Revisiting the role of the news media and journalism in South Africa: Convergence, fragmentation and decolonisation

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Introduction
In my presentation tonight, I will revisit some of the debates around the news media in South Africa. In doing so I will attempt to situate the South African news media in the post-colonial discourse, and answer some of the questions around the role of journalism in contemporary society. While numerous challenges face the contemporary news media sphere, including journalism as both a practice and an institution, world-wide, this presentation will address the unique challenges facing the news media in a post-colonial society such as South Africa, where transformation efforts have focused on breaking with racial as well as gender injustices of a more recent apartheid past, rather than longer continuous legacies of colonialism.

The most important public, as well as policy, debates in South Africa post-apartheid have concerned transformation from various perspectives and in various sectors of society. Debates that with regards to the news media variably and often interchangeably has foregrounded ideas of racial and gender equity in the newsroom as well as in the contents of the news media. Such debates have also touched upon diversity of views and access to the news media. More recently and, emanating from centres in the global South (in some cases very specifically from epicentres in South Africa), are debates around what role journalism can and should play in a changing political landscape characterised by renewed and amplified calls for a decolonisation of all sectors of society.

Globally, the role of the news media is debated, and in an ever evolving media industry heavily influenced by technological developments, questions are being asked as to whether journalism can survive in the digital and social media environment?; What role can journalism play amidst changes thought to diminish its power as a ‘public good’ and the ‘Fourth Estate’?; Who is a journalist and what is news?.

While some of these questions are not necessarily new to the discourse and debate around the news media and journalism, as news organisations and practices have always evolved and changed with the times, there are distinct turning points in time in which more fundamental changes take place (McQuail 2013, 171). The invention of the printing press, the industrial revolutions 1.0, 2.0, 3.0 and of course now 4.0, all present a point in case. Each of these events has increased the scale and reach of news media, the role news media play in society and the various effects that the news media have on society (ibid).

The changes brought about by the third industrial revolution or the ‘digital age’ have fundamentally changed everything from news production and news content to news consumption, and the implications of the glut of information, instantaneous nature, and lack of editorial oversight over social media content, much debated. And while the industry is still grappling with these changes, the fourth industrial revolution is already in full swing and Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) are no longer the topic of science fiction, but increasingly our daily reality.

However, important in our own context with reference to transformation and decolonisation debates, is the contention that, amidst technological changes, the news media and journalism has not changed much in terms of the role it assigns itself. While modernity or the second industrial revolution, that saw mass society emerge, provided the basis for normative ideas around the role of the news media in liberal democracies (i.e. to provide entertainment; educate and inform; serve as a public forum for deliberation and discussion; act as a watchdog of powerful societal as well as individual institutions and interests), contemporary debates around the role of the news media are yet to synthesise ideas around a new role for journalism, particularly in the post-colony.

In the context of South Africa and many post-colonial societies, the news media is shaped by its colonial roots and the mass media have served as extensions of colonial and administrative power and as “sites for the reproduction of patriarchal and colonial structures (McMillin 2007, 71) and later, as in the context of South Africa and southern Africa, apartheid and its aberrations. The mass media and broadcasting, in particular, has always played an important role as an enforcer of ideology by national elites (ibid, 77), a trend often continued by post-liberation governments as well (Pieterse and Parekh 1995) for purposes of nation building and as a tool and platform for development communication (McMillin 2007, 77).
This said, the news media has also served as a platform and tool for resistance and change, and as such the role of the news media has often been ambiguous with the news media being implicated in both “the institutionalisation of the colonial project, as well as in its repudiation” (Ogola and Rodny-Gumede 2014, 227). We know that in South Africa, the black anti-colonial as well as the opposition press and alternative press during the years of apartheid played a crucial role in the dismantling of the same (Switzer and Adhikari 2000). A role that has been taken over and enforced by some of the investigative journalism and individual journalists who have kept checks and balances on both State, big business and private individuals in the post-apartheid era (Harber 2018). Most recently, the many news media reports around power abuse in, and by, former President Jacob Zuma’s administration exemplifies this.

The question is what such changes and challenges mean for the development of the news media and the potential for transformation and decolonisation, and importantly the role that the news media can play in the still nascent democracy?

Questioning the link between media and democracy

While an unfettered press, with unbiased and accurate coverage, is widely considered an important cornerstone of any liberal democracy (Schudson 2008), the link between media and democracy is increasingly being questioned and the news media’s role as the ‘Fourth Estate’ and its claims to public representation queried (Rodny-Gumede 2017a; Rodny-Gumede, milton and Mano 2017).

At the same time and with the complexity of modern society, we have entered “a new age of realism where people’s need for reliable information and quality journalism on issues of society, economy and the environment is increasing rather than decreasing” (Nordenstreng 2009, 516). This seems particularly pertinent with regard to the emergence of new media platforms and it is clear that the relationship between citizens and those who govern is undergoing fundamental changes (Canel and Voltmer 2014, 1). Developments such as the commercialisation of media systems, the changing norms and practices of journalism, the rise of professional communication advisors and political public relations and – last, but not least – the unpredictable nature of the Internet and social media are fundamentally altering the way in which political matters are communicated in the public sphere (ibid). These “political and
technical changes are an open invitation to rethink ‘media and democracy’, a subject that has become repetitive and wrapped in the cobwebs of time” (Curran 2000, 120). Having said this, the idea that journalism should function to safeguard the institutions and principles of democracy is by far the most enduring principle underpinning conceptions of freedom of speech and freedom of the press (Steel 2012, 42). Such ideas have historically been linked to the Habermasian idea of the public sphere (cf. Habermas 1989). While the idea of the public sphere has for long formed the basis for assessing qualitative links between media and democracy, there are several injunctions being made against it. Among other things, it is criticised for not being well suited for modern mass-scale societies and electronic media (Dahlgren 2002, 197), for emphasising the social disciplining as well as exclusionary functions of the public sphere that stand in contrast to its liberatory aspects (Verstraeten 1996 in Dahlgren 2002, 197), and the inherent gender imbalances of the public sphere (Dahlgren 2002, 198). However, newer adaptations of the public sphere also consider new media platforms and social media as constituting a public sphere more suitable for modern societal formation and communication (Dahlgren and Sparks 1991; 1993).

Overall, research points to an increased fragmentation of the public sphere (Dahlgren 2005) as well as increased audience disengagement with the traditional news media (WAN 2013) in particular with regard to younger audiences (Wasserman and Garman 2013). These injunctions highlight the need to question as well as rethink the often quoted and asserted links between the news media and democracy – in whatever guise people choose to define it (Rodny-Gumede 2017a).

In light of some of the critique levelled against the news media’s claim to serve democracy, it is legitimate to ask if the news media can rightfully claim its role as the Fourth Estate and public representative?

**The role and functions of the news media and its claims to public representation**
The public service claim is to date the most powerful claim that the news media has laid to public representativeness and a direct role in democratic processes and institution building. However, such a claim has little meaning and is but a virtual and fictive one in that it rarely reflects the actual opinions and tastes of those to whom it is directed (Keane 1995, 263). In societies, not only multicultural and heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity and socio-economic demographics, but so constituted through deliberate as well as continuous historical
and political legacies, the challenge is how to create a public service ethos or a public interest to empower a true “plurality of citizens” (ibid) formed around a “commonwealth of forms of life, tastes and opinions” (ibid).

In South Africa, a public service ethos has often been emphasised not only for reasons of disseminating fair and objective information in the functionalist tradition (McQuail 2000, 97), but also for reasons of providing access to audiences historically as well as continuously cut off from both public and commercial media ventures. We know that the public interest has often been very narrowly defined and that conceptualisations hereof have excluded and continues to exclude large segments of the audience on grounds of race and ethnicity and their associated socio-economic disparities (Rodny-Gumede 2015a). There are historical, cultural and political explanations as to how people understand and read the news media and how audiences have been conceptualised and catered to, and thus as to whose views have been represented through the news media. While cultural essentialist as well as racist conceptualisations of the audience (i.e. black and bantu editions of newspapers) might be less overt in the contemporary South African news media, audiences are still divided in terms of socio-economic factors that dictate access and ideas around what is considered news (Rodny-Gumede 2015a; 2015b). In addition, South African news audience are divide through an urban/rural divide (ibid). And, foremost, language still fragments audiences and dictates the public interest of cultural groups in South Africa (Gassner 2007; Wasserman and de Beer 2006).

News media content vividly exemplify this. For example, the news media coverage of the student movement and the protests that have rocked the higher education system in South Africa since 2015, as well as the numerous service delivery protests that have faced the country in later years, including the horrific massacre of 34 Miners at Marikana in 2012, shows that the news media has tended to treat calls for a broader stake in the economy and wider political representation and participation—more often than not emanating from poorer, historically marginalised communities—as a threat to liberal democracy and de-stabilising forces (Duncan 2013; Friedman 2011; Rodny-Gumede 2015d). Criticism has also been directed towards the news media for racial narratives perpetuated by an overwhelming focus on corruption and failures of the post-apartheid government and leadership, perceived as little else than attacks on a “black” government and civil service more corrupt, in-apt and prone to mismanagement (Braude 1999; SAHRC 2000). Accusations of racism also surfaced around the murder trial of
high profile former Paralympic gold medallist, Oscar Pistorius. Questions were asked as to why the news media focused so much attention on the murder of a white woman, while numerous cases of abuse and femicide of black women go on trial without the same interest shown by the news media, even when they involve high profile perpetrators or victims. The Pistorius trial, that was broadcast live in South Africa, also highlighted much of the racial disparities and narratives around race that still define South African society (Smith 2014).

Thus, in many ways the broader South African public sphere still reflects old inequalities of access and power (Jacobs 2007) with a narrow articulation of the public interest. The question is whether a re-conceptualisation of the public interest, and most importantly, who the public is in such an interest, has taken place (Rodny-Gumede 2015b; 2015c)? A ‘public’ emerges when there is an attenuation between culture, on the one side, and patterns of social interaction, on the other (Gouldner 2002, 83). Invariably, conceptualisations as well as real applications of the public interest are made easier in homogenous societies with a shared and cohesive sense of ‘self’ and ‘nation’. Thus, we need to understand how the news media conceive of the public interest as well as the public, and if new conceptualisations can be facilitated.

The public interest and journalism as a public service is commonly associated with the normative framework of social responsibility. The premises for the idea of social responsibility are often quoted but under-researched in terms of how social responsibility actually translates in terms of journalistic practices in different national and cultural contexts (Rodny-Gumede 2015b). The idea of social responsibility has influenced Western thought on the role of the press in democratic society and serves as the basis of statutes and codes of conduct of many Western and non-Western press codes. However, these ideas are somewhat contentious in non-consensus societies with diverse and multicultural populations (Rodny-Gumede 2015c, 113), let alone societies where access to the mainstream news media remains one of the main obstacles for broadening participation in, and access to, public debates.

In this regard, post-colonial theory has criticised normative ideas around media functions, media performance and ethics for being entrenched in Western philosophical belief systems and for ignoring non-Western ideas on how the media should or could function in society. The argument is, that for societies shaped by centuries of slavery, colonialism—and as in southern Africa apartheid and its aberrations—a different way of theorising as well as conducting journalism is needed (Rodny-Gumede 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).
Contextual factors influencing media development and trajectories hereof

In any society, the analysis of the news media provides a means of investigating the politics, economy, culture, social relations and imaginative life of that society (Curran 2013) and constitutes “an academic meta-discourse on the daily defining of political reality” (Schudson 2000, 194). However, the contextual factors that need to be factored into such an analysis are often hard to divulge, and in the post-colony, media analysis has often been conducted in accordance with normative ideas of the functioning of the news media set either in juxtaposition to media developments in Western liberal democracies or as a desired extension of the same (Rodny-Gumede 2015a).

Instead there are many other issues that underline the development and fundamental ethos of the news media and journalism that talk to overcoming the many legacies of the past in societies where political organisation and state formation have been premised on racial and ethnic divisions as well as exclusion (Rodny-Gumede 2015a). In particular, ideas around race, gender and the role of the news media in nation building, constructing a common identity, and as a site and instrument for a broader transformation of society need to be factored in when considering media developments in the post-colony (ibid). Added to this are questions around how culture impacts on state-media relations and the role that the media play in society in terms of ideological orientations, audience engagement and a public service ethos (Rodny-Gumede 2015b; 2015c).

The idea of forging national unity was high on the agenda in the South African transition with the news media thought of as both an agent of, as well as platform for, a broader transformation process and nation building agenda. Such projects, however, have been fraught with difficulties often emanating from fundamental differences in the way in which post-independent governments have perceived the role of the news media vis à vis the views expressed by the news media. In South Africa, as in many post-colonial societies, the democratic government has consistently criticised the news media for being untransformed and racist and for looking at the world through “white” lenses, urging the news media to align its reporting to the government’s development goals and polices.

Without denying or rejecting such criticism, there is a need for an independent news media which reinforces the watchdog function and serving in the public interest, particularly with
regard to societies where political elites historically have not been held accountable (Voltmer 2006), the news media is also faced with the dilemma of keeping new political elites accountable, as well as not destabilising the often fragile legitimacy of a new political dispensation (ibid). Thus, we need to stay clear of ‘either or’ narratives, and instead emphasise the need for a news media sensitive to the society and realities it forms part of (and that contributes “to a postcolonial approach attentive to new forms of domination that may arise in the postcolony” (Wasserman 2010, 83).

Linked to this are also questions as to whether African culture and traditions serve as obstacles to development and democracy, with scholars arguing that concepts such as democracy, press freedom or human rights are not African and mere impositions of African culture and governance (Cobbah 1987). Others argue that of course African culture and traditions are not “inimical to development or democracy” (Gumede 2016; Cobbah 1987). Cultures and traditions are not static, nor do they conform to predictable formulae, thus they are not to be analysed by means of scientific laws or rules, but rather as “an interpretative phenomenon, in search of meaning from the perspective of different world views” (Du Plooy 2006, 197). Having said this, the role that culture plays in the media-politics nexus and the changing socio-political landscape in South Africa and many other post-colonial societies has been severely under-theorised and often overly essentialised (Tomaselli 2009). Overall, the analysis as well as the development of media systems is multifaceted and influenced by a variety of factors; however, and with regard to the post-colony, this analysis has to be based on factors that take account of contextual issues lodged within the history and legacies of the colonial project and its politics of repression and exclusion (Rodny-Gumede 2015a).

Looking at general trends in media development in societies that, like South Africa, have undergone political transitions since the late 1980s and early 1990s, certain trajectories of media development become visible. These societies face dilemmas similar to those of South Africa in its first two decades of democratic rule. While there are huge differences between countries such as Russia, China and South Africa in terms of history and politics and how these factors have shaped society, there are also many similarities and lessons to be learnt about the processes of political transition.

On the most basic level, what these societies share is the fact that they have all undergone political transitions from authoritarian undemocratic regimes to democracy (Sparks 2011, 6).
On closer inspection, issues of power, the state, endemic conflicts, societal change, the economy, institutionalized racism and ethnic insurgency, secrecy and surveillance have often taken centre-stage in countries that have undergone significant political transformation since the fall of the Berlin Wall (Downing, 1996: xi). Studies of transitional societies also show that while there may have been considerable political change, social transformation has often lagged behind and, as a result, the news media have failed to transform. New institutions are formed on the remnants of the old and transformation lodged within older societal and political structures, and, as a result, what prevails is often a culture lodged within a former authoritarian political system that is carried over and internalized by the new democratic political dispensation (Downing 1996; O’Neil 1998; Sparks 2005, 2009; Sükösd 2000). This has been exemplified in the many attempts by the post-apartheid democratic government’s efforts to control the news media (Hadland 2007; Rozumilowicz 2002; Sparks 2000). The way in which the African National Congress (ANC) has tried to tighten its grip over the news media, including some of later years proposals for new media legislation in South Africa, is indicative of this. Recently, there are indications of change in this space however (I was personally very chuffed to see President Cyril Ramaphosa’s endorsement of the Journalist website (www.thejournalist.org.za) for example (Ramaphosa 2018).).

However, and as emphasised earlier, where many post-colonial societies stand apart from other transitional societies, particularly in Eastern Europe, is the way in which the news media has been shaped by legacies of colonialism and, as in the case of southern Africa, apartheid and its aberrations. As a result, many post-colonial societies are characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, often skewed along racial and gender lines. Thus, the study of the South African transition and the development of the news media highlight some variables not displayed in the studies of post-conflict and/or transitional societies in Eastern Europe and East Asia, namely those of race and in the extension, racism and how race in the context of South Africa intersects with issues of class and gender (Mtwana and Bird 2006; SAHRC 2000; Rodny-Gumede 2015a; Steenveld 2007, 2004, 2002). It also highlights the absence of a deeper understanding of non-racialism (Everatt 2010, 2009), including projects of nation-building as conceptualized through the news media (Steenveld and Strelitz 1998). To this should also be added the challenges posed by restructuring a liberation movement into a fully-fledged democratic government and how to counter tendencies of partisanship and co-option of the media (Gumede 2012, 2005).
The South African case study, also highlights the fact that far from being overtaken by structural constraints and co-option by political powers, the news media, especially the elite and opinion-leading media, have played a role in shaping the outcome of the transition as well as the discourse in South Africa, both during and post-apartheid (Jacobs 2004). It is argued that the news media continue to be an ambivalent force and power centre in the post-apartheid era and have emerged as a power centre in their own right, displaying considerable agency in relation to political power (Jacobs 2007). Once again this can clearly be seen in the role that investigative journalism has, and continues to play in South Africa and throughout the African continent (cf. Schifferin 2017).

In later years, several studies have been published that analyse trajectories of media development in emerging democracies and transitional societies, and there is a growing academic field within transitional and democrationisation studies concerned with the role of the news media in processes of social and political change. Such studies have often drawn upon comparative frameworks for media analysis. Notable among these is the framework developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their, by now widely invoked, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Here the authors make the argument that distinct patterns of media systems and their relationship to political systems exist. Thus, building on previous models of media systems such as the by now largely rejected ideas of ‘The Four theories of the Press’ (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956).

Even though the ‘Comparative Media Systems’ model was developed from a few case studies of media systems located in Western Europe and North America, scholars have used it to pronounce on the development of media systems in emerging democracies and transitional societies in such diverse parts of the world as Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa, advancing the idea that while the news media in transitional societies have initially seemed to transform after political reforms have taken place, there are still hurdles towards truly transforming and restructuring the sector presented by the legacies of the once authoritarian framework (cf. Hadland 2007; Hafez 2010; Lauk 2009; Mansur 2009). With regard to post-apartheid South Africa, arguments have been brought forward advancing the idea that the development of the news media conforms to that of many other societies often interchangeably labelled young democracies, post-conflict and/or transitional societies, where the news media has fallen prey to co-option by political powers in very much the same way as during the apartheid era (Fourie 2002; Fourie and Oosthuizen 2001; Hadland 2007; Wigston 2007).
Despite being hailed as a significant advance in media systems analysis (cf. Couldry 2005; McQuail 2005), the model including later adaptations of the same (Hallin and Mancini 2012, 2004), has also been critiqued for failing to account for variables, such as country size and regionalism (McQuail 2005, 268) and the heterogeneity of the countries within the ideal-type clusters (Couldry 2005, 305). The model also neglects broadcasting (Hallin and Mancini 2012, 288–289). In particular, the restructuring of state broadcasters into fully fledged public broadcasters is crucial to the socio-political role of the news media in many transitional as well as post-colonial societies, particularly with regard to projects of nation-building. Further to this, the model neglects new media platforms (ibid), and importantly the role that social media plays in the contemporary media and politics nexus.

Also highlighted are the ways in which structure has been emphasised over agency (McCargo 2012; Roudakova 2012) and the fact that the model does not account for hybridization of media systems, particularly with regard to media systems located outside of North America and Western Europe (Voltmer 2012). With regard to the model’s application to South Africa, race and how this has shaped society and the news media would have to be factored in (Hadland 2012; Rodny-Gumede 2015a). Equally, intersections of race, class and gender (Rodny-Gumede 2015a). All these injunctions to the initial model are relevant to the discussion of the analysis of media systems in post-colonial societies in the global South.

A broader sociological inquiry into the media’s organization and individual journalists in relation to variables such as race, class and gender and their contestations and ramifications for projects of nation-building is, therefore, needed (Rodny-Gumede 2015a). In the context of South Africa, where race has been a determining factor in all spheres of life, and racial transformation has been one of the more prominent narratives with regards to debates in, and about, the news media post-apartheid, it is vital to analyse the media and the rationale of transformation from these demographics and how they interact with other variables in the media and politics nexus, also highlighted through the calls for decolonisation.

All in all, there is a need for re-thinking the analysis of media development in South Africa as well as many post-colonial societies. And with reference to South Africa, we cannot disregard some of the complexities of the individual transition that the country has undergone. This is not to claim South African exceptionalism, but rather to emphasise the importance of recognising differing experiences of transitions, as well as premises upon which such transitions are founded.
Importantly, the news media, particularly with regards to new media platforms aligned to more traditional news media outlets act as both vehicles as well as agents of change. And, we need to understand the role of different media in such processes. All media are not created equal. This assertion is of outmost importance for understanding and re-affirming the role that journalism can play in contemporary society (Rodny-Gumede 2018a). And while, some do entertainment better, others do education and/or information and yet others might act as watchdogs and provide investigative journalism. We need to understand these functions and learn to sort one from the other (ibid). This is important if we are to take serious projects of transformation and decolonisation, as if we cannot differentiate between the varying roles that different media outlets and platforms assume, whether such roles are aligned to specific purposes (such as providing information, entertainment, or education, or aligned to different political, social or development agendas), we will always risk missing parts of the audience or important issues.

Instead, we need to add the variables set out above to our analytic and comparative models to avoid “falling prey to Eurocentric ideas of the normative performance of the media” (McMillin 2007). Comparative media analysis is needed to make broader generalisations of similarities as far as best practice goes as well as pitfalls to avoid, but in order to highlight converging as well as diverging trajectories of media development, we need to understand how such trajectories are at once influenced by factors common, as well as unique, to the case studies chosen (Rodny-Gumede 2015a).

In this regard, postcolonial theory allows us to critique the perdurability of constructions of nation, citizen, and community, themselves repositories of residual ideologies of colonialism (McMillin 2007, 66). Even though postcolonial theory has been largely ignored in studies of the media (Kumar 2014), with postcolonial studies and media studies developing as separate fields, parallel to one another but with very few points of intersection (Fernandez 1999, 59), much of our understanding of these varying and sometimes conflicting roles of the news media in the post-colony emanates from the adoption of postcolonial theory in media studies, however recent. Such theories are ever so important if we are to renew and enrich the discipline (Shome 2016), however, and even if increasingly adopted within the field of media studies, they have yet to influence comparative media systems theory and the analysis of trajectories of media development.
This is not to say that we can equate all post-colonial societies or that all colonial or post-colonial experiences are the same (McMillin 2007, 71). The colonial project is shaped by pre-colonial traditions and the colonial as well as post-colonial experience, partially formed and premised on the resistance it met and how such resistance was fashioned (ibid). Equally, a more contextual analysis will also reveal that some of these Western normative conceptualisations of the role of the news, no matter how entrenched they might seem, are also re-assessed, re-shaped, contested and sometimes rejected.

Re-assessments, adaptations and deviations

Despite the criticism directed at the South African news media for being too focused on issues concerning only a small white urban elite, research shows that South African journalists are in fact well aware of such criticism and recognise that something is indeed amiss in the ways that the news media has been shaped and in the practices that have been adopted (Rodny-Gumede 2015b, 2015c). This also extends to ideas of the audience and who the public is in the public interest (ibid).

There are in fact many deviations from the perceived Western normative liberal ideas of the role of the news media that come through in the way that South African journalists conceptualise their role in society (ibid). And while, at first glance, most journalists seemingly conform to normative ideas of the news media entrenched in many Western liberal democracies, and emphasise a role entrenched in a public service ethos, when further queried, the professional values articulated as core to journalism in South Africa do in fact point to a negotiation of a wider set of interests and values (ibid). South African journalists are acutely aware of the complexities and sensitivities of the post-apartheid socio-political landscape (ibid). There is an explicit acknowledgement of the need for the news media to open up to previously neglected segments of the audience and acknowledge that the public interest in South Africa – and who the public is – has and continues to be very narrowly defined (Rodny-Gumede 2015b, 2015c). In addition, there is an emphasis on the need to listen to the audience rather than pander to outdated ideas of what the audience want or need (Rodny-Gumede 2015c). Such ideas also conform to ideas for a new ethos of journalism through the ethics of listening (Wasserman 2013). South African journalists also argue against polarisations of role orientations on a sliding scale from ‘lapdogs’ to ‘watchdogs’ of power,
and instead acknowledge that if journalism is to fulfill a public service function, there must also be room for social commentary in relation to politics (Rodny-Gumede 2015a).

Research points to South African journalists interpreting their role as one of facilitators of a broader transformation of the socio-economic landscape (Rodny-Gumede 2015b, 2015c). A journalistic role conceptualisation still to be properly explored and one that seemingly straddles and negotiates as well as transcends many of the ideas around journalistic role conceptualisations as set out in normative theorisations of the role of journalism in society, often polarised as either European or African, liberal or authoritarian, modern or traditional (Rodny-Gumede 2015b).

In addition, research also shows that South African journalists are open to explore alternative models for the practice and ethos of journalism (Rodny-Gumede 2015b, 2015c), and apart from ideas around a journalistic ethics of listening (Wasserman 2013), ubuntu journalism (Fourie 2011, 2002; Rodny-Gumede 2015c) and even Peace Journalism (Rodny-Gumede 2015d, 2012) are ideas that have been tested against South African journalists conceptualisations of their own role. Many of these ideas and models for journalism also cohere with a journalism of empathy (Rodny-Gumede 2018a).

The exploration of how journalists articulate their own roles and how they conceptualize ideas around professionalism is of utmost importance for broadening the understanding of journalism as a contextual and reflexive practice, and as such provide a more nuanced articulation of the role that journalism plays in any one society (Rodny-Gumede 2015b). While such research take us closer to redefining the role of journalism in contemporary South Africa, it is probably the way in which we harness the potential of new media platforms and technology to strengthen the role that journalism can play that will ensure the future of journalism as we know it. And, given the challenges around access to the mainstream media and inherent problems of public representativeness, the new media landscape presents new and interesting opportunities for the news media and journalism, and young democracies and post-colonial societies in particular (Rodny-Gumede 2017b).

The possibilities of technology and new media platforms for widening the public sphere
Without a doubt the media and communications industry is by far the most heavily impacted industry in terms of technological changes, characterised by both convergence as well as fragmentation. Convergence in terms of platforms and technologies utilised to produce, disseminate and consume media contents and fragmentation by the multitude of platforms and content providers. Equally, such changes pose challenges as well as opportunities. Challenges of access, particularly with regards to digital divides and opportunities in overcoming problems of the same by opening up possibilities for cheaper and greater participation.

Overall technology has changed the news media industry on a fundamental level, where the emphasis is on multi-platform approaches at all stages of producing, distributing and consuming media (Doyle 2013, 19), and where the focus is no longer on transmission but on conversation, and audiences want to interact with content, in real time (Sheridan-Burns 2013, 17). In essence, we have gone from mass media supplying a mass audience to one on one as well as small group conversations.

All of this have presented substantial challenges for the news media and for journalism and news distribution and consumption as we know it. And while some sceptics argue that these changes have brought about a de-skilling and de-professionalisation of journalism and the loss of editorial control (Bromley 1997), others are more optimistic and emphasise the potential of new technology for journalism and journalism practices and see ‘up-skilling’ instead of de-skilling (Nygren 2014, 75) and transformations and fragmentation of journalistic practice and institutions (Waisbord 2013, 2006). Yet others see new potentials for audience interaction and the opening up of the public sphere and/or the creation of entirely new public spheres (Dahlgren and Sparks 1991; 1993). The latter is important in the context of South Africa where, problems of access aside, cheaper technology and the proliferation of new media platforms, however, have meant that larger numbers of the public are able to participate in online forums and share opinions and experiences’ (Rodny-Gumed & Hyde-Clarke 2014, 104), particularly in light of the fact that audiences, as emphasised earlier, are still fragmented, and large segments still cut off from the mainstream news media (Gassner 2007; Wasserman and deBeer 2005).

What then is the potential of social media, and the alternative forms of journalism that it has given rise to, for engaging with the audience in innovative ways, and subsequently broadening the public sphere and providing access for a broader audience and a greater
diversity of views? And, vice versa, what potential does it hold for audiences and various interest groups to become co-creators of media contents? (Rodny-Gumede 2017b).

It is argued that new media platforms are opening up spaces for a more participatory, inclusive and responsive political process (Canel and Voltmer 2014, 1), in which audiences are no longer just an anonymous mass to be served, but co-creators of meaning in an ever-evolving societal formation process (Rodny-Gumede 2017b). Overall, the idea of state control is largely turned on its head with the emergence of social media. And new media platforms and information shared via social media does in fact in many instances stand as a direct response to the uniformity and perceived conservative neo-liberalism of many forms of mass communication (ibid). As such it has provided useful tools for activists to mobilise around specific issues and causes (Oates 2008, 155). However, while social media is becoming more accessible to broader layers of the population all over the world, South Africa included (Rodny-Gumede and Hyde-Clarke 2014, access is still fraught with difficulties. This immediately excludes large segments of the audience from participating in social media activities, and the partaking of news is still premised on online access (Craig 2005, 11–12).

Scholars are divided on the implications that social media has for the traditional news media and in their evaluations of the potential benefits and drawbacks of new media technologies for media and democracy, and political processes more generally. This said, in order for social change to take place, it is clear society can no longer solely rely on traditional news media, let alone government communications for public communication and information dissemination. Instead, civil society plays an increasingly important role in the broader political and societal formation process and its role has decidedly been strengthened and amplified through social media. Thus, efforts to re-affirm the role of journalism as a public information source, need to harness the potentials that new media platforms and new forms of information dissemination open up for a broadening of the public sphere (Rodny-Gumede 2017b). Here it is argued that social media even constitutes a whole “new public sphere” with the potential to open “up for all social groupings of society to be heard” (Jones and Pitcher 2010, 99).

This is however dependent on facilitating access to social media to a broader layer of the population and thus overcoming socio-economic, educational, language and gender divides. Equally, for such a public sphere to fulfil a role, we need to assure that there remains a core of qualitative information, analysis, and support for constitutional and human rights (Rodny-
Gumede 2017b). So far, while access and participation is still fraught with problems, social media and citizen journalists have indeed fulfilled several of the more traditional political functions of the news media (i.e. providing a correlation, continuity and mobilisation function). They have done so by supporting established norms and constitutional values and even authority when merited, and most importantly, by campaigning for social change. Social media and citizen journalists have also played a crucial role as exposers and whistle-blowers of corruption and maladministration (ibid).

And it is the tools provided for research and investigations that stand to change the practice of journalism the most and where the greatest potential for strengthening the role that journalism can play lies. Strengthening and re-focus journalism towards investigative journalism will be core to the future of the news media industry amidst increased competition from new media platforms, social media, lack of editorial oversight and fake news for example (Rodny-Gumede 2018a). Once again, while entertainment for example can come from anywhere, qualitative information and contents that conforms to ethical codes of conduct will still rely on trained professionals and carry currency amidst an ever-increasing information flow.

In this regard, journalism, and in particular investigative journalism can use new technology to its advantage. This by using big data and innovations that provide for harvesting and comparing data from across the world. Just think about Wikileaks and the Panama papers for example (Rodny-Gumede 2018a). This also opens up opportunities for forming partnerships with global news networks and networks of journalists and NGO’s that work on issues that concern us all (ibid).

Further to this, as social media provides for one on one interaction and more individualised conversations, journalism can find ways to engage more niched audiences and leverage commercial pressures that have dictated the perceived needs and wishes of a mass audience and a narrowly defined public interest. Thus, journalism stand a chance to hone in on much needed research tools and resource sharing, this while also being able to reach new audiences with more niched contents.

Once again, endless potential and opportunities, however, all still dependent on access.

So where does this take us? You have all been very patient, so let me try to sum it up.
Concluding remarks

I started this presentation by asking a series of questions talking to the role of the news media in contemporary society and I also stated that with regards to South Africa we are yet to synthesise ideas around a new role for journalism. While much analysis of media development and trajectories thereof have focused on normative ideas and ideals of the role of journalism in liberal democracies in the global North, to strengthen and ‘future proof’ journalism and the role it can play we have to analyse the factors that impact on media development in our own context and how the news media in South Africa, as well as many other post-colonial societies in the global South stand apart from many other post-conflict and transitional societies.

In doing so we can develop new models as well as a new ethos for the news media that talk to the context that it serves rather than perceived best practices emanating from Western normative conceptualisations of the role and function of the news media. This is not to say that we should cast out normative conceptualisations of the news media, from whatever quarter, it simply to say that we need to “‘smash-and-grab’ … usable and valuable insights from anywhere while viably calling for schema that are locally relevant.” (Chasi and Rodny-Gumede 2016). The scholarship of journalism and the news media have an important role to play in this regard (Rodny-Gumede 2018b).

Important, the South Africa news media has proven again and again that it can adapt, not only to new technological challenges (just look at Media24, now a global venture), but also to a fast changing political environment where sometimes resistance and opposition is needed as well as empathy and understanding for contexts often very different from Western liberal democracies.

Comparative media systems theory apart, and notwithstanding calls by scholars for ‘de-Westernizing’ (Curran and Park 2000) and ‘Southernizing’ (Rodny-Gumede 2015a, 2013) communication studies and attempts at validating theory from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011; Connell 2007), communication studies remain mired in paradigmatic approaches that cement the global North as the norm upon which communication theories are founded. The global rarely means ‘universal’ and instead refers only to the global North at the cost of denying the global South (Sreberny 2000, 114–115). Equally, perspectives emanating from the global South have for long been neglected in the scholarship and
communication curricula in both the global North and global South. The theoretical point is that deliberately or otherwise, the dominant Western scholarship of communication reflects Northern histories as though the rest either do not exist or only exist to the extent that this either aids or does not interfere with Northern doctrinal theorization, denying our common humanity, shared history, and future.

Instead we need to forge a new media system informed by research emanating from tools and models that accurately measures what they are meant to measure. Only then can we in earnest start looking towards new models for the news media and the practice of journalism, models and practice fit for the context that it serves, weather from the vantage point of culture, politics, socio-economic factors, geographical location and/or technological advances and developments.

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