Social justice for the poor:
The framing of socioeconomic rights in selected South African newspapers

Sarah H Chiumbu
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa

Vasu Reddy
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Narnia Bohler-Muller
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa

Ntombizonke A Gumede
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa

Amanda Mtshengu
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa

Abstract
Apartheid South Africa created a society of deep-seated inequalities divided along race, class, and gender lines. The promotion of socioeconomic rights and redistributive justice is thus an important element in the country's on-going transformation. This article analyzes the framing of stories on socioeconomic rights by three South African national newspapers. Using a combination of framing analysis and critical political economy insights, we show that although the newspapers foreground the importance of socioeconomic rights and recognize voices of the marginalized, the majority of the stories contain gaps and silences on critical issues concerning the structural causes

Corresponding author:
Sarah Chiumbu, Human and Social Development Programme, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Private Bag X41, Pretoria 0001, South Africa.
Email: schiumbu@hsrc.ac.za

of inequality and socioeconomic injustices in South Africa. The argument concludes by motivating a rethinking of the country's normative media frameworks for the development of a journalism practice that would resonate in a country characterized by social polarization and material inequalities.

Keywords

Introduction

Challenges to the democratization of the media are not unique to postcolonial countries such as South Africa. Several scholars in critical political economy (CPE) have repeatedly demonstrated that the media are increasingly narrowing the diversity of public discourses through their inability or unwillingness to expand the mediated public sphere to include marginalized and class-based voices (McChesney, 2004; Wasserman and De Beer, 2005). This contraction of mediated spaces is a consequence of commercialized media systems that are driven by advertising concerns. Consequently, the print media the world over have been subjected to increasing demands for profit-making. As competition intensifies, content is progressively shaped by the demands of advertisers, resulting in 'more urban biased, consumer oriented media which have diminishing interest in or concern for people living in poverty' (Deane, 2005: 182). Empirical studies in several countries suggest that the concerns of the poor, issues of socioeconomic inequality, and movements of the marginalized are often framed either neutrally or negatively (Bullock et al., 2001; Clawson and Trice, 2000; Kendall, 2005). Media framing of social movements, in particular, has received extensive scholarly attention. Studies since the 1970s to more recent times have found that news frames often trivialize, marginalize, and disparage protestors (see, for example, Chan and Lee, 1984; Halloran et al., 1970; Peng, 2008). In many instances, in the coverage of these stories on poverty and inequality, neoliberal, liberal, and neutral frames are favored (see Byrne, 2012).

This article develops this line of research by focusing on the framing of stories on socioeconomic rights by three South African weekly newspapers. There are few studies that examine how the mainstream media in South Africa represent and construct socioeconomic rights, poverty, and inequality. We respond to this gap by conducting a content analysis of two sets of stories – those related to the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) and Constitutional Court (CC) cases on socioeconomic rights and stories written about struggles over these rights more broadly. The rationale for analyzing these two sets is that most of the cases heard by the SCA and CC are linked to everyday socioeconomic struggles, often championed by grassroots social movements.

We use framing analysis and CPE as theoretical lenses to analyze the print media's positioning in relation to socioeconomic rights. The following research questions are engaged: (1) what major themes and frames emerge from news stories on socioeconomic rights in the selected South African newspapers? (2) What dominant narratives, silences, or gaps are discernible in the news stories?

Our argument is organized in the following ways. We first provide a brief synopsis of social economic struggles in post-apartheid South Africa. Second, we offer an abridged and contextual overview of the print media in South Africa in terms of its transformation after the end of apartheid in 1994 and its current status and normative principles. Third, we discuss the theoretical frameworks underpinning the article. Fourth, we focus on the methods and procedures used in gathering and analyzing the data. Fifth, we examine the frames and themes found in the news stories and, thereafter, offer an analysis of the data and results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and arguments.

Context

Following the end of apartheid, South Africa adopted a constitution which entrenches a range of socioeconomic rights alongside civil, political, and cultural rights in Chapter 2, the Bill of Rights. When the constitution was adopted in 1996, the African National Congress (ANC) government embraced a market-driven economic policy, Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR). The GEAR was subsequently replaced in 2005 by the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA), followed around 2007–2008 with the New Growth Plan (NGP); the latest policy framework is the National Development Plan (NDP) introduced in 2011. All these policies are based on neoliberal political philosophy. Several scholars writing on socioeconomic rights have argued that the government's adoption of neoliberal economic policies have entrenched inequalities and poverty in the country (e.g. Bond, 2014b; McDonald and Smith, 2004).The neoliberal policy environment has generally favored the privatization of some basic services.

Against this background, grassroots social movements that emerged in the late 1990s have routinely engaged the courts in pursuit of the fulfillment of socioeconomic rights. Since 1995, the CC has passed judgment in several high-profile cases on socioeconomic rights in relation to housing, health care, water, sanitation, and land. Extra-judicially, struggles over socioeconomic rights have been played out on the streets across the country and have become a feature of the country's social and political life. South Africa, known colloquially as the 'protest capital' of the world, witnesses on a yearly basis hundreds of community protests against poor housing, unemployment, and water and electricity provision and cut-offs.

The print media in South Africa: A brief history and context

The media in South Africa during apartheid operated within an authoritarian, inward-looking, insular system, whereby broadcasting media were totally controlled by the state that espoused the values of Afrikaner Nationalism and the policy of separate development based along racial lines (apartheid). The print media, although privately owned, tended to serve the interests of the state and mostly sanctioned the apartheid social and political system. However, there was a range of alternative newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail, Vrye Weekblad*, and *New Nation* that provided a voice to progressive and

marginalized groups, often under very difficult and dangerous conditions (see Switzer and Adhikari, 2000). At the end of apartheid, far-reaching reforms took place in the media sector resulting in ownership changes, diversity of content, and the de-racialization of newsrooms (Tomaselli, 1997). Much has been written about these media reforms, with several scholars arguing that South African media, while supposedly transformed in the 1990s, still carry traces of continuities with practices of the past in terms of circulation, distribution networks, and advertising (e.g. Friedman, 2011; Wasserman, 2013; Wasserman and De Beer, 2005).

The print media operate according to an oligopolistic market structure where ownership is highly concentrated. The media are owned by five media groups, namely, Media24, Times Media Group, Independent Media, Caxton, and the TNA group. These groups are controlled by different blocs of capital. Like other commercial media conglomerate elsewhere, the print media operate within the logic of market fundamentalism that privileges profit maximization (Duncan, 2014; Wasserman and De Beer, 2005).

The South African print media straddle the libertarian and social responsibility models. The libertarian theory states that journalists should be independent, that they should seek the 'truth' and act as watchdogs of the state (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). The theory of social responsibility adopts more or less the same principles as libertarian theory, but journalists are called to be responsible toward society by adhering to professional ethics. The South African print media are closer to the social responsibility model, where there is an emphasis on informativeness, truthfulness, plurality, and diversity, although these occur in a libertarian framework. The tension between the two media systems has great implications for how the media report on issues as illustrated in the analysis below.

Framing analysis, hegemony, and CPE of the media

Framing analysis research is widely attributed to sociologist Ervin Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis* which inaugurated the field of framing theory. Goffman defined frames as cognitive structures which include elements of organization and subjectivity that help guide representations and perceptions of reality. Media scholars such as Robert Entman have interpreted and extended Goffman's framing theory to the study of media. Entman emphasized issues of selection and emphasis in news media. Journalists select certain elements and emphasize them while simultaneously ignoring or downplaying other elements of the same issue. As a media theory, framing attempts to explain how realities and meanings are constructed through communications (Entman, 1993). Therefore, media framing research broadly examines how journalists use frames in the construction of news and how audiences interpret these frames (Entman, 1993). Although Scheufele argues that research on framing should focus on both media frames and audience frames, this article prioritizes media frames only – how issues are presented and covered in the print news media in South Africa over a period of time. A widely accepted definition of media framing is offered by Entman (1993):

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Media framing research is often paired with research on bias. Bias in news and information means the systematic inclination to favor 'one side in a dispute, or to favor one interpretation or to sympathize with one cause' (Street, 2001: 17).

With framing analysis representing the main focus of this study, we adopt Carragee and Roefs' (2004) approach, which states that 'framing research needs to be linked to political and social questions regarding power central to the media hegemony thesis' (p. 214). They further argue,

> By identifying frames as little more than story topics, attributes, or issue positions, some contemporary approaches to framing neglect the ideological nature and consequences of the framing process as well as the power relationships that influence that process. Framing research that ignores the ways in which frames construct meanings and the interests served by those meanings deprives the concept of its theoretical and substantive significance. (Carragee and Roefs, 2004: 219)

The authors suggest that frames should be traced back to specific economic or cultural resources used by sponsors to promote certain frames. These resources are implicated in the way frames enter the news discourse and become dominant or hegemonic. Therefore, frames reveal the '"imprint of power" because they register the identity of actors or interests that compete to dominate the text' (Entman, 1993, cited in Carragee and Roefs, 2004). We approach the issue of power through combining framing analysis with theories of hegemony and CPE to explain why certain frames did or did not dominate the news articles discussed below.

The notion of hegemony connects questions of culture, power, and ideology. Gramsci argued that ruling groups can maintain their power through force, consent, or a combination of the two. Highlighting hegemony in framing research provides strategies to examine how the news media construct ideological meanings largely consistent with the interests of power elites or capital (Carragee and Roefs, 2004).

Issues of power and hegemony form the main focus of the CPE of the media which is built on a Marxist foundation. Beginning in the 1970s, a number of scholars have contributed to the growth of a political economy approach to studying media. These scholars defined their approach as 'critical' to distinguish it from neoclassical economics (Nixon, 2012). The CPE of media is associated with a wide range of theoretical standpoints, but almost all are broadly dedicated to macro questions of media ownership and control. Therefore, how the media are organized and funded is central to understanding their role in society. Thus, the CPE of the media is focused on 'tracing the impact of economic dynamics on the range and diversity of public cultural expression and its availability to different social groups' (Golding and Murdock, 1997: 73).

The most important task of CPE is to clarify concretely and specifically how hegemonic 'ideology' is produced. The concept of ideology is based on the understanding that culture and ideas cannot be understood separately from broader belief systems underpinned by the political, social, and economic forces that shape or constrain it (Flew, 2007: 33). The central argument of the CPE approach is that the production and distribution of culture take place within a specific economic and political system, constituted by relations between the State, the economy, social institutions and practices, culture, and organizations such as the media (Golding and Murdock, 1997).

In this study, we maintain that the frames dominant in the stories on socioeconomic rights published by the *Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times* and *City Press* are in part influenced by the ownership and economic make-up of these newspapers. The latter two newspapers are owned by huge media conglomerates listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE), while the former is owned by a publisher with media businesses in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Beyond ownership, these newspapers operate within dominant capitalist structures that constrain and facilitate their operations. It is submitted that despite claims to provide a space for democratic debate, the South African media have not escaped the commercial pressures of a market-driven globalized media.

Method

Research design, interpretation, and coding procedure

Our discussion and analysis are based on 32 articles on socioeconomic jurisprudence and 38 stories on socioeconomic rights struggles, focusing on housing, water, and electricity related either directly or indirectly to court judgments. To explore media coverage of these issues, content analysis on a selection of articles from three weekly English-language South African newspapers was performed. The three newspapers were chosen because of their status as national newspapers and their important role in opinion-making. *City Press* is owned by Media24, which is a subsidiary of Naspers, the sprawling Afrikaner media empire established in 1916. *Mail & Guardian*, formerly the *Weekly Mail*, was established in 1985 at the height of resistance to apartheid viewed as an alternative press. When foreign donor funding started drying up for anti-apartheid organizations in the late 1980s, *the Weekly Mail* struck up a partnership with the *Guardian* of London, ensuring the paper's continued existence (Switzer and Adhikari, 2000). *Sunday Times* is South Africa's largest Sunday newspaper, established in 1906 and owned by Times Media Limited.

We have selected to focus on water, electricity, and housing because these are the dominant rights related to social protests that have been litigated in the courts. The privatization and commercialization of municipal services over the years have deprived millions of people from access to housing, electricity, and water.

Newspaper articles cover 2000–2014, the period when the court judgments were handed down and the most significant protests took place. The articles were extracted from the SA Media Database (South African Bibliographic and Information Network (SABINET)). For stories on court judgments, articles were extracted using keywords such as 'constitutional court decisions', 'supreme court of appeal decisions', and 'service delivery cases'. For articles on socioeconomic rights, keywords such as 'home evictions', 'water privatization', and 'electricity cut-offs' were used. Taking cognizance that most struggles for socioeconomic rights in South Africa are driven by grassroots social movements, we also used the names of some of the organizations as keywords, namely, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) – *Abahlali baseMjondolo* and the Anti-Privatization Forum.

In total, we extracted 207 ($n=207$) articles from the database, and from this, we analyzed 70 ($n=70$) stories. We used the probability sample design that has many types such

as simple random sampling, stratified sampling, systematic sampling, and cluster sampling. For this study, we used simple random sampling to select the stories. A simple random sample is a sample in which every member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen (Krippendorff, 2004). We arranged all 207 articles in a table, assigning a number to each article in accordance with the date of publication. We then selected random numbers from the random number table.[1]

Our study used both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. We used quantitative content analysis to present some of the findings in numbers and percentages. Qualitative content analysis, used to interpret meaning from the content of text data (Bryman, 2012), was employed to extract some key themes. This was complemented by framing analysis as a specific technique for content analysis to explain how the media promote certain aspects of a perceived reality (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). There are limitations to our methodological approach worth noting: We may have missed potentially relevant articles since we relied on a handful of prechosen search terms. We did not interview the media. In-depth interviews would have also allowed for a deeper understanding of the newspapers reporting on the themes discussed.

Findings

The 70 stories we analyzed were categorized by tone (positive, negative, neutral, and mixed) and dominant frames. We provide our findings in relation to (1) tone and (2) dominant frames below.

Tone

Tone plays a critical role in navigating the reader to particular viewpoints in news articles and to the reported issue. Tone is a technique used to express meaning, influence the recipient in the communication encounter and contributes to particular slants in the report. It usually functions in conjunction with framing and viewpoints (Cissel, 2012). We categorized news stories on court cases as 'positive' if they agreed with pro-poor judgments or pointed to limitations in the court's understanding of socioeconomic rights. For news stories on social justice struggles, a positive tone implied that the story provided a sympathetic slant toward these rights-based struggles.

In stories on the court cases, negativity references newspapers that took a non-progressive approach to socioeconomic jurisprudence. In the stories of social justice struggles, articles with a negative tone were those that delegitimized these struggles. Stories were generally neutral if they were deliberately factual pieces that eschewed strong wording. These were stories that adopted what has been termed 'description bias' (Smith et al., 2001). Mixed stories were those that had a diversity of tones.

There were 32 stories related to court cases, and from these, 43.75 percent of the stories (14 articles) were positive, 34.375 percent (11 articles) were negative, 9.375 percent (3 articles) were neutral and 12.5 percent (4 articles) were mixed. From the 39 news articles on social justice struggles, 33.33 percent (13 articles) were positive, 10.25 percent (4 articles) were negative, 45.15 percent (18 articles) were neutral, and 10.25 (4 articles) were mixed.

From the tone of the newspapers, it would seem that the justice system and the CC are viewed in a largely positive light. This is not surprising as the country's constitution has been hailed as one of the most progressive in the world. The 10 stories on socioeconomic judgments with a negative tone were not critical of the justice system, but failed to appreciate the transformative nature of the constitution. These stories were myopic with regards to appreciating the role of the courts in advancing socioeconomic rights and pro-poor adjudication. Although only 10.3 percent of stories on socioeconomic struggles of the poor were negative and 30.8 percent positive, the neutral tone dominated at 43.6 percent. This seems to suggest that the newspapers in question are mostly unwilling to critically engage with issues affecting struggles of the poor. Almost all stories categorized as neutral did not give context or background to the rights-based struggles. The description bias mentioned earlier drives news stories in this category.

These findings concur with a study on media and poverty in South Africa by Berger (2003), who found in his analysis of three newspapers – *The Business Day, Sowetan*, and *The Star* – that although there were few negative stories of the poor, the media did not dwell too much on the structural causes of poverty and inequality in South Africa. In addition, in much of the coverage, poor people were often invisible and unheard.

Framing themes

Using the dominant frames from the two sets of stories, we provide an analysis of how the media conceive of socioeconomic rights and social justice, which narratives dominate and what gaps and silences feature. Coupled with a CPE analysis, we motivate why certain discourses dominate over others. Based on a descriptive reading and interpretation of the 70 articles, the four main themes were state failure, positive jurisprudence, plight of the poor, and delegitimation.

State failure

In the stories on court judgments, concern with the delay between a court decision and implementation of a decision or order of the court was one of the main themes. Several stories show that the implementation of court orders remain a serious bottleneck. For example, the article '*Court must not weaken the power of basic rights*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 29 April 2004) foregrounds a landmark CC decision on the right to adequate housing in the *Government of the Republic of South Africa v Grootboom and Others.* The newspaper laments that 'more than three years later, the same squatters appear to continue to live in parlous conditions, despite their much heralded court victory'. Irene Grootboom brought her homelessness case to the CC in 2001 in terms of Section 26 of the constitution which guarantees the right of access to adequate housing. The CC ruled that the State has an obligation to fulfill this right. She died without shelter.

In '*Former Schubart Park residents unhappy with rehousing schedule*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 21 October 2013), following the case of Schubart Park Residents' Association v City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, residents complained about the slow pace of their relocation following the CC order. Approximately a year after the order, the article exposes some of the bottlenecks. Even in an otherwise exclusively human interest

story on informal housing '*On the other side of the mountain*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 14 August 2008), Ashraf Cassiem, Chairperson of the Western Cape AEC, is cited as saying the 'judgments coming out of the Con Court aim to show that the judges are listening to us, but that's it'. The phrase 'listening to us, but that's it' offers a trenchant critique of the implementation of court decisions by the state, as it is the duty of the state to act progressively to realize socioeconomic rights within its available resources.

This lack of implementation of court decisions is strongly linked in the stories to state failure. Although they direct attention to the failures of the state, they equally reveal a thinly veiled criticism of the governing party, the ANC. The anti-ANC frame dominates the South Africa news discourse generally. Most of the print media have adopted an adversarial position in relation to the ANC, save for *The New Age* which is perceived to be favorable to the ANC. The newspaper, launched in December 2010, is owned by the Gupta family, close friends of the incumbent President. As Wasserman and De Beer (2005) argue, one of the critical media developments in post-apartheid South Africa has been growing friction between the media and the governing party. This is in keeping with the libertarian approach discussed earlier that emphasizes the media acting as a watchdog of the state. The South African print media define their role primarily in relation to the state rather than in relation to the citizenry (Wasserman and De Beer, 2005). Libertarian media systems tend to overlook and not overly criticize other centers of power such as the private sector. Surveillance of power is therefore 'conceived of only in terms of government and not in other configurations such as economic or symbolic power' (Wasserman, 2006: 85). In turn, the ANC has been hostile toward the print media, accusing them of 'lack of racial transformation, prioritising the world views of elites, and being overly concentrated' (Duncan, 2014: 89).

While the state is held accountable for lack of implementation, most news stories fail to point out that lack of implementation can also be attributed, in part, to the cautious interpretation of socioeconomic rights by the CC, which has in part failed to take an activist stance in interpreting the constitution in ways that will lead to transformation (Bond, 2014a: 469; Dugard, 2008). It should be noted, however, that the perceptions of judicial deference and activism need to be understood within the context of the democratic doctrine of separation of powers and the fact that the courts tend not to want to impose on the other arms of government. In fact, the executive, unlike Dugard and Bond, often complain that the courts are interfering with policy-making by being *too* activist.

Just as in the stories on judgments, the state is once again at the center of most of the news stories on socioeconomic rights struggles. While several stories fail to provide an analysis on the root causes of socioeconomic protests, they nevertheless apportion blame for these protests squarely on corruption and inefficiency within local government departments. For instance, in stories such as '*Rich vs. Poor in Housing Wars*' (*City Press*, 17 June 2007), '*No lights and just 6 toilets for 7,000*' (*Sunday Times*, 6 November 2005), and '*Opaque transparency in water privatization*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 14 August 2003), the municipalities are depicted as being corrupt and self-serving. The media have evidently adopted a consensus that they should perform a watchdog role over state power, and as a result of this position, their reporting is largely adversarial and confrontational (Wasserman, 2013, 2015).

Overall, the frame of state failure prominent in most of the stories fails to acknowledge the fact although citizens have been granted extensive *de jure* socioeconomic rights, the failure of translating these rights into *de facto* empowerment has roots not only in state inefficiencies but also in the country's neoliberal economic policy framework discussed earlier. The media fail to place state failure within the country's political economy. Government's macro-economic policies over the years have placed emphasis on tighter fiscal control on government spending and privatization has severely impacted delivery of basic public services such as housing, water, and health care.

Positive Jurisprudence

Many stories view the CC as upholding constitutional values and defending the rights of the vulnerable. For instance, in one of the first reports on *Grootboom* case ('*Hope for the homeless*', *Sunday Times*, 8 October 2000), an exceptionally positive image of the court is constructed: 'For the first time, the highest court has held that the Constitution caters for truly destitute people and that the state has an obligation to provide them with shelter'. Some cases, such as *Grootboom*, had a profound international impact in that it 'gave legal muscle to the poorest of the poor and has been studied around the world' ('*Grootboom dies homeless and penniless*', *Mail & Guardian*, 14 August 2008). In the same article, Justice Richard Goldstone, a former CC Judge, describes the judgment as 'unique' and indicates that this case will be remembered as 'the first building block in creating a jurisprudence of socio-economic rights'.

At the same time, the media caution against blind celebration of the Court. They point to some judgments that do not go far enough in protecting socioeconomic rights. In an article on the launch of the purpose-built complex of the CC at Constitutional Hill in Johannesburg ('*Nine years under the kgotla tree*', *Mail & Guardian*, 6 May 2004), the report cautions that 'the Constitutional Court is only as valuable as the decisions made by the 11 judges charged with safeguarding what is widely considered to be one of the most progressive constitutions in the world'. Similarly, in the story referring to the *Grootboom* case '*Hope for the homeless*' (*Sunday Times*, 8 October 2000), where the CC is praised, the reporter cautions, 'But, although it breaks important new ground, the judgment leaves many people who are concerned about the plight of the poor and the homeless in a frustrating impasse'.

Although the media do indicate some weaknesses of the CC in its deliberations, they fall short of criticizing socioeconomic jurisprudence. Alternative, more critical views on constitutional jurisprudence indicate that the CC has failed to empower policy-makers and legislators to translate socioeconomic rights from abstraction into reality (Bond, 2014a). By failing to draw on some of these alternative views above, the media do not provide a holistic analysis and assessment of the country's socioeconomic jurisprudence.

The plight of the poor

Central to all reports is the prominence afforded to a human angle to news reporting. The State's duty to uplift poor people is recognized to be important and forms an integral

feature of the reportage. In a story '*On the other side of the mountain*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 6 January 2011) and '"*Dumping ground*" *for unwanted people*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 9 October 2009), the journalists sketch detailed narratives about various people living in Blikkiesdorp or Silver Town in Cape Town to highlight the challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequalities. The residents of Delft, an informal settlement in Cape Town, were forcibly removed in 2008 and relocated to Blikkiesdorp, a dreary and bare area of corrugated iron structures, in preparation for the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup held in South Africa in 2010.

Another story narrates the experiences of homeless people occupying an abandoned factory in downtown Johannesburg ('*Dreaming of a home in a defunct factory*', *Mail & Guardian*, 24 February 2011). Personal stories of the people there are shared in the report. In another feature story on water struggles, '*Mabeskraal: Our water troubles still rundeep*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 14 February 2014), the author offers a poignant portrayal of lack of access to water of residents of Mabeskraal, a village of 10,000 people in the North West province. In the story '*Black Street a delivery barrier*' (*City Press*, 26 October 2008), the daily struggles over water and electricity of resident Carter Hlatswayo of Barcelona informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg are outlined in detail, with the voice of Carter driving the story. In these articles and a few others, voices of the residents are sourced.

Although the media render some of the affected people a voice, it is interesting that, collectively, their stories are reported as individual cases of poverty and misfortune and thus tend to dislocate the individual's experiences from the broader socioeconomic struggles of the poor. For instance, Devereux (1998) argues that it is very common to narrate stories about poor people in an individual and/or biographical manner rather than in structural terms. In a similar vein, a study on poverty, class, and the media in the United States (Kendall, 2005) notes that the media applauded individuals who have overcome poverty and suggest that if one person can overcome poverty, others should be able to do so. This kind of reporting, which Kendall calls 'exceptionalism framing', ignores the structural causes of poverty. Similarly, studies by Bullock et al. (2001) in the United States and by Chauhan and Foster (2013) in the United Kingdom found pervasive classist stereotyping of the poor.

The majority of the stories also showed gaps, mainly in relation to linking the court cases to broader social struggles in the country championed by a range of social and community-based movements. Most of the socioeconomic rights cases that went to the courts were supported by these movements. The CC case challenging the City of Johannesburg water policy, *Mazibuko and Others vs City of Johannesburg and Others* (2009), was supported by the Coalition Against Water Privatization (CAWP), a collection of community organizations struggling against the negative effects of water service delivery. The *Grootboom* case was principally driven by the Western Cape AEC, while other cases were given support by rights-based organizations such as the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI). In a way, the news media detach the legal fight for socioeconomic rights from the politics of radical social movements in South Africa. For example, in the story '*On the other side of the mountain*' (*Mail & Guardian*, 6 January 2011) detailing the living conditions of Blikkiesdorp, the media lose an opportunity to explore the political economy of housing

and service delivery in Cape Town. In the same story, the author interviews the Chairperson of the Western Cape AEC, Ashraf Cassiem, and yet the militant social movement to which he belongs and which is at the center of the housing struggles in the city is not discussed or profiled. Similarly, the story on the water crisis in Mabeskraal is also not framed within the broader water struggles in the country.

Even in stories that ostensibly gave a platform to social movements such as '*APF Challenges government to* "*stop selling water*"' (*City Press*, 21 November 2004), there is a slant in favor of privatization. In this story, the writer suggests that the Anti-Privatization Forum demands have a 'political agenda', and he doubts whether these demands have merit. He concludes the article stating that 'perhaps the Constitutional Court, if the APF approaches it, will lay the matter to rest once and for all'. Other studies have also shown the media's reluctance to confront the contradictions of privatization. A study by Mayher and McDonald (2007) that examined the responses of the mainstream media to privatization and commercialization of a wide range of public services in South Africa found that the media did not question these initiatives and in some cases seemed to perpetuate and endorse such discourses. Similarly, Kariithi and Kareithi (2007), analyzing media coverage of the 2002 Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) national strike against privatization, concluded that the print media propagated and legitimized the country's neoliberal economic policies. These scholars attribute this kind of reporting to inherent deficits in a corporate-dominated, highly commercialized media system. These findings corroborate similar studies conducted elsewhere, which have found that newspapers often favor privatization and denigrate popular protest (e.g. Harper, 2012; Martin, 2004; Skonieczny and Morse, 2014).

Delegitimation

While the media did allocate editorial space to socioeconomic rights struggles, the coverage tended to follow the description bias discussed earlier. Neutrality of tone in newspaper articles can be used to delegitimise or silence the poor who are denied full expression and articulation in the media. Some stories on community protests over service delivery had a veneer of the 'protest paradigm' by emphasizing violence and chaos caused by protestors, quoting official sources and devaluing protesters. The protest paradigm is a specific type of frame that news media often use to weaken legitimacy, obscure a protest's social/political concerns, or both (Chan and Lee, 1984). In the story '*Alex housing drama continues*' (*City Press*, 18 July 2004), the journalists maintain a neutral tone while discussing the arrests of several people who illegally occupied government houses in Alexandra, one of the poorest and oldest townships in Johannesburg. The use of the word 'drama' in the story title suggests that the media see the housing crisis as yet another performative event to entertain readers.

In '*Squatter camp turmoil threatens state's Gateway housing project*' (*City Press*, 16 September 2007), the journalist focuses on the 'violent clashes' between the police and the 2000 protestors and the 'turmoil' this will cause to a state housing project. The story fails to provide analysis of the controversial state housing N2 Gateway project and housing politics in Cape Town. The N2 Gateway was a public–private partnership project that led to many mass evictions ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The 'violent' frame is

also carried out in several stories where the coverage deemphasizes the reasons for the protests and instead highlights the violence perpetrated by the protesters.

This kind of reporting is in keeping with South Africa's negative or neutral media representation of social movements and their struggles (Duncan, 2013; Kariithi and Kareithi, 2007; Pointer, 2015; Wasserman, 2013). What is represented in this scholarship is that South African media, like commercial media elsewhere, have adopted a negative frame in relation to protest or class-based struggles. Most media allow common protest stereotypes such as violence, chaos, and anarchy to lead the framing of the news. In relation to this, Duncan (2010) notes that coverage of protest actions

> tends to be episodic, focusing on the moment of protest, which does not explain why a community got to the point where they felt that the only way of communicating their message was to barricade roads, stone the mayor's house or torch a library. (n.p.)

Pointer (2015) found in her study on media framing of protests that dominant frames 'work together to delegitimize protest and highlight the dramaturgy of protest, rather than analyzing what protests are about or giving voice to protesters' (p. 60).

Discussion: Framing, hegemony, and power

Based on the findings, we draw the conclusion that the stories analyzed in the three featured newspapers provide a partial view and presentation of the world in terms of information. Claasen (1999) argues that in libertarian media systems, ideals of truth and informativeness, underpinned by journalistic codes such as neutrality, objectivity, and impartiality and reliance on facts, while good on the surface, actually conceal, silence, and erase certain alternative or unpopular discourses. Similarly, Mayher and McDonald (2007) in their analysis of print media representation of privatization processes argue that it is this, the facade of objectivity, that gives neo-liberalism its hegemony by appearing to assign equal space to different views, while in reality obscuring 'the more subtle, opinion-making discourses that generate neo-liberal biases' (p.443).

McDonald and Smith (2004) argue that one of the most remarkable features of the post-apartheid political landscape has been the increasingly hegemonic nature of neoliberal thought and practice. The print media, controlled by big corporations, have accorded legitimacy to neoliberal ideas by lending dominance to some ideas, while closing off or limiting others (Mayher and McDonald, 2007). Peet argues that media institutions 'have been "captured" by neo-liberalism … disseminating a consistent set of ideas shaped around a particular policy agenda' (cited in Mayher and McDonald, 2007: 446).This explains why the lived experiences of people or groups resisting neoliberalism tend to be marginalized.

The discussion above also gives credence to the arguments of Carragee and Roefs (2004) that media framing research ought to pay attention to broader issues of political and social power so as to locate dominant frames within broader power dynamics in society and to explain why certain discourses and narratives are ignored or marginalized. While framing of news is influenced by internal dynamics such as organizational and structural factors – newsroom routines and ownership structures – external economic

forces and elites also influence and '"organize discursive flows" and give "legitimacy" to [dominant] ideas' (Peet cited in Mayher and McDonald, 2007: 446). Therefore, 'studying the framing process within the context of the production, distribution and interpretation of hegemonic meanings enable researchers to chart the relationship between news and the distribution of power' (Carragee and Roefs, 2004: 222).

This of course does not mean that the media in South Africa are monolithic in its treatment of socioeconomic rights or that neoliberal discourses are all-encompassing. The *Mail & Guardian*, for instance, has a history and reputation of being a crusader for human rights. In 2011, it established a hard-hitting investigative unit called *Amabhungane* (isiZulu for Dung Beetles), which has since its emergence covered a fair number of stories related to social justice. Similarly, the *City Press* with its tagline 'The full story. All the facts. You decide' aims to be a paper that provides well-researched investigative stories. On one hand, the print media are vibrant and provide a public space for discussion and deliberation, and on the other hand, they tend to frame issues from what Friedman (2011) calls a 'view from the suburbs', meaning that the media serve the interests of lucrative audiences (p. 107). This, according to Friedman, results in the media appropriating a middle-class view of politics and social struggles. This kind of reporting shows conflict in the country's normative media framework. While the media attempt to adhere to ethical journalism in promoting the public interest, this is circumscribed by powerful economic interests that are often not counter-balanced by other societal imperatives. Rodny-Gumede (2015) in her research based on interviews with journalists in the country found that while most journalists articulate their role in society in ways that conform to liberal normative ideas of the news media, their responses also point to 'a negotiation of a wider set of interests' that are compatible with a social responsibility role of the media (p. 66).

Conclusion

Our interpretation of the stories represented shows that the newspapers foregrounded the importance of socioeconomic rights. In most cases, the selected media provide a robust and informed coverage of legal cases concerning socioeconomic. Several stories on the courts invariably drew attention to the importance of the constitution as a landmark document in global terms. Many stories displayed a positive tone and recognized voices of the marginalized. However, the majority of the stories contained gaps and silences on critical issues concerning the structural causes of inequality and poverty. Grassroots social movements driving struggles for social justice are either absent in the stories or poorly contextualized. The media are generally silent on the political economy of socioeconomic rights in South Africa and urban social movements and everyday resistance.

There is no doubt that the print media in South Africa are at the cutting edge of investigative journalism and often bring government to account. At the same time, it has been criticized for ignoring views that might alienate middle- and upper-class audiences, who have the most disposable income.

Although the perspectives offered here feature three newspapers and cannot be generalized to other newspapers, some of the key political economy arguments are applicable to the broader newspaper sector in the country since it shares a similar normative media system. The arguments raised in this discussion emphasize debates on the role of the

media in a post-conflict democratic country such as South Africa. The central question of what role the media should play in the reconstruction of post-apartheid social identities becomes very critical and is the subject of on-going debate.

The current liberal-democratic view of independence and neutrality that now underpins the media ethical frameworks seems to contradict the social reality of material, race, and class inequalities facing the country. Scholars such as Wasserman (2006) and Rodny-Gumede (2015) have argued for a revision of the current media ethical frameworks by stating that the media should play a central role in the transformation of society and the redress of inequalities inherited from apartheid. The nature of this alternative role needs careful unpacking and theorizing. Wasserman (2013, 2015), for example, proposes a model where the media adopt a stance of listening that would recognize acts of protests as legitimate contributions to political discourse and the actors in these events as worthy of being listened to. He argues that for this to happen, a fundamental shift is required from 'the monitorial-watchdog stance that favours rational deliberation in a Habermasian public sphere, to a model where control over discourse is ceded to citizens to engage in "emotion talk" through their words and their deeds' (Wasserman, 2015: 384).

Funding

Note

1. We are aware of the weaknesses of simple random sampling, the major limitation being that it tends to have larger sampling errors and less precision than stratified samples of the same sample size.

References

Berger G (2003) The journalism of poverty and the poverty of journalism. *Paper presented at for International Communications Forum*, Cape Town, South Africa, 5–9 April 2003. Available at: https://www.google.co.za/?gfe_rd=cr&;ei=RIriVp6VDo2p8wfYv4HgCQ&gws_rd=ssl#q=The+journalism+of+poverty+and+the+poverty+of+journalism (accessed 8 March 2016).

Bond P (2014a) Constitutionalism as a barrier to the resolution of widespread community rebellions in South Africa. *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 41(3): 461–482.

Bond P (2014b) *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, 2nd edn. London: Pluto Press.

Bryman A (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bullock H, Wyche KF and Williams W (2001) Media images of the poor. *Journal of Social Issues* 57(2): 229–246.

Byrne RJ (2012) *Framing income inequality in the media: Is there a liberal or neoliberal bias*. MSc Thesis, Georgia Southern University. Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1622&;context=etd (accessed 3 March 2016).

Carragee KM and Roefs W (2004) The neglect of power in recent framing research. *Journal of Communication* 54(2): 214–233.

Chan JM and Lee CC (1984) The journalistic paradigm on civil protests: A case study of Hong Kong. In: Arno A and Dissanayake W (eds) *The News Media in National and International Conflict*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 183-202.

Chauhan A and Foster J (2013) Representations of poverty in British newspapers: A case of 'Othering' the threat? *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 24(5): 390–405.

Cissel M (2012) Media framing: A comparative content analysis on mainstream and alternative news coverage of Occupy Wall Street. *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 3(1): 67–77.

Claasen C (1999) *Between the devil of apartheid's legacy and the deep blue sea of a rationalized press*. Unpublished essay at Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa. Available at http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_content&;task=view&id=578&Itemid= (accessed 9 February 2015).

Clawson R and Trice R (2000) Poverty as we know it: Media portrayals of poverty. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64: 53–64.

Deane J (2005) Media, democracy and public sphere. In: Hemer O and Tufte T (eds) *Media & Glocal Change: Rethinking Communication for Development*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: CLACSO, pp. 177-192.

Devereux E (1998) *Devils and Angels, Television, Ideology and the Coverage of Poverty*. Luton: John Libbey Media.

Dugard J (2008) Courts and the poor in South Africa: A critique of systemic judicial failures to advance transformative justice. *South African Journal on Human Rights* 24(2): 214-238.

Duncan J (2010) On protest hotspots and analytical blind spots. The South African Civil Society Information Service. Available at:http://www.sacsis.org.za/site/article/439.1 (accessed 28 January 2015).

Duncan J (2013) South African journalism and the Marikana massacre: A case study of an editorial failure. *The Political Economy of Communication* 1(2): 65–88.

Duncan J (2014) 'It's not just the unions that are cut off from people, but the media too': Reconstituting South Africa's mediated public sphere. *Acta Academica* 46(1): 73–97.

Entman RM (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.

Flew T (2007) *Understanding Global Media*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Friedman S (2011) Whose freedom? South Africa's press, middle-class bias and the threat of control. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 32(2): 106–121.

Goffman E (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Golding P and Murdock G (1997) Ideology and the mass media. The question of determination. In: Golding P and Murdock G (eds) *Mass Media and Society*, 3rd edn. London: Arnold, pp. 70–92.

Halloran JD, Elliott P and Murdock G (1970) *Demonstrations and Communication: A Case Study*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Harper S (2012) *Beyond the Left: Communist Critique of the Media*. London: Zero Publications.

Kariithi N and Kareithi P (2007) It's off to work you go! A critical discourse analysis of media coverage of the anti-privatization strike in South Africa in October 2002. *Journalism Studies* 8(3): 465–480.

Kendall DE (2005) *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Krippendorff KH (2004) *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

McChesney R (2004) *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

McDonald DA and Smith L (2004) Privatizing Cape Town: From Apartheid to neo-liberalism in the mother city. *Urban Studies* 41(8): 1461–1484.

Martin C (2004) *Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mayher A and McDonald DA (2007) The print media in South Africa: Paving the way for 'Privatization'. *Review of African Political Economy* 34(113): 443–460.

Nixon B (2012) Dialectical method and the critical political economy of culture. *tripleC: Cognition, Communication, Co-operation* 10(2): 439–456.

Pan Z and Kosicki G (1993) Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication* 10(1): 55–75.

Peng Z (2008) Framing the anti-war protests in the global village: A comparative study of newspaper coverage in three countries. *International Communication Gazette* 70(5): 361–377.

Pointer R (2015) *From illegitimate disruption to failing state: How South African newspapers framed 'service delivery protests' in 2013*. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

Rodny-Gumede Y (2015) South African journalists' conceptualisation of professionalism and deviations from normative liberal values. *Communicare* 33(2): 54–69.

Skonieczny A and Morse G (2014) Globalization and the occupy movement: Media framing of economic protest. In: Steger MB, Battersby P and Siracusa JM (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Globalization*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, pp. 662-682.

Smith J, McCarthy JD, McPhail C, et al. (2001) From protest to agenda building: Description bias in media coverage of protest events in Washington, DC. *Social Forces* 79: 1397–1423.

Street J (2001) *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Switzer L and Adhikari M (2000) *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation under Apartheid*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Tomaselli K (1997) Ownership and control in the South African print media: Black empowerment after apartheid, 1990–1997. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 18(1): 21–68.

Wasserman H (2006) Globalized values and postcolonial responses: South African perspectives on normative media ethics. *The International Communication Gazette* 68(1): 71–91.

Wasserman H (2013) Journalism in a new democracy: The ethics of listening. *Communication* 39(1): 67–84.

Wasserman H (2015) Marikana and the media: Acts of citizenship and a faith in democracy-to-come. *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 41(2): 375–386.

Wasserman H and De Beer A (2005) Which public? Whose interest? The South African media and its role in the first ten years of democracy. *Critical Arts* 19(1–2): 36–51.

Author biographies

Sarah H Chiumbu, PhD, is a senior research specialist in the Human and Social Development Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria, South Africa, and a visiting senior research fellow of Media Studies at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Vasu Reddy, PhD, is the dean in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Prior to taking this position, he was the executive director in the Human and Social Development Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria.

Narnia Bohler-Muller, PhD, is executive director in Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria, South Africa, and an adjunct professor of the Nelson R Mandela School of Law at the University of Fort Hare.

Ntombizonke A Gumede, MA, is a researcher in the Human and Social Development Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria.

Amanda Mtshengu, MA, is a junior researcher in the Human and Social Development Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in Pretoria.