societies, subjects and forms of knowledge (Banazak and Ceja 2010).

This coloniality of power comprises four interrelated domains of control in areas of authority, gender, sexuality and knowledge, and forms a dynamic part of global imperial designs that continue to exert power over the four areas mentioned above (Quijano 2007). I argue in this paper that this coloniality of power is implicated in global processes that direct and fund media and democracy projects. It is argued that the democratisation agenda, under which the media reforms project falls, has been central in promoting the West’s foreign policy interests (e.g. see Scott 1999; McFaul 2004; Scott & Steel 2011). As Saltman (2006) and Reifer and Mercer (2005) have shown, democracy promoting initiatives are not benign, but are usually tied to the donor countries’ geo-strategic priorities.

Coloniality theories are also concerned with issues of knowledge and ideas. Coloniality of knowledge refers to the manner in which Eurocentric knowledge systems are privileged over other knowledges and epistemes (Mignolo 2007). Quijano (2007: 169) states that ‘African modes of knowing of producing knowledge, and of producing perspectives became subordinated to Euro-American epistemology that assumed universal proportions and universal truth’. Hegemonic narratives are thus projected as absolute and other knowledges outside the bounds of Western modernity are ignored, marginalised or repressed. More critically, however, coloniality speaks to the issues of location and the locus of enunciation. Grosfoguel (2007) articulates that knowledge is situated and in terms of the locus of enunciation, the location of the enunciator is geopolitically and historically important. For instance, one can be geographically located in Africa, but articulate issues affecting Africa from the loci of the empire.

3. POSTCOLONIAL THEORIES

This article is also interested in analysing the discursive articulation of ‘media reforms’ and ‘media and democracy’ in the context of the neo-liberal and modernisation strategy promoted by Western actors. In this regard, postcolonial theories assist in critiquing the modernist ideology underpinning the democracy project. Therefore, postcolonialism,

[problematizes] the very ways in which the world is known, challenging the unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at the heart of western disciplines that are profoundly insensitive to the meanings, values and practices of other cultures. They challenge the meaning of development as rooted in colonial discourse depicting the North as advanced and progressive and the South as

backward, degenerate and primitive (McEwan 2001: 97).

Much of postcolonial theory ‘challenges the epistemic, ideological and political authority of Western and elite knowledge’ (Prakash 1994, cited in Chowdry and Nair 2001: 13) and the ways in which the colonial/imperial projects continue to shape the postcolonial world and the production of postcolonial and western identities. To this end, this article undertakes a postcolonial critique of the dominant discourses of media, democracy and globalisation. As McEwan states, Western dominant discourses in the area of developmentalism ‘are unconsciously ethnocentric, rooted in European cultures and reflective of a dominant western world-view’ (McEwan 2001: 94). Postcolonial approaches are used not only to critique the discourses of media and democracy, but also to problematize technical assistance practices promoted by donor and development agencies.

4. MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: ACTORS, IDEAS AND INTERESTS

As stated earlier, in the early 1990s southern Africa witnessed a dramatic transition from one-party, autocratic and apartheid regimes to pluralistic and multi-party systems. These political reforms emerged alongside the promotion of independent and plural media, deregulation of broadcasting and telecommunication systems, and proliferation of new media channels (Bourgault 1995). The *Windhoek Declaration* stated that an independent press is ‘essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation and for economic development’ and was one of the key impetuses behind the emergence of the privately owned press mainly in southern Africa.

As Putzel and Van der Zwan (2006) state, the democratisation project was strongly influenced by the neo-liberal agenda that viewed the advance of markets as the driver for political and economic changes. Donors and international financial organisations put forward an argument that there is a correlation between the existence of a liberal media and economic growth in developing countries. In addition, a free media was seen as a tool to usher in democratisation. For instance, objective of Article 1 of the *Windhoek Declaration* is ‘to promote an independent, pluralistic and free media’ in pursuit of the development and maintenance of democracy. This became the main objective of a regional media freedom organisation, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA),⁴ formed in 1992 following the passing of the *Windhoek Declaration* the previous year.

As Moyo (2006: 163) states, ‘the formation of MISA coincided with the beginning of Africa’s “democratisation decade” and therefore donors keen to see the spread of democracy in the region responded with generous funds’. Major donors such as USAID, Norad, Sida, Danida, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Open Society Institute, have been active in promoting media reforms. While there is a plethora of research on media and democratisation, many accounts of processes of democratisation and media reform are ahistorical and often decontextualized from historical situations.

As stated earlier, the democracy project can be seen as continuation of the developmental mission that started in the 1960s, which represented the ‘Third World’ as backward, problematic and in need of Western intervention (see Escobar 1995). Similarly, as Robins *et al.* (2008: 1077) argue, the exporting of liberal democracy to Africa by Western donors, NGOs and governments, can

be seen as part of ‘new civilising mission’ that seeks to modernise and democratise the Third World, and in doing so, it reproduces images of the Third World as ‘failed’, ‘weak’, ‘corrupt’ and ‘undemocratic’, thus peddling an image of Otherness.

This corresponds with arguments made by Okwudiba Nnoli who is critical of the way the ‘political affairs of various African countries are currently painted with a common brush as authoritarian, collapsed, kleptocratic, corrupt, illiberal, personalistic, traditional, and inefficient’ (Nnoli 2005, cited in 2008:4). Similarly, Hill (2005: 140) argues that the description of African states as weak, failed or collapsed, so predominant in various literature within the discipline of International Relations, positions ‘African states and societies as the deviant Other to those of Western Europe and North America’. Correspondingly, the measurement of democracy in Africa is measured according to universal and Euro-American standards of what democracy means (see Koelble and Lipuma 2008).

This article argues that the media and democracy agenda is a construction emerging out of historical encounters (e.g. colonialism) and grounded in unequal power relations. The promotion of democracy conveniently serves the interests of donors, Western governments and institutions that are the primary beneficiaries of neo-liberal globalization within the global capitalist system. For instance, throughout the 1990s and beyond, aid in southern Africa was tied to conditionalities tied to good governance and the opening up of markets. Through these conditionalities, countries in southern Africa were forced to realign their policy frameworks with those of the West as a precondition for participating in the global economic system. I argue that these political and economic reforms, together with the aid conditionalities that accompanied them, opened avenues for the transfer of policy ideas, instruments and frameworks, under the mantle of promoting democracy and good governance. In relation to the governance agenda of the early 1990s, Ihonvbere argues:

In the majority of African states, development planning, financial matters and public policy were already being determined, influenced, or severely constrained by the policies, interests, and power of these bodies [World Bank, IMF and bilateral donors]. Political conditionality therefore, would create a platform to using the disbursement of foreign assistance to condition, influence, and determine the content and context of politics, the political agenda, and the overall ideological content of politics (Ihonvbere 1994).

This ‘disciplinary neo-liberalism’ (Haardstad 2012) or ‘global coloniality’ as Grosfuguel (2007) calls it, is an imposition of neo-liberal policies and market structures on nation-states by multilateral institutions, pushed through via the traditional tools of conditionality.

5. IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN A CONTEXT OF POWER

As Escobar (1995) and McEwan (2001) argue, language and ideas are fundamental to the way development interventions are understood and justified. As Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock argue, words and ideas are not neutral:

They come to be given meaning as they are put to use in policies. And those policies in turn, influence how those who work in development come to think about what they are doing (Cornwall and Brock 2005: iii).

Campbell (1998) and Fischer (2003) state that ideas can orient actors' preferences in new directions and have an effect on policy practice. For instance, ideas framing the media reform agenda such as 'liberalisation' and 'deregulation' became buzz words and clichés in the 1990s and early 2000s that were repeated over and over again across the region. These ideas reoriented media freedom NGOs to lobby governments in South Africa to open up and liberalise the media sector, without realising the negative impacts of this free market ideology. A statement by a former employee of a regional media freedom organisation is telling:

I too was seduced by all the talk of the "liberalisation of broadcasting" until one day I realised that "liberalisation" really meant "privatisation". I was being sold a repackaged form of the Thatcher and Reagan dream of a free market based on individual materialistic values. What I was looking for was the promotion of a broadcasting environment that provided comprehensive, in-depth and impartial news and information coverage – one that ensures access to minorities and provided culturally relevant programming in local languages. What the politicians and organisation such as the World Trade Organisation were selling was the chance for overseas companies to infiltrate our markets and make profit. In short, they were offering a broadcasting system primarily focused on providing a narrowcast service for an elite (cited in Moyo 2006: 165).

This statement points to the complexity of the relationships between donors and local elites. In most cases, the views of the donor are conclusive in shaping the thinking of the local actors implementing development or democracy projects. Rosemary McGee, in a study of poverty reduction policies in Uganda and Nigeria, noted that in most cases, domestic actors 'talk the talk reading parts assigned to them by governments or international donor agencies, and aligning themselves comfortably with the dominant discourse' (McGee 2004, cited in Chiumbu 2008: 179). Citing Stephen Ndengwa (1996) on the relationship between donors and African NGOs in the political reforms of the 1990s, Kalu notes:

African NGOs, political parties and other social movements like the Labour Unions, Students Organisations and Market Women Associations, rather than push for social issues to be placed on the agenda menu, simply respond to externally channelled messages for political reform. Failure to do so could mean the difference between continuing operation or folding up (Kalu 2004: 84, cited in Chiumbu 2008: 180).

Echoing the above statement, Ibarro-Colado (2006: 471) argues 'to belong in an "international community" you must speak the Centre's language, use its concepts, discuss its agendas and conform to the stereotype of the "imperfect south" while keeping a "polite silence" on the real causes of your problems'. The asymmetrical relationship between Western donors and local elites demonstrates a model of power that is globally hegemonic, unequal and includes an element of coloniality.

Ideas in policy documents are important to analyse to ascertain which discourses and forms of knowledge are dominant and which ones are excluded. Slater and Bell (2002: 339) posit that key policy documents are 'sites of enunciation', which raise questions of who the agents of

knowledge are, for whom they speak, where they are located, how they conceptualise issues and how their views and voices silence and marginalise others. The sites from which knowledges/ideas are produced are central to our understanding of those knowledges, hence Mignolo's concept (2003) of the geopolitics of knowledge. The first step towards situating the media and democracy agenda is to look at its loci of enunciation.

The knowledge/ideas framing this agenda is predominantly produced within Western research institutions and epistemic communities, which Haas (1992, 3) defines as a 'network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area'. Epistemic communities have a shared set of normative principles and causal beliefs that influence policies. Think-tanks such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the USA and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in the UK have promoted the normative principles and narratives of media and democracy that have become universalized and totalized. In the context of this paper, the normative principles and narratives of media and democracy have become universalised and totalised. These principles largely take neo-liberal tones by suggesting that an independent media is necessary for freedom, choice and citizenship. Donors, specifically the USAID, promote a liberalised and deregulated media as an ideal and democratic model. For example, although the MISA 'Free the Airwaves campaign', which ran in the early 2000s, advocated for a three-tier system encompassing public, commercial and community broadcasting, it was essentially premised on rescuing broadcasting from state control and opening it up to make countries in the region safer for transnational capital (see McGlinchy 2011). While the principles of democracy – freedom, rights and social justice – cannot be contested, the articulation of the neo-liberal variant of democracy with its insistence of individualism and marketisation is problematic.

Through the lens of coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge, this paper argues that neo-liberal democracy with its grounding in the Enlightenment and the writings of the early classical thinkers such as John Milton, Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill who argued for the open marketplace of ideas (e.g. see Keane 1992) is based on European values, practices and structures that often do not fit different cultural and political histories of the postcolony. Another concept that frames the media and democracy project is the 'free flow doctrine', a construct made up of political and ideological elements derived mainly from US geo-political interests. This concept resonates with 'market place of ideas', which was shaped in the USA in the legal and political debates during the Cold War (Nordenstreng 2011:79). For instance, one of the principles underpinning the Windhoek Declaration is the Unesco General Conference, Resolution 25C/104 of 1989 which promotes the 'Free flow of ideas by word and image at international as well as national levels' (Windhoek Declaration 1991). These narratives are produced and shaped by bilateral and multilateral donors and form part of what Gosovik calls 'global intellectual hegemony' through which ideas are 'monopolized by a relatively small number of influential actors with global reach and power' (2000: 447). These influential actors comprising bilateral donors, political foundations, international institutions and various think-tanks control the production of knowledge and ideas of media reforms. Often these ideas are transferred to NGOs in southern Africa through technical assistance, which, according to Degnbol-Martinus and Engberg-Perderson, is a form of aid that emphasises

what donors throughout the years have called technology, organisations, best practice, advanced knowledge ... ideas (as opposed to money). It comprises the most immaterial aspects of development cooperation: policy dialogue, capacity-building with a minimum of financial support, technical advice, consultancy assistance, scholarships and so on. Its rationale is that developing countries greatest problem today is not lack of capital but lack of knowledge about the correct sound or good development model (Degnbol-Martinius & Engberg-Perdersen 2003: 307).

The rationale behind technical assistance and capacity building also seems to be a belief that the spreading of awareness and ideas lead to policy change. This way of thinking is also reminiscent of the modernisation development paradigm that assumed that exposure to new ideas by the elites in the developing world would lead to pro-growth economic policies (Melkote: 1991). So although technical assistance has changed from the 1960s and 1970s, it is still mainly understood in the same frame of reference as the transfer of knowledge that was prevalent during that time. The goal of technical assistance in those days was modernisation and today it still remains the same, though the language that defines this may have changed (Chiumbu 2008). The other assumption that comes out of technical assistance is that knowledge is not situated, but can be transferred from one place to another. Thus donors become conveyer belts of expertise and knowledge.

Kothari posits that ideas about 'experts' and 'expertise' are 'not neutral categories but are notions reconfigured through neoliberal development imaginaries ... furthermore by privileging certain groups of individuals and particular forms of knowledge, they articulate a eurocentrism that is highly gendered and racialised' (Kothari 2005: 427). Walsh (2007: 97) goes further to argue that the Western idea that knowledge can be unpositioned, unlocated and neutral is a myth that is designed to 'control and dominate colonised, racialised and subordinated people in the capitalist world system' (ibid.). Thus many donors view knowledge as a neutral, manageable commodity that can be shared freely (Van der Velden 2002). Yet, as Ishemo (2004: 68) states, all societies have historically developed 'ways of knowing and doing' based on indigenous knowledge and cultures.

6. NGOS AS 'TRANSLATING CENTRES' OF HEGEMONIC IDEAS

Over the last two decades, NGOs in the region have been the main drivers of media reforms. One such regional media freedom organisation, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), since its formation in 1992, has been a key media advocacy organisation on the African continent. This paper argues that MISA through a mixture of policy learning and 'soft forms' of coercion, has acted as a facilitator of policy transfer, articulating and repackaging hegemonic ideas on media reforms, largely emanating from global epistemic communities and donors. These ideas are transferred from global actors to MISA and other NGOs through different ideational channels, ranging from conferences, training programmes to reports, and in turn MISA popularises these ideas throughout the region through different discursive channels to such an extent that these ideas have become hegemonic and common sense. Ibarro-Colado (2006: 471) calls this process 'internal colonisation'.

It is not being suggested that people working in these NGOs are unthinking and have no agency, but this creation of common sense point to coloniality of knowledge or what Florescano (1994)

calls ‘epistemic coloniality’ – ‘the process by which the institutionalisation of knowledge as scientific knowledge permit the integration of domestic elites into the dominant Western ideology of modernity’ (cited in Ibarra-Colado 2006: 464). What this shows is that NGOs and policy elites in southern Africa appropriate dominant discourses around media policy reforms from the empire’s locus of enunciation, while claiming ownership of the said discourse. For instance, both the *Windhoek Declaration* and the *Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression*, are seen not only as home-grown, but expressions of African people’s aspirations (e.g. see Berger 2011), yet the core discourse of these declarations espouses notions of liberalisation and deregulation that are tied to Western powers and the modernity project. As Grosfuguel states:

The fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations, does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location. Precisely, the success of the modern/colonial world-system consist in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions (Grosfuguel 2007: 213).

As Ibarra-Colado (2006, 465) opines, ‘locally generated ideas do not find their way into the networks of power that constitute global knowledge’. As a result, local actors continue to depend on the knowledge generated in the West.

7. CONCLUSION: RETHINKING MEDIA REFORMS

The ‘rethinking’ encapsulated in the title of this paper should be seen in two ways. First, we need to rethink how media and democracy debates in the South are theorised and second, how the media reform agenda can be decolonised through creation of alternative narratives that point to more interesting, emancipatory and progressive realities.

Regarding the first point, as stated at the beginning of the paper, we need to move away from problem-solving theories that accept existing systems as they are and do not question them, but provide solutions to correct problems within the system. In other words, these theories assume that the major components of a system are not subject to fundamental changes and the end result is the superficial analysis and a world-view that favours the status quo (see Cox 1987). For instance, many studies on media and democracy point to the inadequacies of democracy assistance strategies and provide ways of addressing the shortcomings, without questioning the democratisation agenda itself (e.g. Santiso 2001; Brown 2005).

This article suggests that critical and decolonial theories provide ways of rethinking and retheorising media and democracy in southern Africa. As Cox argues, critical theory on the other hand, takes diachronic approaches and questions how the existing order came into existence and possibilities for how it can be changed. In other words, the critical theorist investigates how the world in which the theorist finds herself or himself came about. This theoretical outlook is emancipatory in the sense that apart from questioning a particular world order and how it serves particular interests, it also uncovers other possible routes for transformation or change (Cox 1986: 128). Echoing this radical role of theory, Fay (1987) states that critical theory must be

explicitly constructed for social theories to have a practical political impact (cited in Seppälä 2012: 8).

This point links to the second issue of rethinking narratives framing media and democracy. As stated earlier, these dominant narratives, embedded in discourses of modernity, serve particular material interests of Western donors. I would argue that the current political and economic moment that the world find itself in providing opportunities to counter the dominant conceptualisation of neo-liberal democracy that has been dominant since the 1980s. Recent events such as the Occupy Movements and the Arab Revolutions in 2011 indicate that we may be entering a period of ‘non-hegemony’ and an era of significant transformation in the organization and structure of world order. In addition, as Six (2009: 1118) asserts, the rise of new state donors such as China or India questions not only the established modes of development co-operation but also the development paradigm as a whole and the consequence is that ‘the Western dominance which for decades determined the external and internal relations of many developing countries, is in decline’. As Cox states, ‘We are living in a time of gradual disintegration of a historical structure, which not so long ago seemed to be approaching what Francis Fukuyama once called “the end of history”’ (Cox, cited in Schouten 2009: 1).

There are three suggestions in which the media and democracy agenda can be decolonised and reconceptualised. First, there is a need to construct new media reform policy narratives that put emphasis on needs and realities of southern Africa and disrupt the neo-liberal media policy paradigm. As an example, the dominant debates on media and democracy have failed to adequately theorise and address the field of alternative, citizen and radical and grass-roots media. As Rodriguez (2001) argues, these alternative media are able to reconstitute their own cultural codes to name the world in their own terms, disrupt power relationships and exercise their own agency. Consequently, theories of democracy, rooted in the liberal tradition, cannot be useful to define the role of these citizen media in society.

This leads Rodriguez (2001) to suggest using Chantal Mouffe’s concept of radical democracy to engage with these media forms. Radical democracy breaks from liberal values of rational deliberation, individuality and private property to confront power in all its complex and subtle guises (Lummis 1996). Mouffe (1992) argues that strategies are needed to expand the liberal definition of democracy, which is based on freedom and equality to include difference because dominant forms of democracy in their attempts to build consensus, oppress differing opinions, ‘races’, classes and gender. Therefore radical democracy depends on antagonisms, difference and dissent.

Second, think-tanks in Africa and the sub-region can be strengthened to challenge Western intellectual hegemony on media reforms and democracy. These think-tanks could be seen as counter-hegemonic networks of experts to which African policy-makers and NGOs can turn for policy advice. This directs to the need to create links between academics, activists and social movements. Often these work in separate spheres, but these factions have much to gain from one another. Such a relationship will lead to ‘intellectual liberation’, which Gosovik (2000) argues should be adopted as a collective project of the South.

Third, there is also a need to create new discursive spaces for media reform debates. As things stand, these debates and discussions take place in narrow forums of NGOs, donors and experts. It

is essential to take these discussions into other spaces – streets, town halls, online discussions and so on. It is in these spaces that the everyday lived experiences of people and their engagement with media can be understood. Media policy issues become relevant only when merged into the social and cultural fabric of communities and their needs (see Rodriguez 2001). In addition there are other global knowledge spaces that can be used to promote an alternative vision of media, for instance the World Social Forum.

These three suggestions above indicate the enactment of diverse and alternative realities, which, according to Enrique Dussel (2002), leads to transmodernity, which is the viable alternative to a single Western modernity. I will end this paper with a statement from Mignolo (2007) who states:

To contribute to a world in which many worlds can co-exist, they must be decolonized and refashioned through the geo- and body politics of knowledge. For decolonization to be fully operative, we must create alternatives to modernity and neo-liberal civilization. We must begin to imagine such alternatives from the perspectives and consciousnesses unlocked in the epistemic, ethical and political domain of the geo- and the bio-political loci of enunciation and of action (Mignolo 2007: 492)

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Windhoek Declaration was formulated and adopted at a seminar on promoting an independent and pluralistic African press, held in Windhoek, Namibia (29 April – 3 May 1991). The seminar also paved the way for the UN General Assembly Decision on 20 December 1993 to establish 3 May as World Press Freedom Day. Windhoek was the first of five major regional seminars on the same theme organized by UNESCO and the United Nations Department of Public Information with the active collaboration of a number of press freedom organizations between 1991 and 1997 all over the world - Alma Alta Declaration (Kazakstan), Santiago Declaration (Chile), Sana'a Declaration (Yemen) and Sofia Declaration (Bulgaria) (Boafo, 2001, n.d.).
- 2 The African Charter on Broadcasting was adopted by participants at a 2001 UNESCO conference to mark the 10th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration. While the Windhoek Declaration focuses mainly on the print media, the African Charter on Broadcasting focuses on the broadcast media.
- 3 The working group on the African Platform on Access to Information has created partnerships with numerous organisations, including the African Union Commission (AUC), the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Expression and Opinion, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
- 4 The MISA Regional Secretariat is based in Windhoek, Namibia and coordinates and capacitates the National Chapters in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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