

Mainstream South African Newspapers' Coverage of National Elections in Post-apartheid South Africa 1994–2014

Stefan Sonderling

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4282-8098>

Independent Researcher

Stefansonderling@me.com

Abstract

During each of the five elections held in post-apartheid South Africa, from 1994 to 2014, the African National Congress (ANC) accused the mainstream media of being racially biased against the predominantly black political party. The newspapers and the other media were condemned for being privately owned and monopolised by white capital and dominated by white editorial staff, who allegedly reported negatively and critically on the party's electoral policies—thus alienating it from the voters. Despite such criticism, the ANC gained a majority of votes at each election. This article examines: i) the presumed powerful influence of the press on electoral support for the ANC; ii) the extent that newspaper reporting on elections were racially biased against, and hostile to the ANC; and iii) the racial composition of the editorial staff. Five influential South African newspapers were analysed: three daily newspapers, *Beeld*, *The Star*, and *Sowetan*; and two weekly publications, *The City Press* and *The Sunday Times*. A total of 111 170 newspaper articles and editorial pieces relating to the elections were content-analysed to establish their manifest *positive*, *negative*, or *neutral* tonality. It was found that mainstream newspapers' reporting did not negatively influence voters' support for the ANC, that reports on elections were predominantly objective with a slight positive bias in favour of the ANC, and that the racial composition of editorial staff changed from being predominantly white to more representative of black personnel, which in turn introduced more visible anti-white bias.

Keywords: ANC; South African national elections; mainstream newspapers; media reporting on politics; media bias; media ownership and editorial control; content analysis

Introduction

In the two decades of democracy in post-apartheid South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) won a majority of votes in each of the five national general elections held from 1994 to 2014. The ANC's consistent victory at the polls—even though a slight decline in voter support in consecutive elections was noticeable—prompted the ANC to boast that it will rule South Africa for eternity and “will not be conquered until ‘Jesus comes’” again (Omarjee 2009, 3).

Yet, despite being victorious at each election from 1994 to 2014, the ANC constantly voiced its displeasure with the South African mainstream press. The press was accused of alienating voters by expressing anti-ANC sentiments manifest in negative and critical reporting on the party's electoral policies. Indeed, even before the first post-apartheid election held on 27 April 1994, and subsequently before every election, the ANC and the ANC government expressed the fear that the privately-owned mainstream newspapers—controlled by white capital and populated with predominately white editorial staff—exerted a powerful negative influence capable of alienating voters away from the ruling party. In order to neutralise the attributed negative effect, the ANC and the government threatened to introduce legislations to force racial transformation of the press, so as to replace white owners and white editorial staff with black owners and editors. The ANC and the government were also proposing to censor the contents of political reports in order to make the press obedient to the ruling party's needs. Journalists and commentators condemned the government's attempts to curtail the freedom of speech and compared it to the old apartheid regime's stringent censorship laws (Fourie 2002, 17; Pillay 2004, 173). Francis Nyamnjoh (2005, 66) contends that under ANC rule, South Africa's press is gradually coming to resemble the rest of Africa where legislations “have traditionally stressed control and containment more than freedom.”

Underlying the ANC's criticism of the South African newspapers is the assumption that the press has a powerful effect in shaping people's political opinions. Such assumptions are reflected in the ANC's accusation that the press: 1) reports on the ANC's electoral campaigns in a presumably negative and hostile manner; and 2) that the anti-ANC bias is a manifestly racist, anti-black bias and is the result of the press being owned and controlled by white capital and predominantly dominated by white editorial staff.

The aim of this research is to investigate the ANC's accusations and establish how a representative sample of the mainstream press reported on national elections from 1994 to 2014, and to determine whether they manifest a negative, positive or neutral sentiment towards the ANC. The article will also examine the racial composition of the editorial staff to see to what extent racial bias may be manifest in the reports on the elections.

Data and Method

Five influential mainstream South African newspapers were selected for analysis. These consist of three daily newspapers, *Beeld*, *The Star*, and *Sowetan*, and two Sunday publications, *City Press* and *Sunday Times*. These represent the English and Afrikaans language and the target of black and white readership diversity. Articles and editorial opinion pieces from these newspapers were collected in the run-up to each national election for the years 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. Articles selected were those published during the period of six weeks prior to the election date until the election date. A total of 111 170 newspaper articles were collected and their content analysed to identify the tonality of the coverage; the articles were coded as manifesting **positive**, **negative**, or **neutral** tonality. *Media Tenor* researchers were commissioned to collect the data and conducted the content analysis (*Media Tenor* 2014a&b). See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for the quantity of data analysed.

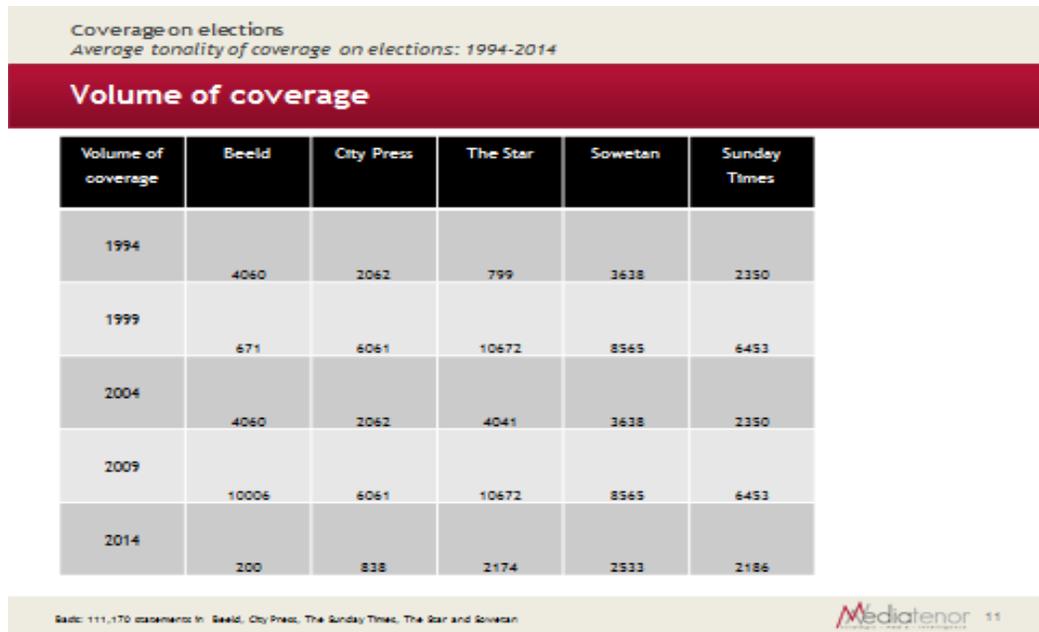


Figure 1: Data analysed by *Media Tenor* 2014a&b

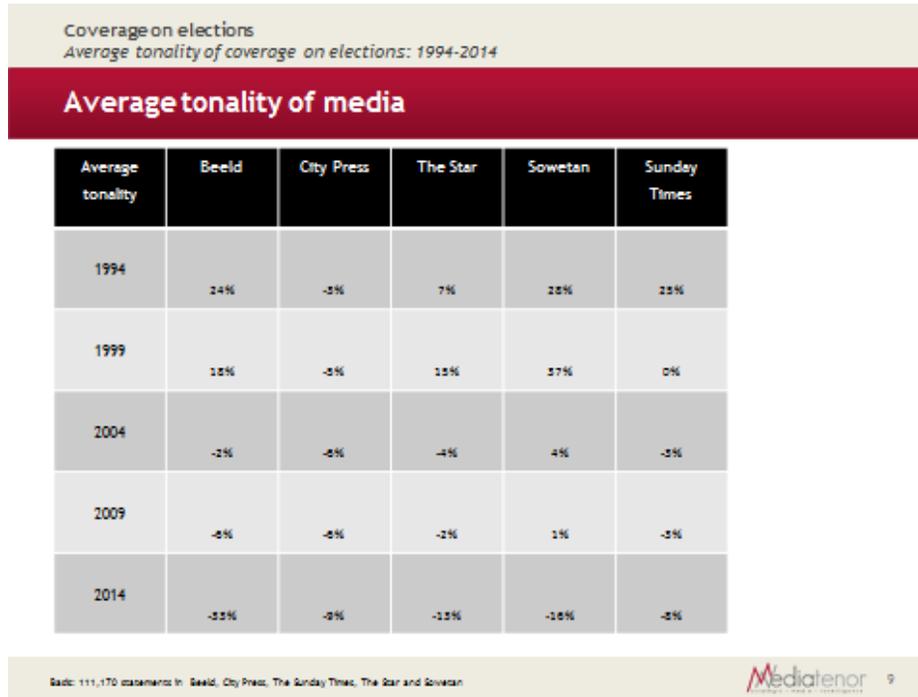


Figure 2: Average tonality of media reports

The Role of the South African Press in Democratic Elections

Research on the role of the mass media in politics is motivated by the assumption that media publications have an effect on their audiences. Presumably the mass media—more than any personal social interactions—determines people’s political opinion and constructs the totality of the individual by conferring predetermined identities, desires, aspirations and emotions (Mills 1961, 314). With the global spread of mass communication, it was further assumed that citizens of Western democracies almost exclusively rely on the mass media for their political information and are less dependent on family, community or other intermediary organisations (Davis 2006, 231). In South Africa during elections, it could be assumed that because the print media “devote large amount[s] of space to elections and electoral campaigns” they ought to have great power to influence the electorate voting behaviour (Duncan 2014, 133). However, Duncan expresses doubts about the attributed power of the print media to sway voters’ choices, because the South African press does not appear to be partisan enough (Duncan 2014, 133). However, if the press does not have much influence over voters’ choice, then perhaps it might be providing information about the policies and political behaviour of the competing political parties. However, even the informational role of the press can be doubted, because recent research indicates that the press could hardly identify the major ideological differences between the parties contending the election (Duncan 2014, 133). Thus, when evaluated from a liberal democratic theoretical perspective, the

press is judged to have failed to fulfil its ideal function of informing the public. An evaluation of the media performance in the 2009 South African election, by Jane Duncan, finds that instead of educating and informing the voters by reporting on serious public issues, the press trivialised and presented the election as a melodrama—the election became *infotainment* and did not provide voters with sufficient information to make informed choices at the polls (“Desperately Seeking Depth: The Media and the 2009 Elections” Duncan 2009, 215). However, such criticism of the South African media for having trivialised the elections may be misguided. The inability of the press to identify the ideological differences between the political parties is not necessarily a failure of the press—in many African countries the lack of a substantial ideological difference between political parties is the pervasive norm, while political parties’ manifestos do not play a significant role in elections (Melber 2014, 63). Moreover, as a ritualised fight between agonistic political adversaries, elections by their very nature are melodramas. Thus, it could be argued that the main reason for the failure of the press to educate the electorate is, paradoxically, the result of transformation and increasing editorial neutrality and evasion of partisanship. This is so because in the past the privately-owned print media performed an educational function by exercising their freedom to express their political opinions through the partisan endorsement of their favourite political candidate or a party. The partisan editorial political endorsement was considered as an educational service that explained, according to Jane Duncan, which candidate could be considered as the most suitable for election to political office, while “to refrain from doing so is to abdicate the print media’s responsibility to help the public to form opinions on the pressing issues of the day” (“Desperately Seeking Depth: The Media and the 2009 Elections” Duncan 2009, 230).

During the apartheid period, political endorsement of political parties by the press usually mirrored the linguistic and racial divides within society, but in the post-apartheid era partisan endorsement is declining to the extent that it was almost absent during the 2014 election (Duncan 2014, 144). Indeed, after 1994, as black and African editors were replacing white editors, so the press began to eschew political endorsement of any alternative anti-ANC parties, as is seen in Figure 3. This could be contrasted with the higher level of partisan endorsements and the decline of neutrality during the 1994 election, which may indicate that the white-dominated mainstream newspapers openly expressed their support for particular political parties standing in opposition to the ANC, while paradoxically also expressing a positive attitude toward the ANC. However, in subsequent elections criticism of the ANC increased slightly due to its being the governing party, while simultaneously there was an increase in professed neutrality and a decrease in expression of partisan support that would encourage the voters to select alternatives to the ANC.

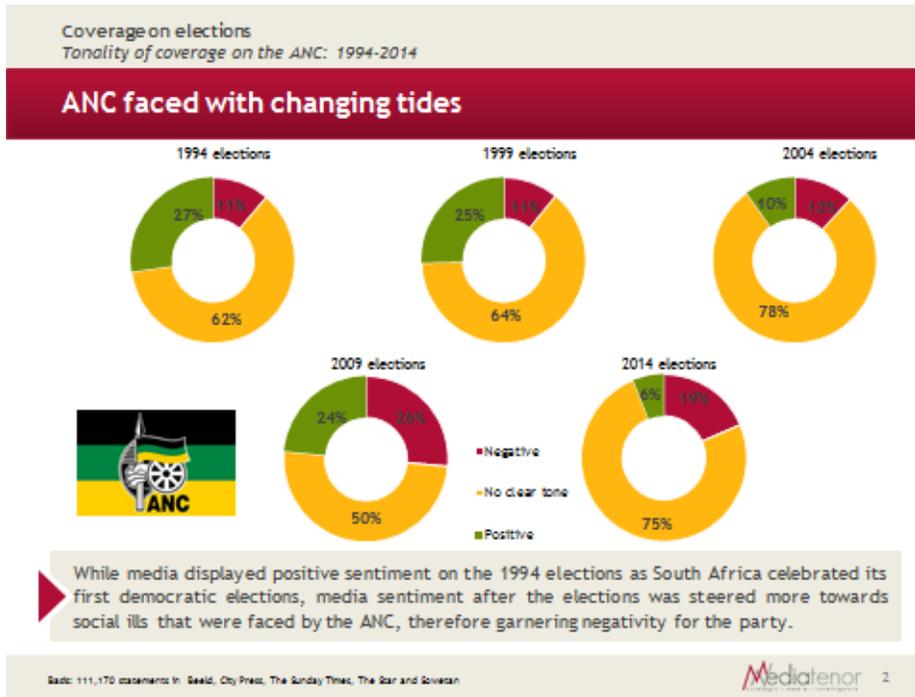


Figure 3: Content analysis of media coverage trends 1994–2014

While the press did not endorse political parties in opposition to the ANC, nevertheless it published information on the ANC’s shortcomings; however, even this did not seem to influence the public’s electoral choices. Thus, the relative political *insignificance* of the press is evident from the results of the 2014 election. Despite the ANC’s accusation that newspapers were hostile and exposed corruption in the ranks of the party and the government, the voters remained loyal supporters of the ruling party and the ANC gained a resounding victory at the polls, capturing more than 62% of the vote. The *Sunday Times*, in an editorial article, acknowledged that a pre-election opinion survey conducted by the newspaper indicated that support for the ANC did not decline despite the regular revelations of scandals; thus paradoxically, “instead of the ANC suffering a sharp decline in support ahead of the elections, the party looks set to maintain its majority ahead of the elections” (“Support for ANC Shows How Opposition is Failing” *Sunday Times* 2014, 20). The *Sunday Times* explains that the persistence of voter support for the ANC is the result of the opposition parties’ shortcomings rather than newspapers’ power to influence political opinion. Thus, despite there being “thousands of South Africans who are disillusioned with the ANC” there are no alternative parties they could vote for because they were “not convinced by the messages of the existing opposition parties” and even a campaign by a former ANC cabinet minister, urging the disaffected to boycott the election, did not have an impact on the outcome of the election (“Support for ANC Shows How Opposition is Failing” *Sunday Times*, 20). Overall, like

the ANC, the Democratic Alliance (DA) also lost some of its appeal for undecided voters (see Figure 4)

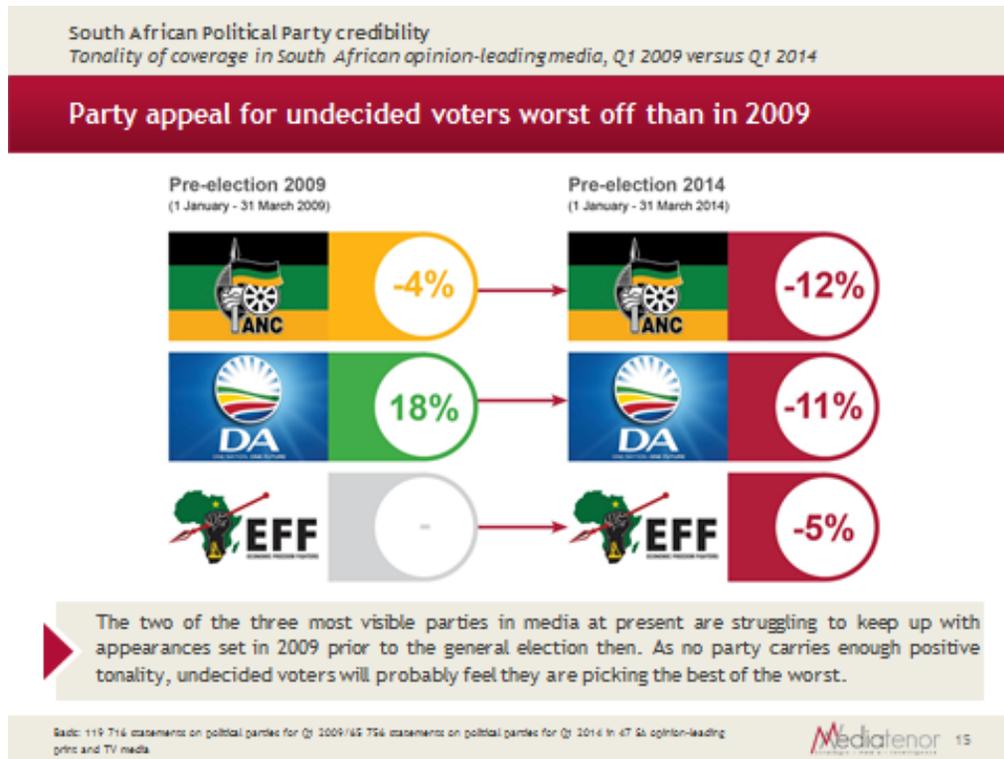


Figure 4: Party appeal

Despite the relative editorial neutrality of the press, and despite its marginal influence on electoral political choice, the ruling party and the government increased their attacks on the press in an apparent attempt to gain more favourable and uncritical coverage. The ANC's propaganda charged that the newspapers were disproportionately owned and controlled by a racist white minority. Celebrating the ANC's victory in the 2014 election, government minister Malusi Gigaba boasted that the victory was won despite the fact that the "ANC did not have media support" and had to contest the election against a hostile, unified front consisting of the mainstream press and opposition parties, all bent on "unseating the ANC" ("ANC Did Not Have Media Support, Gigaba" *Iol.co.za* 2014). Various ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) leaders also attacked the presumed hostile press in an act of revenge for having been disrespected by the newspapers during the election. This was also a political strategy to remind the voters of a pre-election promise made by President Zuma, that racial transformation of the press would be a priority after winning the 2014 election. The ANC's preoccupation with the mainstream press is not new; it was manifest during the liberation struggle and in the post-apartheid era it was evident in Nelson Mandela's desire to acquire ownership

of the *Sunday Times*, in order to make that newspaper the exclusive voice of the ANC during the first post-apartheid 1994 election (Mulholland 2002, 1). By the time of the second election in 1999, the presumed white-dominated print media was condemned by the ANC as being “racist and unpatriotic” because they “oppose the government at every turn” and encouraged a negative mood in the populace while their owners and editors were not representative of the experience of the black majority in the country (Davis 2006, 232; Jacobs 1999, 150). Goaded by the ANC’s accusations of racism, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) launched an investigation into racism in the media in 1999/2000 (South African Human Rights Commission 2000, 1). The SAHRC’s inquiry could be interpreted as an imposition of revenge justice by the victorious winner of the war of liberation, reminiscent of the *Nuremberg* trial paradigm. The journalists that were subpoenaed to testify before the SAHRC inquiry revealed that attitudes towards press freedom mirrored the racial divide: white editors supported while black editors rejected freedom of expression as being a white privilege and accused white editors of having benefited materially under the apartheid regime (Steenveld 2007, 120).

The ANC’s attack on the presumed hostile press became a ritual at every election since 1994. However, research by Jeanne Prinsloo (2014, 47) indicates that there is no clear evidence of outright media hostility toward the ANC. For example, in the 1994 and 1999 elections the ANC received more positive and neutral reportage than negative coverage in almost all of the mainstream newspapers. In the 2004 and 2009 elections, negative and positive reports on the ANC were almost equal, while neutral reports increased; and it was only during 2014 that there were more negative than positive reports (See Figure 5).

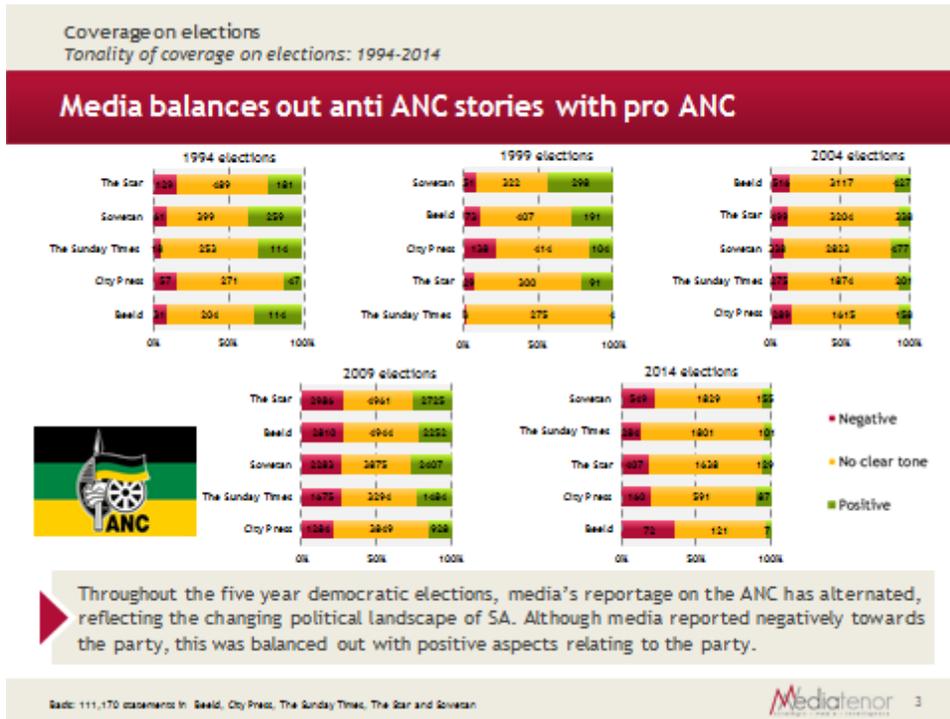


Figure 5: Media balance reporting

The Influence of the Press on Voting Behaviour

The ANC's resounding electoral victory in 2014 (capturing over 62% of the vote)—claimed to have been gained without the support of the mainstream press and despite print media hostility—would suggest that the press may not have had significant power to influence voting behaviour. Indeed, historically the South African mainstream newspapers did not have a great influence on the voting choices of their audiences. During the apartheid era Afrikaner newspapers supported the National Party, while the English newspapers supported the white opposition parties, and the English press also championed and reported—to the extent it was allowed by law—on black political aspirations. However, despite the English language newspapers' endorsement of liberal views and support for anti-apartheid political candidates, they did not have much effect on the voting patterns of the electorate. For example, Benjamin Pogrund recalls that in the 1961 election the influential Johannesburg newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail*, for an entire week before the election published on its front page editorial endorsements of the Progressive Party (Pogrund 2000, 127). Despite such spirited support, the opposition party's candidates were defeated at the polls because the majority of white voters did not wish to end apartheid and disregarded the newspaper's advice (Lever 1972, 22–25). In the post-apartheid elections since 1994, the newspapers also did not significantly impact upon the electorate's preferences because these choices are mostly racially

predetermined: many black voters traditionally and unquestioningly support the ANC, while white English-speaking voters support the liberal opposition parties, such as the Democratic Alliance (DA), and Afrikaners support the smaller white parties derived from the former National Party. Indeed, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) acknowledged that the 1994 elections were largely “an ethnic census between two major competitors, the ANC and the NP” (Jeffery 2009, 477).

In the first post-apartheid election in 1994, the English mainstream newspapers continued (as they did under apartheid rule) to support the liberal opposition Democratic Party, while also reporting in positive tenor on the ANC. However, as in the past, this support “had never really resulted in great success at the polls” for the Democratic Party, which received mostly white votes while the black majority either did not read these newspapers or disregarded their political advice and voted for the ANC (Silke and Schrire 1994, 122). Likewise, the result of the 1999 election indicates marginal influence of the mainstream newspapers on the political preferences of the majority of black voters, who disregarded the print media’s opinion or dismissed it as reflecting racist white colonial prejudices and continued voting for the ANC (Jacobs 1999, 147–148). Bundy (2014, 68) suggests that black people support the ANC because they retained their emotional bond with the liberation movement and they still consider the ANC as “a vehicle of national liberation and victor over a hateful racist rule.” These black voters seem to share a sentiment also evident in other southern African countries, whose voters are not prepared to contemplate an electoral defeat of their old ruling liberation party (Melber 2014, 42).

It is possible to suggest that in the wider South African media landscape, the mainstream newspapers are less influential politically because the government has already captured the electronic broadcast media—both television and radio—at the national and local community levels (Sparks 2009, 209). Thus, effectively, the ANC has gained outright control over the national broadcaster (SABC) and also has a direct influence on the only independent private television service (eTV). Further, the ANC received support in the 2014 election from the newly established channel ANN7, owned by the Gupta family, who are close allies of President Zuma. The ANC domination of the electronic media can be considered as exerting significant influence, because the majority of black voters rely primarily on radio and television for political news while in the rural area newspapers have limited penetration and little relevance for the populace (Nyamnjoh 2005, 64).

More significant is the fact that for the dissemination of political information in the run-up to the 2014 election, the ANC relied less on the newspapers and more on the party’s own organisational structures and made use of non-traditional mass media channels such as rallies and “door-to-door” canvassing (Butler 2014, 43). Significantly, the ANC gradually increased its voter support from 63.12 % in 1994 to 66.35% in 1999; and again to 69.69% in 2004; while it registered a slight decrease to 65.9% in 2009; and was again down to 62.2% in 2014 (Piombo 2006, 258; Schulz-Herzenberg 2014, 190). However,

it is doubtful that the small decline in voter support for the ANC in 2014 could be attributed to print media influence. Black traditional ANC-supporting voters indicated their dissatisfaction with the ANC's policy and performance by threatening not to vote for the party, while refraining from voting for oppositional parties because they considered them as white people's parties. Moreover, the disaffected blacks bypassed and avoided involvement with the mass media and newspaper-mediated discourse by engaging in direct militant expression through protests, rioting, civil disobedience, sabotage and armed struggle, which are considered as the traditional "language of the unheard" used by marginalised people to express grievances (D'Arcy 2014, 1). These non-democratic communication tactics are relics of the ANC's "people's war" against the apartheid regime that were aimed at eliminating political rivals at all cost (Jeffery 2009). Paradoxically, illegal groups and tactics can contribute to democracy because they "constitute alternative power groups to the state" and restrict "the state's ability to take decisions against majority interests" (Berger 2002, 28).

The decline of the South African print media influence is mirrored by the decline of print media influence on a global scale (Tsfti and Peri 2006, 165), caused by the expansion of alternative new social media channels that provide competing political information to the publics (Jackob 2010, 589). However, a newspaper report by Alfreds (2014), titled "Reduced Role for Social Media in SA Elections" on the role played by the new social media in the 2014 South Africa election, reports that despite the use of online social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) by political parties in their campaigns, the new media did not significantly impact on party loyalty or influence voting behaviour.

The marginal print media influence and people's declining interest in politics are also the results of election campaigns having become a dull, five-yearly ritual. Paradoxically, some newspaper editors view the dullness as a positive sign that South Africa is becoming a normal society. For example, an editorial opinion piece in the *City Press*, published in 2004, proudly proclaims that "[w]e are running a very dull and boring campaign, and that is as it should be when a country like ours becomes a maturing democracy" ("Petty Poll Bickering a Sign of Progress" *City Press* 2004, 18). However, in contrast to such complacency, *Sunday Times* editor Ray Hartley laments that South Africa has "become a one-policy state" because while there are many political parties, nevertheless, they all offer "shades of the same vision" (Hartley 2004, 18). According to Hartley, the demise of meaningful political debate occurred in the final days of Mandela's presidency, when "hysterical shrieks of the powerful at any criticism of themselves or their parties" frightened journalists who abandoned their critical "interrogation of policy" and became eager "hagiographers" of the ruling party (Hartley 2004, 18). The dullness of the print media election coverage can also be attributed to self-censorship and fear of provoking the ANC and the government's ire, that may threaten financial losses when the State decides to withdraw advertising from newspapers that are critical of the government (Berger 2002, 38; Mabote 1996, 325).

For example, fears of government boycott drove the critical and outspoken *City Press* newspaper into submission in 2012 (Basson 2012, 256–262).

Moreover, the demand that the editorial employees of the press must mechanically reflect the racial composition of society, leads to political correctness. For example, the black editor of the *City Press* openly endorsed the policies of the ANC in the 1999 election, but while justifying such endorsement, the *City Press* editor revealed naiveté and ignorance of the dynamics of democratic political competition by claiming that the ANC is the only genuine representative of the aspirations of the majority of black South Africans (“We Believe the ANC is on the Right Track” *City Press* 1999, 6). Having praised the ANC, the editor then contemptuously dismissed the opposition parties as being the unsavoury remnants of a white racist past, as the editorial writer put it: “we firmly believe that the Democratic Party, the National Party and the other white parties do not qualify as credible opposition” and in the editor’s opinion, in order to qualify as “credible opposition” these parties had to “urgently transform themselves to represent the interests of all South Africans” (“We Believe the ANC is on the Right Track” *City Press* 1999, 6). This editorial not only expresses anti-white racial bias, but also demonstrates political ignorance because already in the 1994 election, the former white parties became racially inclusive and recruited membership from the various race groups, while their advertising campaigns portrayed them as a multi-racial party (Silke and Schrire 1994, 126). The DA polled only 10% of white votes in the 1994 election and by 1999 it gained 55% of the white votes, while black and Indian support increased significantly (Reynolds 1999, 182–183). Moreover, the editor of the *City Press* also showed misunderstanding of the democratic political process: an opposition party should represent a particular partisan policy and the aspirations of only a section of the population that oppose the policies of the ruling party. Thus, no political party could meaningfully claim to “represent the interest of all South Africans,” because making such a claim would portray the party as a dictatorial power that tolerates no dissent. Indeed, Gumede (2005, 293) notes that intolerance for dissent and stifling of open debate is a legacy of the ANC’s history, whereby “the militarisation of the movement as a result of the armed struggle tilted the balance further away from consultative practices” and moved the party towards enforced uniformity and blind following of the leadership. The *City Press* newspaper aligned itself with the ANC and ignored the opposition, as is seen in Figure 6. Ironically, against the parochial vision of the *City Press* that catered mainly for black readers, a conservative white newspaper such as *Beeld* became more progressive and racially inclusive in its election reporting (See Figure 7).

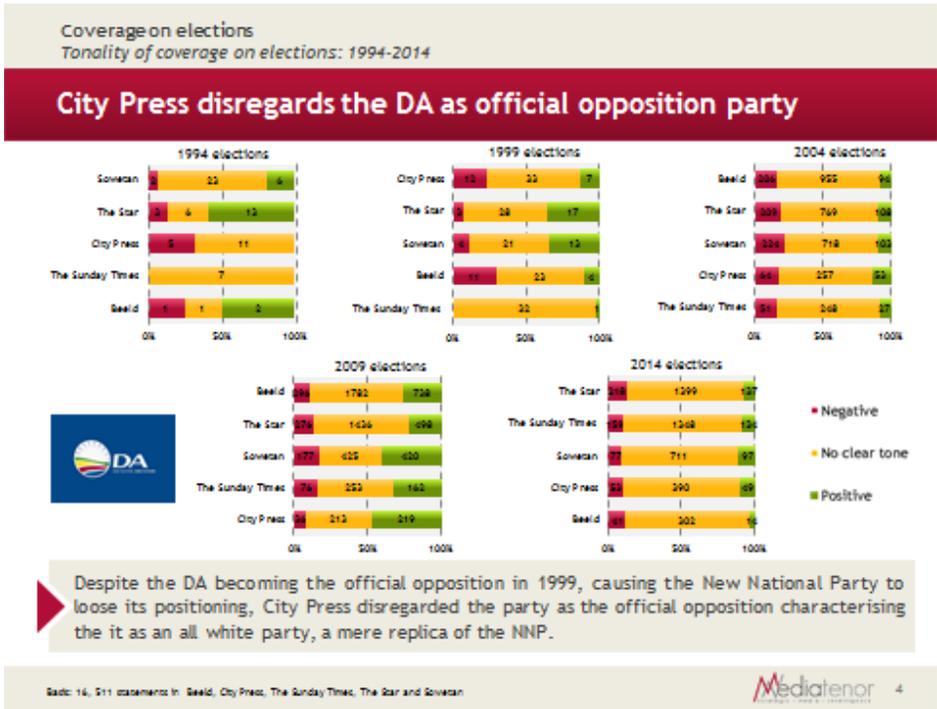


Figure 6: City Press ignores opposition parties

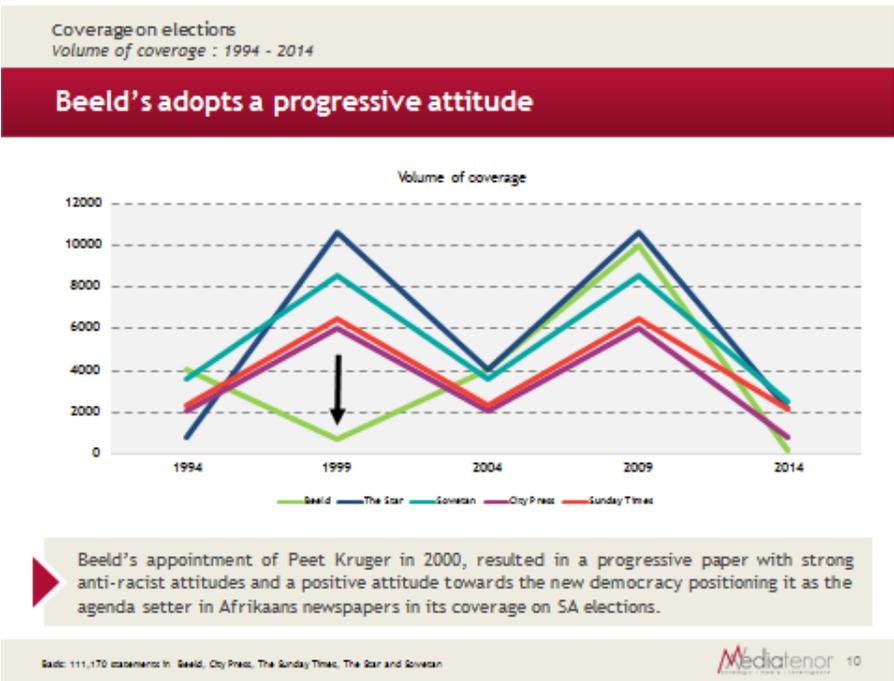


Figure 7: Beeld adopts a progressive attitude

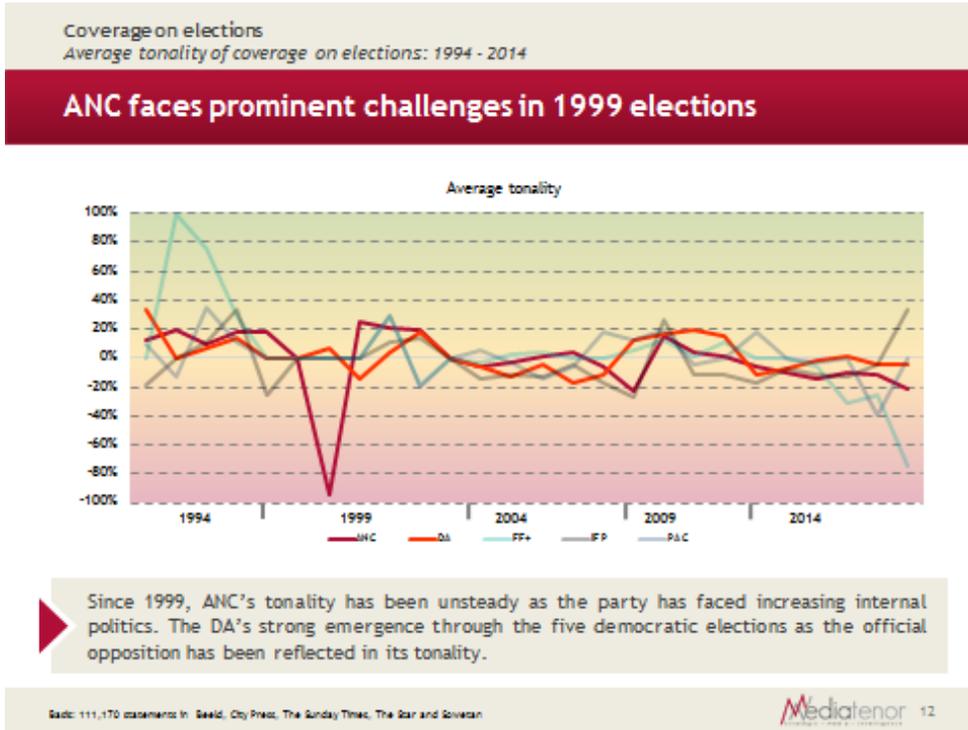


Figure 8: DA as official opposition

The support of the black press for the ANC can be explained by the historical and racial political solidarity of black journalists with black political organisations. Moreover, the ANC and its affiliated black business enterprises have acquired newspapers and exerted direct influence on editorial policy. For example, the acquisition of Times Media Limited by a black consortium, headed by ANC member Cyril Ramaphosa, curtailed partisan editorial political endorsements (Jacobs 1999, 154–155). Nyamnjoh (2005, 64) notes that expanding black ownership increased the “grip of political correctness on many newspapers” and resulted in black journalists refraining from criticising the ANC because they did not want to appear disloyal. Ultimately, black journalists eschew political reporting altogether and focus on daily trivia. (See Figure 9 Influence of black ownership on content).

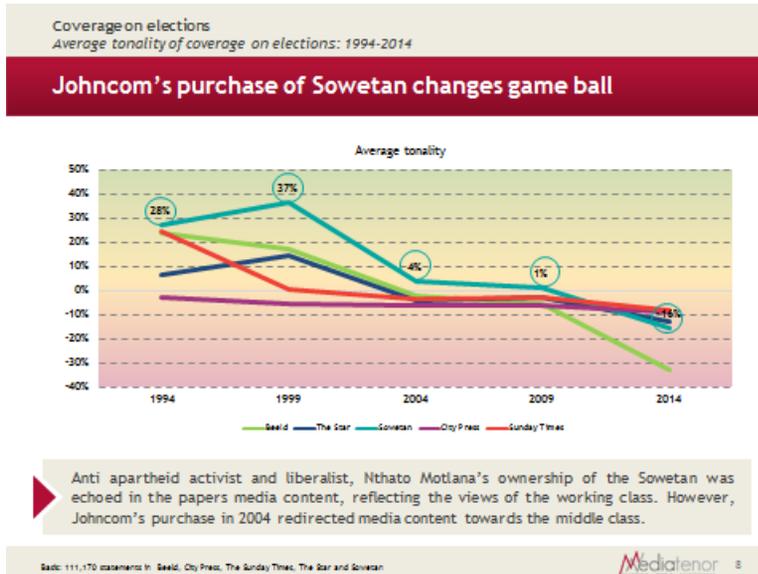


Figure 9: Influence of black ownership on content

Thus, the editors' professed neutrality and escape from politics during the 2014 election was paraded as a badge of honour by a black editor of the *City Press* (with a predominately large black readership), when she proclaimed that this newspaper "believes the era of political endorsement by the media is passé" because mainstream newspapers have been displaced by new forms of social media where the people create their own content ("We Endorse You and Your Right to Vote" *City Press* 2014, 2). Similar words were used by the *Sunday Times* in an editorial to announce its refusal to endorse any political party: "In the past, newspapers were expected to endorse one political party above all others" but in the present context this newspaper is unable to provide guidance to the readers because "a collective of senior managers" decided not to endorse any party ("Are We Keeping Mandela's Vow? It's Your Turn to Judge" *Sunday Times* 2014, 20).

Ultimately, the dull election reportage was broken by the entry of a new political party, the flamboyant and combative *Economic Freedom Fighters* (EFF), led by a former head of the ANC's Youth League (ANCYL), who added melodrama to the newspapers' reporting on the 2014 election. The media's interest in the EFF and the party's popularity among young voters could be attributed to a sense of "war envy" among its youthful supporters, following the party's appropriation of "a populist-militarist persona, with Malema as its 'commander-in-chief' at the head of an army of red-bereted foot soldiers, the EFF proclaimed itself a government-in-waiting" (Southall 2014, 17). The participation of the EFF in the 2014 election and the dynamic DP election campaign attracted media attention and in turn less attention was given to the ANC by the press (See Figures 10 and 11).

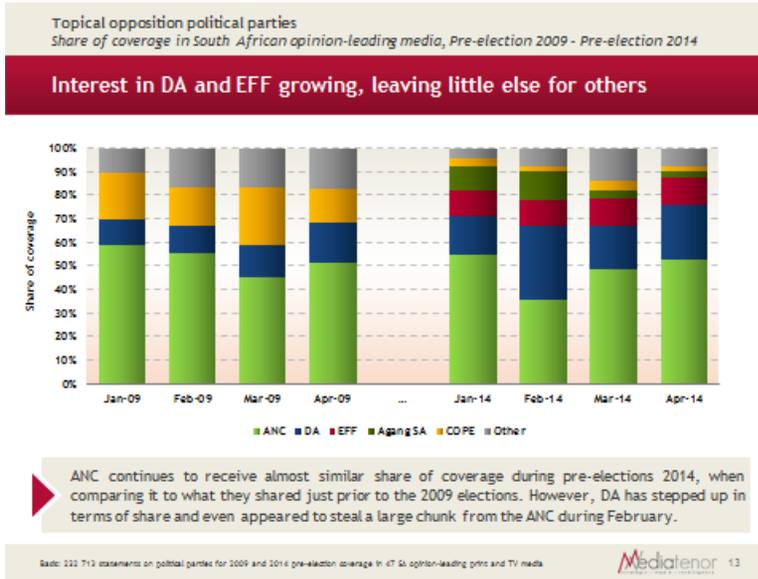


Figure 10: Interest in DA and EFF

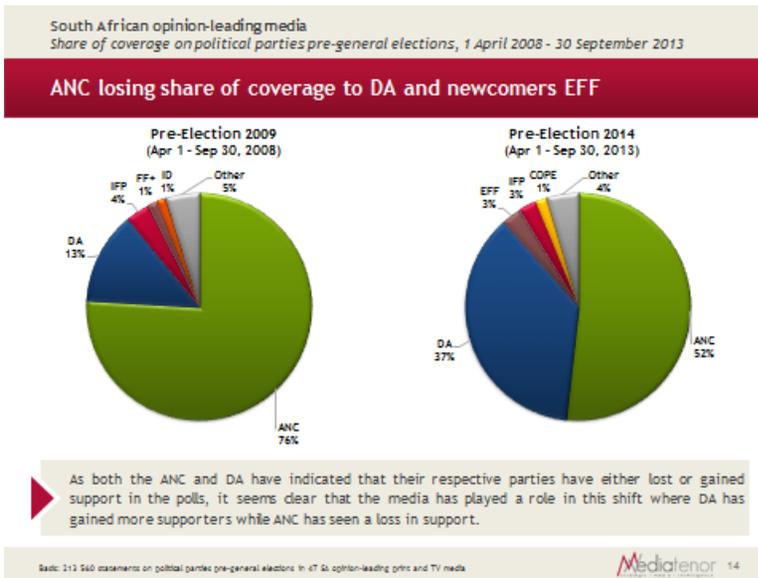


Figure 11: ANC losing share of coverage to DA and newcomers EFF

The State of Racial Transformation of the Mainstream Newspapers

In the run-up to the 2014 election, it was reported that president Zuma threatened to force racial transformation of the privately-owned print media as his first official act after the ANC had won the election (Ndlangisa 2014). President Zuma announced the

intention to change legislation to enforce racial transformation because he claimed the press remained white-dominated and the ownership and editorship did not represent the racial demographics of the country. Ironically, president Zuma made this announcement at a celebration hosted by the Sekunjalo consortium, headed by a former ANC activist Dr Iqbal Survé, on the occasion of Sekunjalo's acquisition of a major media corporation, the *Independent News and Media*—publisher of a number of most influential English newspapers—from its Irish owners, which took effect on August 2013. The acquisition was financed by the ANC and Chinese government loans. This acquisition effectively transferred the country's largest print media monopoly to the hands of ANC allies, effectively giving the ANC—directly and indirectly—a monopoly over the print media, in addition to the monopoly it already had over the broadcast media.

Thus, if in 1994 most editors and newspaper owners were predominantly white, by 1999–2000, ownership was estimated as being 31% black, 27% foreign, 32% Afrikaner and 10% white English, while editorship stood at 51% white and 49% black (South African Human Rights Commission 2000, 22). By 2002, about 50% of editors of the mainstream newspapers were black (Sparks 2009, 208). By 2011, a new pro-government newspaper, *The New Age* (owned by the Gupta family, closely associated with president Zuma), was launched. By 2012, an ANC-aligned black consortium consolidated control over the *Sunday Times* group. By 2013, racial transformation was almost complete with the acquisition of the *Independent Media Group*. Change of ownership resulted in racial transformation of editorship: by the time of the 2014 election most editors of mainstream newspapers were black, as is seen in Figure 12.

While it may be acknowledged that the ANC's discourse on media transformation (ANC 2010) is driven by the presumed need to correct apartheid's legacy of racial inequalities, nevertheless, some commentators claimed that the ANC's criticism of the print media signalled a threat to the freedom of the press ("ANC Threatening Free, Independent Media" *Iol.co.za* 2014). Veteran journalist, Max du Preez, writing in the *Pretoria News*, considers the ANC's criticism as a "war of attrition on the media" and expresses the fears that the accusation that the mainstream print media are "white-owned, racist and unpatriotic" can ultimately justify nationalisation of the press and the introduction of strict State control—thus ending media freedom in South Africa (Du Preez 2014).

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
Beeld	Willie Kuhn	Johan de Wet	Peet Kruger	Peet Kruger	Tim du Plessis
Star	Peter Sullivan	Peter Sullivan	Moegsien William	Moegsien William	Makhudu Sefara
Sowetan	Agry Klaaste	Agry Klaaste	John Dlodlu	Fikile-Ntsikelelo Moya	Mpumelelo Mkhabela
City Press	Khula Bransby Sibiya	Khula Bransby Sibiya	Mathatha Tsedu	Khathu Mamalia	Ferial Haffajee
Sunday Times	Ken Owen	Mike Robertson	Mondli Makhanya	Mondli Makhanya	Phylicia Oppelt

Figure 12: The racial transformation of mainstream press editors

Indeed, indication of a coordinated attack against the privately-owned newspapers was evident from the timing and synchronised pronouncements of various functionaries of the ruling ANC alliance. For example, South African Communist Party (SACP) leader and Minister of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande, denounced newspapers' criticism of President Zuma's handling of the Nkandla scandal as an example of "white people's lies" manufactured by white newspaper owners in order to demean black Africans ("Nkandla Articles 'White People's Lies'" *City Press* 2014). The ANC's spurious accusation was evident in its 2014 complaint to the SAHRC about media racism, when a political cartoon was published titled "Congress of Clowns" that satirised the unquestioning black electoral support for the ANC, despite the wide exposure of scandals and corruption within the ruling party ("ANC to HRC Over 'Clown Cartoon,' DA 'Racist Tweet' and Thuli" *The Citizen* 2014). Accusing the press of harbouring racism already began a decade earlier during Thabo Mbeki's presidency, whereby any criticism of the ANC by white journalists was routinely dismissed as instances of white racism and hate speech. For example, the ANC labelled Max du Preez as a white supremacist, thus ironically transforming a former vociferous anti-apartheid editor and long-time ANC sympathiser, who during the anti-apartheid struggle was "assiduous in shielding the ANC from critical scrutiny," into an enemy (Jeffery 2009, xxxviii). Max du Preez recalls in his memoir that in the discourse of the ANC he was metamorphosed into a "political commissar of apartheid masquerading as journalist" and his mild criticism was condemned as a blatant "attack on President Mbeki" as well as "an attack on the ANC" that "will not be tolerated" (Du Preez 2008, 268). The ANC propaganda warned against the danger of a white anti-revolutionary conspiracy because "Max du Preez and his old friends have clearly embarked on a war path" declaring war against the ANC (Du Preez 2008, 268).

The 2014 ANC complaint to the SAHRC about racism in the media is reminiscent of the accusation made in 1998, when the ANC and some racially-exclusive black professional groups' complaints led to the SAHRC instigating an inquiry in 1999–2000.

The memory of the SAHRC inquisition and fear of being labelled racist had a chilling effect and restrained some white editors from criticising the ANC and the ANC government (Nymanjoh 2005, 65). Moreover, support for freedom of speech among journalists is not uniform, as was evident during the SAHRC inquiry of 1999–2000, when some black and African editors and media scholars contemptuously denounced freedom of expression as being a “white thing” and dismissed defenders of freedom of the press as the noisy white fringe consisting of “freedom of expression fundamentalists” that were threatening black democracy (Tsedu quoted in Steenveld 2007, 120). For the black editors and like-minded scholars, freedom of speech should not be considered a primary human right in a democracy. Freedom of speech can be suspended and should give way to the needs of a “developmental state” whereby promoting “human rights” means that the politicians’ dignity is protected by outlawing all criticism, while the vibrant political debate is curtailed in order to protect some selected ethnic and religious interest groups from being offended. Some black editors and scholars, such as Steenveld (2007, 123), denounce support for press freedom as being meaningless for the poor black masses because their “other freedoms are overlooked.” Increasingly, Marxists and liberal scholars began to condemn democracy and freedom of speech as a bourgeois illusion. For example, in 2005 a director of Amnesty International, an organisation that is supposedly in the business of protecting freedom, declared that “freedom of expression means nothing to a man who cannot read a newspaper”; a clear irony whereby the old authoritarianism becomes desirable, while freedom is now the new enemy (Cohen 2007, 324–325). The desire to censor and close the universe of free debate has been gaining support among young activists in South Africa as black editors, and Marxist media scholars, adopt an anti-Western and anti-democratic ideology that they consider to be fashionably anti-colonial (Glenn 2008, 69).

Conclusion

Clear divisions along racial lines among journalists were already evident during the first election of 1994. The black journalists dismissed white political parties that in the past had promoted black interests and opposed apartheid as *collaborationists*, whose participation in politics under apartheid merely gave credibility to the “tainted parliament” and ultimately were “co-managers of the suppression”; just like the apartheid regime itself, which they claimed to have opposed (Silke and Schrire 1994, 126). In the earlier days of transition from the apartheid regime, and just prior to the 1994 election, the mainstream white-owned media “feared interventions by the future democratically elected government” that could either “forcibly break up monopolies, or effectively nationalise them as had happened in Zimbabwe during the 1980s” (Pillay 2004, 173). Racial transformation of ownership and composition of the editorial personnel had an effect on the newspapers’ editorial independence and neutrality. In post-apartheid South Africa, some print media owners and some black editors do not place much value on press freedom and do not express opinion critical of the ANC government because they are closely aligned with the party or fear political and financial backlash from the ANC government. The ANC government’s attitudes towards

privately owned newspapers and press freedom resemble the apartheid regime's relationship with the English opposition press, as both governments desired to control the media while keeping the myth of democracy alive (Fourie 2002, 17). In the post-apartheid era, while freedom of expression is enshrined in the Constitution, nevertheless, the press is still wary of government intervention.

Autobiography

The author is a research fellow with the Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa.

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