

3 THE NEWSROOM AND BEYOND: THEORISING THE MEDIA

3.1 The Media as Social Agent: Debating the Media's Impact on Social Transformation

How are we to understand the significance of media representations of gender? Feminist critiques of media representations have been very prolific, yet often the underlying assumption of the significance of media representations in creating, sustaining or challenging material and social inequalities is not always explored but, in some ways, taken for granted. Common to much feminist media research and activism related to the media has been an implicit structural functionalist media theory, embodying what Carey (1989) named the “transmission view” of communication. Described in its most basic sense, a transmission view of the media assumes a relatively unfettered one-way flow of influence from media text to media audiences and consumers, necessarily making the way in which gender, for example, is represented in the media very important in shaping gendered social norms, values and behaviours.

However, a general shift has occurred in media theory, including certain feminist media studies, towards more complex conceptions of media production and negotiation processes (van Zoonen, 1994). A view of media consumers as “passive, indiscriminate and morally malleable” (Segel, 1992: 6) and the media as “all powerful, dangerous and potentially hazardous to stable society” (ibid), has progressively been challenged by a “pluralist paradigm” highlighting mediations, negotiations and contestations occurring in both textual creation and reception processes (ibid).

When it comes to the question of the impact of the mass media on society, debate rages on between theorists and activists alike. It is interesting to note that while transmission views have for a number of years been effectively challenged in the halls of academia, discourses common to policy activists continue to echo assumptions embodied in the transmission view of communications. The potential implications of these contesting views can be conceived of as critical to the feminist invocation of media effects theories to launch a critique against prevailing gendered media representations. As such, a brief synopsis of central themes in the complex and controversial media effects debate follows. This synopsis will also provide

a platform from which to launch a briefly articulated and rudimentary feminist epistemological standpoint (drawn primarily from Africa feminist work) on media “effects” or importance, considered as lacking from most feminist media theory and of potential importance to activists.

Theories surrounding the impact of media representations involve, in the main, theories on the normalising and socialising impacts of media representations, agenda setting theories, and those theories challenging the assumptions of the one-way flow of influence implied in the former theories, highlighting audience appropriation and resistance of media messages. The latter pluralist paradigm will be limited here mainly to the frequently cited work of Stuart Hall (1980) on “Encoding/Decoding” media processes.

Theories stressing the media’s role in normalising roles, behaviours and values, and socialising audiences via the expression of dominant meanings embodied in representations, can perhaps be no better introduced than through research on the effects of television on children. David Buckingham (2003), in his chronicle of this area of research, contends that the fervent attention granted to the impacts of media representations on children, in particular, can be attributed to the theme’s invocation of moral and ideological assumptions about the social constitution of children and, by unspoken extension, adults.

Buckingham (2003) contends that deep-seated anxieties surrounding perceived undesirable social and moral changes may evoke the pursuit of causal explanations for such changes, as witnessed in the flurry of research aiming to identify the mass media’s impact on phenomena such as increased or changing patterns of violence. Television is thus frequently cited as having a powerful influence on children’s socialisation, the negative impacts of which characterise the majority of research (ibid). Most of this work has further been concentrated on the “stereotyping” of various social groups in media representations, notably stereotypes associated with gender, ethnicity and race (ibid).

Quantitative content analysis is widely used to evidence the proliferation of gender stereotypes produced and reproduced by the mass media, concentrating mostly on the dire state of under-representation of women in the media as well as their objectification as limited (sexual and/or domestic) beings (van Zoonen, 1994). Extensive data pertaining to these patterns in mass media products are available in many countries around the world,

and employed to raise awareness and lobby for change (ibid). However, as prolific as this data may be, it has been widely critiqued for its theoretical and empirical deficits (van Zoonen, 1994). The methodological approaches associated with this kind of research, it is argued, are flawed in their presupposition of a parallel between content and effects (Buckingham, 2003). Critics of this approach have drawn attention to the diverse socialisation factors that mediate the potential impact of the media (ibid).

Agenda setting theories offer an alternative approach to abstracting the role and impacts of media representations. These theories hold that, while the media may not be able to enforce upon audiences *what* to think, it can powerfully direct what audiences do or do not think *about*. Agenda setting theories are popular in analyses of media representations with party political content. As the media evolves into a near-ubiquitous communications body, so it increasingly becomes a “real” public space in which politics occur for the majority of people (Ross, 2002). Ross (ibid) adopts a position premised on agenda setting and priming, arguing that media content and representations “visibilise” certain political issues through repetition, to the effect that these issues come to be known as central in the eyes of the public.

Ross (ibid) also argues that the issues set as part of principle national and international agendas through the media privilege dominant socio-economic paradigms of patriarchy and capitalism, entrenching existing relationships of social, political, economic and cultural inequality. This, she further explains, is especially problematic given that journalists’ insistence on their application of neutrality and impartiality masks their agenda setting capabilities and roles. Tuchman (1978), for example, has described the ways in which journalists’ professional ideologies and values (such as objectivity) are strategically used in different situations to shape news stories. For instance, the use of “facts” to make “soft” news “hard” (or to legitimate it) enables news stories focussed on social issues to be forwarded strategically.

However, while agenda setting theories function as a useful alternative to socialisation and stereotyping theories (theories based in social constructionism), their implications cannot be wholly untangled from social constructionist approaches. By implication, agenda setting theories conceptualise omissions, marginalised issues or lacunae in media representations as powerful in constituting the omission, marginalisation or repression of certain notions of

“men” and “women” in society. As such, media representations are seen as, in a particular way, socially and culturally (re)constructing reality. Agenda setting theories also interestingly appear to recommend a view of media representation drawing from notions of “silencing”, and by implication of “voicing”, amenable to powerful feminist arguments around epistemology, as will be further explicated later in the literature review.

As a challenge to social constructionist theories, a number of theorists have aimed to unpack the complexity of potential media effects by examining audiences’ reception of media messages. van Zoonen (1994), in an overview of feminist media studies, provides a synopsis of the thesis put forward by Hall (1980) in which the one-way flow of influence from media messages to audiences is challenged. According to van Zoonen (1994), Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” model holds that meanings are “encoded” into media texts by their producers, and then “decoded” by audiences. Critically, Hall argues that the processes of encoding and decoding are not necessarily symmetrical (*ibid*).

While the ideologies held within media organisations may be encoded into media messages, the decoding process is not exclusive; audiences’ decoding of media messages will be influenced not only by the ideologies and discourses carried through or within media texts, but will be influenced by an array of social ideologies and discourses available to audiences (Omarjee, 2001). In essence, an audiences’ interpretation of media messages can be divergent from the messages inscribed in texts at the point of production. However, while media texts are polysemic, decoding possibilities are *not infinite* (van Zoonen, 1994). “Encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decoding will operate” (Hall, 1980). Thus, van Zoonen (1994) invokes Hall to suggest that texts have a “preferred” meaning, which will commonly reconstruct dominant values.

“Encoding/Decoding” and similar theories offer a counter to theories and approaches maintaining the omnipotence of media messages. Implicitly, then, the media’s role in promoting or inhibiting gender transformation is constituted as one input in a process of ideological and discursive negotiation over meaning. Audiences are posited as active participants in these processes of negotiation, drawing on multiple discourses to decode, and in so doing (re/de)construct, the meanings encoded in texts. Some theorists have derived from this a view assigning primacy to audiences’ agency in interpreting texts. Others, however, have embraced the notion of audiences’ agency as tendering a more

complex and nuanced understanding of media effects and consequently the role of the media, while maintaining the media's power in crafting an influential ideological and discursive arena in which its meanings are negotiated. Theoretical counters to notions of media power, and the media's "pivotal role in organising the images and discourses through which people make sense of the world" (Golding & Murdock, 1996: 11), also challenge the idea that the media is "trivial and manipulative" (Golding & Murdock: 13). However, as Golding and Murdock (ibid) point out, these counters are potentially at risk of colluding with "conservative celebrations of untrammelled consumer choice", removing encounters between audiences and texts from wider contexts and presenting decoding "moments" as instances of "consumer sovereignty" (Golding & Murdock, 1996: 13).

In my rendering the "Encoding/Decoding" model, attending to "moments" in meaning making (at production and reception), while offering very useful insights fails to account for *broader* battles over discursive and ideological power. The power inherent in knowledge production is linked and limited not only to such "moments" in the meaning making process, but is part of a broader intellectual, ideological and discursive context which can limit, challenge, reaffirm, inhibit or contest values and meanings in society. Thus, the macro-context in which values are contested and eventually constituted into the production of media products cannot be completely divorced from the context in which these products are interpreted. As will be discussed further in relation to news production processes ("coding"), the various levels at which discourses are drawn from, to create a particular product or meaning in a media text, interact considerably with one another, and cannot be wholly separated. The same, then, should be true for the process of interpretation and assimilation ("decoding"). As such, these "moments" of creation and interpretation are not distinct moments at all, but are so connected socially and culturally that the boundaries become blurred.

Hall's (1980) reference to media production as constructing the limits to decoding possibilities does indeed imply some of the limits referred to here in the autonomy of decoding processes, albeit apparently in reference to a "moment" in the making of meaning. This point, to me, also resonates somewhat with Judith Butler's (1997) rendering of discourse as the limits of acceptable speech or possible truth. Yet, it is not only the "moment" of reception or production that is key, but broader contestations over voice. These broader contestations are abstractly embodied in these discourses or possible truths, and the relationship between who produces the news, about whom and how have

epistemological implications in the broader sense: implications for power and voice, the inputs and outcomes of which are in part concretely manifested as oppression.

Having very briefly introduced some of the common arguments about the power of the media, and hence implicitly the possible role of the media in promoting or resisting gender transformation, how can the media's role be understood? If audience sovereignty in interpreting and re-appropriating media messages is upheld, then prevalent feminist critiques of media representation can be discarded. However, if the meanings of media messages are conceptualised as having an impact on the ways in which audiences discursively view, understand or value social and material phenomena, then a feminist critique of media messages that cherish dominant masculine paradigms and interests, and affirm values counter to the transformation of gender relations, are valid.

This Chapter now broadly moves away from debates related to audience "reception" and the influence of media texts, to the context of their production in the following section. However, as has been alluded to and will become increasingly apparent, the issue of the media's *impact* cannot be completely separated from the media's *production*. As such, an epistemological viewpoint linking media production to the media's role is gradually unpacked in the following two sections.

3.2 Into the Newsroom: Journalists, Journalism and the Media Production Context

Turning to the context of media production, it is important to briefly establish a basis for approaching the issue of text production, as I do, from a social constructionist perspective. Journalism as a profession has commonly been bound up in a largely "positivistic faith in empiricism, [resting on] the belief that the external world can be successfully perceived and understood" (Katembo, 2005: 60). However, a feminist inquiry such as this into journalists' viewpoints, discursive frameworks and understandings of their role in gender transformation rests on the notion of knowledge as *situated*, and an implicit critique of claims of "objectivity" in news production.

Understandings of knowledge as situated are by no means limited to feminist thinking. However, feminist theorists have commonly stressed the partiality and situated nature of knowledge production in response to mounting theorisation regarding the androcentricity of

written knowledge, particularly in history and science. Authors such as Narayan (2003) have also raised these feminist epistemological concerns through the added lens of North-South power dynamics. She joins other feminist theorists in asserting that mainstream theories and knowledge production in general are one-dimensional and flawed due to the exclusion of women and the inferior status ascribed to their perspectives and activities, particularly those of non-Western traditions (ibid). Thus, a scan of existing bodies of knowledge reveals common omissions and the assignment of values that are not neutral or total, but from a dominant masculine perspective.

This observation of the situated nature of knowledge and its role in relationships of gender domination has also extended beyond feminist critiques of male-dominated processes of knowledge production and into the realm of self-reflexivity. Feminists have turned the lens inwards, acknowledging the implications of their own positions and subjectivities in the production of knowledge. Mbilinyi (1992: 53) articulates critical feminist epistemologies as denying “the possibility of neutral, value-free science and knowledge”.

“The researchers are part of the world under study. Our [researchers’] conception of the problem under study, our construction of research instruments, our interpretation of data, are all effected by our multiple identities and discourses. The theories, methodologies and epistemologies adopted interact with our experience (empirical findings) in the world” (Mbilinyi, 1992: 53).

Thus, according to proponents of critical feminist epistemology such as Mbilinyi (1992), claims to neutrality – in any area of knowledge production - function to conceal the situated nature of knowledge production, perpetuating exclusions and assumptions of dominant hegemonic truth. Unveiling the discursive and ideological positions that inform knowledge production is thus constituted as a means to countering the perpetuation of selected “truths” that marginalise certain perspectives.

Foucault’s (for example, Foucault 1972, 1973) work also points to a relationship between uttered “truth” or knowledge and the unconsciously appropriated discourses contained in people’s social environment. Through his work on the “archaeology of knowledge” (Foucault, 1972), Foucault “attempts to identify the *conditions of possibility* of knowledge,

the determining ‘rules of formation’ of discursive rationality that operate beneath the level of ‘thematic content’ and subjective awareness and intention” (Best, 1994: 30, emphasis original). According to this rendering, knowledge is situated and drawn from broader discourses characterising particular social, political and discursive positions in history. Aspects of Foucault’s work (and interpretations of his work) will be further explored in Chapter 5 under discussions of methodology. Suffice it to say here that, while interpretations of Foucault’s work differ rather substantially (and while feminist appropriations of his work are a particularly significant locus of tension), a Foucauldian viewpoint would, arguably, in its most basic form affirm the situated nature of knowledge, and link knowledge to power.

Given then that knowledge is conceptualised here as situated, I will redirect attention to various sociological theories that aim to identify and understand the sources and systems of influence on the text production process. In particular, theories that aim to address these questions in terms of the *news* production context will be focused on. What discourses are operating within, upon and through the newsroom context, and at what different levels should the politics of knowledge production in this context be assessed?

A number of approaches taken towards understanding media texts perform analysis on a combination or all of the following levels: the micro-level, which looks at the individual’s impact on the creation of text; the meso-level, focused on newsroom and news institutions’ discourses and practices; and the macro-level, including the broader cultural, social, political and economic context shaping various levels of news-making (Steenveld, 2007). That there are numerous factors that impact on news production processes, many of which impact variously on one another as well, therefore makes the study of news production methodologically complex. The levels of analysis therefore often need to be treated as intertwined.

Some of the most common areas of interest within the analysis of these levels warrant a brief introduction here, having informed the manner in which the analysis for this research was undertaken. Each level and focus within it could yield detailed and complex research findings. However, while a comprehensive analysis of each level has not been undertaken in the case of this research, I have aimed to capture some of the salient elements of each through the particular lens of feminist inquiry. This has, to some extent, been a methodological imperative given the inter-relatedness of these levels of analysis as stated

above. In essence, the micro-level is taken in this thesis to encapsulate issues such as identity and agency as expressed through the discourses of journalists. The impact of the meso- and macro-levels (with particular relevance to the news production context) on individual articulations of agency and identity will be unpacked in slightly more detail.

Key theoretical contributions to news production analysis at the *meso*-level stem from the social organisational approach. Journalists' professional values and practices are seen as mediated by organisational and professional demands, ranging from the ideological to the practical (Katembo, 2005). Contained within this is the notion of journalistic professionalism, which is constituted of discourses that legitimate and marginalise various journalistic practices, values and approaches (Katembo, 2005). Common examples include the valuing of "objectivity" over "bias" and the hierarchical distinctions between "hard news" and "soft news".

The parameters of journalistic professionalism are deeply gendered. Professional journalistic culture with implications for the representation of gender in the news, according to de Bruin (2004), commonly include widely embraced gendered dichotomies such as objectivity versus subjectivity and detachment versus advocacy. These dichotomies, it is argued, serve to prize "objective" cultural values reflective of dominant gendered ideology (ibid). For example, claims of objectivity may serve to justify news stories framing violence against women as single news events, instead of attempting to contextualise or critique the prevalence of gender based violence in a misogynistic social environment, which would be considered advocacy and therefore "biased". Tuchman (1978) has also pointed to the ways in which the news media privileges "events" rather than "issues", therefore making it difficult for social issues (such as gender issues) to be addressed in the news, unless the journalist makes an effort to frame them around some identified "event".

So ubiquitous are these traditional¹² ideals espoused in the journalistic profession, that some feminist advocates of gender transformation in the media have invoked these very discourses to lobby for change in news production. For example, some have argued that current journalistic practices distort the experiences and contributions of women in society

¹² From here onwards, I refer to journalistic approaches echoing characteristics described in this section as "traditional" journalistic and professional ideals or values (for example, those related to objectivity). "Traditional" will also be used to refer to approaches historically taken in mainstream, broadsheet newspapers, such as "objective" reporting. Because of the historical dominance of these approaches in the journalism profession, there is a need to broadly distinguish these approaches.

and should, subsequently, be altered to “objectively” or “realistically” reflect the diverse roles and contributions of women in society (see, for example, Opoku-Mensah, 2004; Gallego et al., 2004). In so doing, some feminist engagements with the media have discursively aligned themselves with the positivistic paradigm common in professional ideologies of journalism. This could perhaps signify the power of the positivistic discourse of objectivity in journalistic professionalism, or could perhaps also indicate a strategic attempt to find common ground with journalists at the meso-level of discourses of journalistic professionalism.

A theoretical approach to the *macro*-level of news production can be broadly referred to as the “cultural” approach. As opposed to a social organisational approach, a cultural approach stresses the shaping force of broader cultural traditions and systems (Katembo, 2005). From this vantage point, the media industry is considered not as an isolated social system, but rather within the context of much wider cultural discourses. The force of this trans-organisational and trans-professional cultural milieu places demands and constraints upon the products produced in the newsroom, which draw on the broader cultural symbols of society. Katembo (ibid) notes that a cultural account of news contributes towards understanding the ways in which journalists’ rendering of what constitutes “news” is often vague. As Katembo (2005: 62) explains:

“Real events do occur. However, because events are not intrinsically newsworthy, they only become ‘news’ when selected for inclusion in news reports.”

From a cultural perspective, these selections can be understood as shaped by the discourses of the society in which, and for which, news is produced. These cultural discourses can be so pervasive as to render them largely invisible. This could account for the oft-heard claim by journalists that they will know news when they see it.

I propose that both approaches offer an insight into the complex processes of news production at different levels. Organisational and professional discourses with particular bearing on the newsroom are significant, but cannot be entirely separated from the broader socio-cultural milieu. As will emerge in the research findings, discourses around news production reflect various links between individual, journalistic and broader social discourses (the micro-, meso- and macro-levels).

Another theoretical approach to the question of communications and organisational practices is represented in the work of Golding and Murdock (1996), who bring to the debate an analysis of communications production processes that blends often raised notions of cultural ideology and practice within media organisations, and economic dynamics. This approach addresses in part the argument that economic imperatives and pressures placed upon news producers to produce news that sells hinders their ability to create more progressive or transformative media representations. This argument has it that the issue of sales (and therefore the values and agency of the wider public or readership) dominates the content and style of media production. In addressing such arguments, Golding and Murdock (1996: 11) fuse the “symbolic and economic dimensions of public communications” in a political economy approach to news production, arguing that financing and organisational structures have consequences for the ways in which news is produced or the range of discourses and representations “feasible” for public consumption.

Political economy has been identified as linked to a number of shifts in the patterns of media production. For example, viewing news as a commodity in an economically driven market introduces the impact of consumer desires and expectations in shaping news coverage (Hamilton, 2004). Political economy, therefore, links economic pressures at the meso-level with the macro-level of cultural reproduction and broader social discourses. In addition, expectations of the media’s function (be it entertainment, “objective” reporting of particular events or a forum for intellectual engagement with social and political issues, for example) will shape and constrain the types of cultural reproduction *expected* through the media, feeding back into the kinds of cultural reproduction undertaken towards economic imperatives. In this way, one can see the mutual interaction between macro- and meso-levels of news production.

While the traditional precepts of news production for journalists involve answering a series of questions such as what happened, to whom, where, why and when, political economy concerns are articulated through questions such as who the particular readership is, what they will consider important, if and how a particular readership will have access to the product, what advertisers will be willing to pay to reach such readerships and so on (Hamilton, 2004). Ideologies of press freedom can often obscure the economic drives of news production such as these, which are linked to the social values (and socio-economic position) of a particular readership.

In terms of the gendering of news production, political economy has played a key role in shifts in media form and content. One important example is the “feminisation” of news. Increased economic participation of women, as well as their location at the coalface of the “consumer economy” (the home), led to significant changes in the shape of media products, in particular the inclusion of “softer” news, human-interest pieces and additional features such as cooking and advice pages, thought to be of greater interest to women (Holland, 1998). The “page three” phenomenon, in the form of sexualised pictures of women, was also linked to political economy at the nexus of economic incentives and broader gendered discourses legitimating the male gaze on female sexuality as a form of consumption.

These theories suggest the need to recognise the complexity of news production processes, and the politics of knowledge production present at various levels. The role of professional ideology, organisational culture and broader cultural influences intersect and are intersected at the micro-level, namely at the level where a media practitioner (be it a journalist, editor or photographer) crafts a media product. As such, theories on journalistic agency can help to bring these diverse theories together in terms of the journalist’s role in transformation processes. In the social, political, cultural and economic milieu that creates news production contexts, how do individual journalists eventually create particular news products?

Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller (1989) offer a theoretical perspective on journalistic agency in the South African press. Relying heavily on the work of Herbert Gans (1980), they argue for a perspective of journalistic agency that situates journalists as ideological actors operating in a news production milieu constituted by multiple internal and external “considerations” that must be negotiated in the production of news (ibid). According to Gans (1980), these “considerations” include individual locations within ideological frameworks, from personal values drawn from various social discourses to professional values drawn from discourses surrounding the role of news and journalists.

Echoing the work previously raised regarding journalistic and professional cultures, Gans (1980) argues that journalists “tend to identify ideology with allegiances at the extreme ends of the political spectrum”. Thus, ideological positions are distanced from journalistic practice and are associated with the far left or the far right. As such, ideological positions among journalists *themselves* are often felt as “objective” if they do not appear to be that extreme (ibid). Journalists also tend to regard external realities reported upon as independent events (new, and thus “news”) rather than part of an ideologically charged environment (ibid). Thus,

for something to be “newsworthy” and to constitute “objective” journalism, some event needs to “happen”. Social conditions, trends and contextual analysis are thereby relegated to the margins of news reporting, and while current newspapers in South Africa appear to be incorporating a greater number of analytical features, these are usually situated within prescribed analytical sections of newspapers, distanced from the “real” news (events) dominating the front page. In other words, the perceived objectivity of news production speaks to the issue of journalistic agency and journalists' *perceptions* of their own agency.

Tomaselli et al. (1989) further indicate that these more internally oriented considerations interact with various external considerations that journalists have to negotiate. These include the tight time frames associated with news journalism, and the processes of information “filtration” within news media organisations (ibid). Tomaselli et al. (ibid) reject the notion of a series of authoritative “gate-keepers” systematically blocking and limiting the choices available to journalists regarding how and what to write about. Instead, they assert that the newsroom constitutes an ideologically laden environment in which journalists must *mediate* everyday events into an “acceptable commodity called 'news’” (Tomaselli et al., 1989: 22). While there are indeed often consequences for challenging the ideological and professional slant of media houses and authoritative individuals therein, they argue that the “considerations” perspective accords journalists mediated agency, seeing journalists as involved in discursive negotiations for consensus in order to push a particular news story and angle through the filtration process (ibid).

Seen in this light, the processes constituting news production involve various economic, social and political “considerations” drawn from micro-, meso- and macro-level discourses. Journalistic agency is not regarded in isolation. Instead, journalists are regarded as agents mediating the political, economic and social milieu of the newsroom, as well as their own personal locations, towards the production of the news. This occurs within broader discursive contexts briefly sketched above, including dominant (but constantly shifting) discourses related to the role of the press media in South Africa. As will emerge in the research findings presented later, evidence of these various considerations, and the tensions between them, came through and shaped (often contradictory) notions of journalistic responsibility and agency among research participants.

Interestingly, while these theories on journalistic “considerations” discursively emphasise the role of human agency far more than Foucault, the notion of complex interactions between different levels of influence (discourses) echoes a Foucauldian conception of the media’s impact on society raised earlier. Foucault’s concentration on the “*conditions of possibility* of knowledge, the determining ‘rules of formation’ of discursive rationality that operate beneath the level of ‘thematic content’ and subjective awareness and intention” (Best, 1994: 30, original emphasis) reflect a conception of news production processes as involving various interacting considerations or discourses that shape the kind of product that can eventually be produced.

Media text production is therefore a process mediated and influenced by an array of social, economic, cultural and political discourses. The following section attempts to briefly pull together issues related to the significance of media texts (their impacts) and to the production of media texts (knowledge production), proposing a way of understanding the role of the media in society and in processes of gender transformation.

3.3 Power, Voice and Knowledge Production: A Feminist Epistemological Conception of Print Media

In this section, I draw on a small selection of works concerned with epistemology and power to contribute to the deepening of gender and media debates. The work referred to here pertains not directly to media communications, but rather to knowledge production more broadly, and to the political act of producing knowledge within the academy as well as through other writings. This work sketches a broader context in which the power of knowing and being known are articulated and contested.

Jane Bennett (2000), in *The Politics of Writing*, compellingly expresses a view of the written text and the act of writing as fundamentally powerful, both personally and politically. While this work is by no means the only of its kind, it powerfully articulates much of what this research project is concerned with, and as such I will draw quite heavily on Bennett’s paper. Writing and the act of knowledge production are, she asserts, a privilege, with the ability to reinforce domination or challenge it; to subjugate or transform; to construct accountability and visibility or to silence (Bennett, 2000). Turning to feminist concerns over patriarchal and

imperial biases in mainstream (resource-laden) knowledge production, Bennett (ibid) points to the fact that written histories highlight the issue of immense silences and lacunae in dominant knowledge production.

For example, she points to the work of Zeleza (1997), who has written on African historiography and related matters of engendered and North-South power relations around knowledge production. Histories regarded as canonical, according to Zeleza (ibid) are androcentric, full of silence around women and their experiences, and blind to the implications thereof. Numerous other feminist writers (for example, Hartsock, 1983; Moller Okin, 1989; Smith, 1987) have also drawn attention to the androcentricity of dominant modes of knowledge production, as well as the ways in which race and class power relations have intersected with patriarchy in shaping unequal knowledge production (for example, Hill Collins, 1989; hooks, 1984; Mama, 1995; Mohanty, 1991).

Knowledge production through the act of writing or text creation, then, is understood as carrying forward and denying certain voices and experiences. As has historically been the case, women's voices are those that are often negated, and one can look at the marginalisation of voice as layered with power through gender, race, class and more. The deeply interconnected nature of "representation" and "reality" also means that representation through text - knowledge production - has very real implications for whose interests are dominant or marginalised, heard or unheard, and this involves a cyclic flow of power in (re)constructing "reality". Histories as knowledge production, to which Bennett (2000) refers, are prime examples of this: "reality" is constructed through representation, through the production of certain knowledges, and in an unequal world that "reality" or "knowledge" (usually associated with "reality") will tend to be that of the dominant. This includes both the content and the methodology of the way in which that knowledge is produced.

Dorothy Smith (1987) has pointed to similar issues, looking at the power of texts as tools for the shaping and concrete expression of cultural and ideological incarnations, as well as power relations. She observes the following:

"The relations of ruling in our kind of society are mediated by texts, by words, numbers, and images on paper, in computers, or on TV and music screens..."

Further, the ways in which we think about ourselves and one another and about society... are given shape and distributed by the specialized work of people in universities and schools, in television, radio and newspapers, in advertising agencies, in book publishing and other organizations forming the *'ideological apparatuses'* of the society" (Smith, 1987: 17, emphasis my own).

While Bennett refers primarily to the written text, she acknowledges that this is not the only communications form through which to construct known histories, values and power. However, she stresses the unique capacity of writing towards gender transformation. As she elaborates further in reference to knowledge production and history:

"Writing remains a politically vigorous means of constructing visibility, accountability, and the meaning of time. Many (different) feminist writers complement [the] conviction that in order to both imagine a world free of gender injustice, and to understand the intersecting vectors of racism and misogyny under current capitalist interests, access to knowledges of women's experiences in the past is crucial" (Bennett, 2000: 4).

Bennett's (2000) insistence on the critical role of knowledge production and knowledge producers towards engendered transformation is linked to the power of the written word to create visibility and stimulate critical interactions surrounding various experiences currently marginalised from mainstream knowledge production. She thus emphasises as part of the strategy to address these issues the need for indigenous knowledge production in Africa, stressing not only the participation of women in the processes of knowledge production, but the critical engagement of knowledge producers with the imaginative processes of reflection and voicing towards engendered transformation in Africa (ibid). The expression of marginalised interests and voices is, she argues, currently limited by the insistent "deafness" to diverse women's concerns, experiences and voices: a marginalisation that is institutionalised into publication and education industries (ibid).

While Bennett's (2000) work here refers more to academic (and personal) acts of writing, it raises a number of salient issues. Firstly, it sketches a broader context linking the wielding of social and economic power with the power to produce knowledge, and in so doing "voice" and "silence" (or be "deaf" to) various experiences and interests. It is not limited to certain

“moments” in the production or reception of texts, but stretches to a broader context of contested power through voice. In so doing it also links to Foucauldian notions of the “possibilities” of knowing. Secondly, while agency is upheld as central, and the written text is therefore not viewed as all-powerful over the minds of individuals and groups, the power of knowledge production is recognised in shaping social and material landscapes through promoting or inhibiting alternative voices to patriarchy.

Interestingly, she refers to the notion of “imagining” in relation to knowledge production, linking the idea of wider contexts of knowledge production and power with the “possibilities” of knowing. As Pereira (2002) comments with regard to the role of imagination in knowledge production, imagining is “the capacity to go beyond what is given, to fantasise, to create new possibilities that link what is desired with what is known, that will shape the content of knowledge production and its potential uses” (no page number, online). Written texts and knowledges that challenge mainstream or dominant knowledges, according to Bennett (2000) too, are important in enabling, drawing out and stimulating the imagining of alternative ways of being and, therefore, gender transformation. In the wider context of circulating, contested and negotiated representations, opportunities for voices that can imagine gender transformation to gain access to powerful means of expression, through the written text, are therefore very important.

While carving out spaces for alternative and marginalised voices is critical, Bennett (2000) also addresses some of the limitations of a focus primarily on acquiring a “critical mass” of, for example, women’s voices in knowledge production. She notes, “we all... have lived through configurations in which numbers meant very little for justice” (Bennett, 2000: 9). She argues that the undermining of gendered and racial oppression requires not only attention to representative numbers, but to the prioritisation of the promotion of diverse and marginalised voices that are able to be *critical* of the status quo, as well as scrutiny of the *institutionalisation* of the marginalisation of certain voices and perspectives (ibid). She acknowledges, however, that “there remains much work to be done on understanding the relationship between feminisms, difference, writing and transformation of injustice” (ibid: 10).

The centrality of writing and knowledge production to the wielding of agency is thus key. While representative numbers of women in media production is one step towards change, it is on its own an inadequate one. Instead, I would argue that a feminist epistemological view

necessitates the interrogation of the media as a site for “knowledge production”, even if the boundaries and roles of this textual form differ from academic and other forms of knowledge production. As Smith has argued, “the very forms of our oppression require a deliberate remaking of our relations with others and of these the relations of knowledge are key”. News print form, viewed from the perspective of it being a form of knowledge, is therefore constituted as a significant site in the remaking of gendered power relations.

Drawing too on the work of Bennett (2000), it is considered a site for the negotiation of meaning through which voicing and silencing (or deafness) is contested, both within the media industry more specifically and within wider contexts of voice contestation in South Africa and globally. This voicing and deafness has a bearing on the selection of salient topics for print news (agenda setting) as well as for discursive and ideological representations in print news, or “realities” portrayed and, therefore, partially constructed. While the “reception” of media messages may not be a one-way flow of influence from media text to the minds of audiences, its content, and the ways in which its content is presented, offers up ideas, implicit arguments or beliefs and hence “tools” of possible knowledge, or “ideological apparatuses” as Smith (1987) argued. These should reflect critical engagement with gendered relationships for audiences and producers of media alike (not always clearly distinguished either) to be able to dialogue in a potentially transformative way around salient issues of gender and power.

3.4 Conclusions

In this Chapter I have sought to contextualise the research question within major communications studies debates about the media’s impact on broader society, and related debates around media text production. Looking at theories that attempt to explain the possible impacts and significance of media representations on social and (by implication) material status quos, it has emerged that while many critiques against the media (including those by feminists) often implicitly rely on the idea that the media is a powerful social agent impacting on and socialising members of society in a (gendered) way, many theories have been developed to, in various ways, contest the relative one-way flow of influence these understandings suggest. Far more research is being undertaken on audiences and the ways in which their agency, as well as other social factors beyond the media text, impact on their interpretation of texts and the meanings texts therefore could be said to diffuse into the

social milieu. I have also explored a related basis for the research, namely the idea that media texts are socially constructed rather than “neutral” or “objective” as common traditional journalistic discourses would suggest. This is part of underscoring the need for, and validity of, researching journalists and their perceptions in an attempt to discover something about how texts are constructed, as I do in this research.

Some important theoretical debates around the construction and deconstruction of meaning through media texts, therefore, have been raised, and I posit my own position as being one that is social constructionist and that acknowledges both assertions of media power and those of audience agency. However, my position is that it is also important to do this in a way that - in addition to looking at the specificities of, for example, the media industry - pulls focus back a bit to see how the *creation* and *interpretation* of texts are intimately interconnected. In order to elaborate on this briefly, a (particular interpretation of a) critical feminist epistemological perspective, drawn principally from critical African feminists, has been drawn on to tentatively sketch my own (constructed) position on the print media as an instance of knowledge production and voicing.

Print news, therefore, is understood here as one particular medium through which knowledge is constructed and disseminated, one that enables members of a society to *engage* with current issues and to *imagine* ways of being. It forms part of wider contexts in which contestations over voice (and power) are played out, contexts linking the sites of both the production and the interpretation of news texts; while specific contexts are shaped by different particular dynamics, how texts are produced and how they are interpreted cannot be full disentangled. Voice and power are central to understanding the contested terrain of knowledge production of which the media industry forms part, and I have argued in agreement with others, such as Bennett (2000), that there is a need for voices that critically challenge the unequal status quo in order to reconstruct knowledges towards new representations - part of new and possible “realities”.

The following Chapter will move from these broader media and communications debates and theories towards more *specific* contexts, events and phenomena that have had a bearing on this research study in particular. Borrowing from a multiplicity of theories and sources, I situate the research in salient global and local South Africa contexts, exploring the politics of knowledge production via the print media in South Africa through a range of

lenses: the South African press's history and policy; shifts in press patterns globally and locally, with a special focus on tabloidisation and its implications for the press; feminist media studies as a contemporary field and common local and international feminist critiques against the media; and contemporary South African political and media-related events that left a notable impression on the research process and context.

4 THE STATE OF THE PRESS: LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXT AND CRITIQUES

4.1 The South African Press: Politics and Political Economy in Historical Perspective

The historical legacies of apartheid arguably impact on every sphere of contemporary South Africa in some way. These historical legacies, wrought through the social, political and economic institutionalisation of unequal power relations, and the ways in which they were challenged, have left an enduring mark on the media industry and on gender relations in South Africa, both central contexts for this research. The South African press today is the product not only of wider global processes but, importantly, of the specificities of South African history and, essentially, the role the press came to play in the fall of apartheid. This section will outline some of the issues and historical processes framing the nascent democratic press in South Africa and, therefore, with implications for how print news professionals understand the role of the media in contemporary democratic South Africa.

Written accounts of the history of the South African press have, to date, largely considered contestations over media power through the vectors of national party politics and political economy. In particular, literature on South African press history has focused largely on racial dimensions, including racial oppression and resistance to apartheid ideologies. Gender dimensions are conspicuously absent in most accounts of South African press history, and the information there is on gender and the press in South Africa is focused on more recent changes since democracy, especially press ownership and employment patterns¹³. However, a brief overview of South African press history, while not adequately engendered, offers some insights into the ideological and institutional shifts that make up current discourses surrounding the role and position of the press in South Africa. Furthermore, they set the scene for reflection on current political economy dynamics with an impact on the shape of contemporary newspapers.

¹³ This is quite revealing as an indicator of some of the changes that have taken place since the introduction of the new democratic dispensation in terms of how inequality in South Africa is conceptualised. Where issues regarding race relations dominated in earlier accounts of media transformation issues, probably much in thanks for the concerted effort made by women's organisations in South Africa at the turn to democracy, gender as a factor and recognised indicator of inequality has over time been more normalised and institutionalised.

In their account of the political economy of the South African press during apartheid, Tomaselli and Tomaselli (1989) note that, while a number of African-owned publications existed at the turn of the century, almost all of these fell prey to economic and/or political restraints and suppression during the apartheid regime. As white-dominated ownership patterns grew, and the commercial opportunities inherent in the black African market were increasingly recognised, large white-owned media companies expanded, assimilating existing black African newspapers struggling to compete with the competitive power of white-owned press and their comparative political advantages (ibid). Political economy played a significant role in the kinds of voices emerging in the mainstream press, with white media (largely divided along ideological lines) broadly including English language liberal press linked to mining capital - and therefore tolerated to a degree by government - and a largely state-compliant Afrikaner nationalist press (Wasserman & de Beer, 2006).

Switzer (2000), however, notes that numerous print media forms challenging apartheid doctrines, including white-owned independent print media, were eventually closed down through political and economic pressures, or bought out by dominant media houses. While various forms of print media, from larger scale newspapers to small local newsletters, were appropriated by independent companies and opposition parties towards resistance, consciousness-raising and mobilisation against the apartheid regime, alternative press power was largely repressed in ongoing battles for political voice (Wasserman & de Beer, 2006). Alternative, anti-apartheid press “operated under the constant threat of state harassment or governmental control of different kinds” (Wasserman & de Beer, 2006: 61), with journalists being harassed or jailed and various publications being banned or censored “under a barrage of restrictive laws” (ibid).

The profound restrictions imposed on the South African press during apartheid provide a broad context underpinning the emergence of current concerns over the role of the media in South Africa, and are thus an important contextual characteristic to note. Furthermore, the pressures and struggles around issues of political economy, and their impact on the shape and ownership of print news in apartheid South Africa, resonate with various current theories on political economy and the modern press, both locally and internationally.

With the fall of apartheid, numerous changes were instigated at the levels of legislation and ownership. Strict legal measures to suppress press freedom were repealed, and both media

freedom and freedom of expression were entrenched in the Constitution, the adoption of which was viewed as the most vital legislative change with respect to the media (Wasserman & de Beer, 2006). To a large extent, self-regulation of the media replaced state regulation, with two watchdog bodies - the Press Ombudsman and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa - being established (ibid). Two large ownership transfers to so-called black empowerment consortiums (Johnnic and Nail) led to the first major changes in racial ownership patterns in the South African media (ibid). South Africa's media was also increasingly globalised, with one noteworthy development being the Irish Independent media group's acquisition of control of a series of newspapers (ibid).

The new dynamics of political economy playing out in the post-apartheid period, from those related to racial ownership (and readership) demographics to the globalisation of the South African press, also contributed to the rise of the tabloid press in South Africa from 2000 onwards. Wasserman and de Beer (2006) note that escalating commercial competition in both local and global media markets have led to what is often called the "tabloidisation" of the media, in particular the press. Hand in hand with these pressures and changes are also reductions in staff and the "juniorisation" of newsrooms (with newsrooms increasingly dominated by junior staff) (ibid). The indelible footprint that tabloidisation is leaving on the practice of journalism and the identity of the press will be discussed in the section that follows, and will also be explored further in relation to the research findings. Suffice it to say here that South Africa's press has seen (and continues to see) some critical shifts in political economy dynamics, born out of local and global transitions.

Ideologically and politically, shifts have also occurred. Jacobs (2003) argues that while the South African media did not *directly* lead to the break down of the apartheid regime, it played an instrumental role in shaping democratisation during the transition and consolidation period in South Africa. According to Jacobs (ibid), during the early period of transition the mass media emerged as a political actor in its own right and as an actor in shaping notions of democratisation and political transformation. These processes were further largely dominated by contestations over political voice, with political players holding great stakes in how the "new" South African media would take shape (ibid).

Increasingly, however, the media's role in promoting and enforcing state accountability and transparency came to be an important feature in emerging media transformation rhetoric,

along with profound considerations over racial ownership patterns (Jacobs, 2003). As transition processes progressed, the media was increasingly envisaged less as a political actor in its own right and more as a “cog in the machinery of democracy” in South Africa (Jacobs, 2003: 44). As a result, overt struggles for political control of the media were reconstituted into a focus on the need to constrain state control over media freedom (ibid). Jacobs (ibid) concludes that views of the media as a conduit for governments, political parties and/or citizens was largely replaced during the early political transition phase in South Africa by discourses constituting the media as an autonomous power or force *in competition with* other power centres, including political configurations.

South Africa's history of overt political, economic and social repression has laid the foundations for a deep concern with the democratisation of the media in South Africa. This has, in many cases, been harnessed by gender activists working with the media in arguing for gendered democratisation of media ownership and representation. However, while questions of racial (and, to a lesser extent, gender) ownership and the view of the media as a “watchdog” for democracy are still discursively powerful, the transition period from 1994 until now has not been characterised by a smooth progression towards an uncontested view of the media’s role in the “new” South Africa.

As Wasserman and de Beer (2006) maintain, the media’s relationship with the South African government has remained tenuous. One possible reason for this could be varying conceptions of (and discourses around) what the new Constitutional principles with relevance to the media guarantee and advance (ibid). Furthermore, historical relations of tension between the media and government have not yet been fully dismantled. The mistrust of the media that characterised the apartheid period has spilled over into the new government to a large extent, bolstered by concerns that the media continues to be dominated by the same white, middle-class males who controlled the media during apartheid (ibid). On the other hand, the media’s historically based concern over the repression of press freedom also persisted into the new democracy. Thus, there is an inherent tension in the simultaneous *suspicion* and *desire to protect* the autonomy of the media, especially in relation to the state.

Interpretations of the media’s role in transforming South Africa and building a strong democracy have also continued to be a source of disagreement. At the *Sun City Indaba*, a

landmark meeting held in 2001 between the cabinet and the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), some of these contestations were highlighted. Discourses invoking the divergent interests of government and the press were embodied in a debate regarding the phrasing and understanding of the media's role in South Africa, namely as serving the "public interest" or the "national interest" (Wasserman & de Beer, 2006). In both discourses, the notion of a "greater good" appeared to be harnessed towards the normative promotion of particular media values and responsibilities, as well as particular interests (ibid).

The government expressed concern over the media's ostensible "reluctance to embrace the concept of national interest", while media representatives largely expressed concern that the concept of "national interest" was susceptible to masking (or legitimating) the exercise of power, particularly by the government (Wasserman & de Beer, 2006). In the end, the media's representatives did not accept the idea of "national interest" as a description of their role in post-apartheid South Africa, but continued to insist on their role being framed by the "public interest" (ibid). The following quote from a media representative at the *Sun City Indaba* encapsulates the media's struggle to remain within a watchdog role in South Africa, as well as the continuing tensions between government and media in terms of the media's role.

"It is our contention that the use of the term 'national interest' in relation to news gathering and dissemination is too restrictive and can have a narrow political connotation. Journalists work in the public interest, which is much wider. Politicians of a ruling party may decide that there should be secrecy over an issue 'in the national interest' - where the meaning 'national interest' is defined by the politicians. Journalists work in the 'public interest', a sounder, much wider base that might override 'national interest'. Chapter Two of the [South African] Constitution protects the 'public interest'" (cited by Wasserman & de Beer, 2006: 67).

Such concerns over the role of the media repeatedly erupt into the public debate arena when stimulated by particular political events or statements by public figures. As the research process was unfolding, some key events in this regard were taking place in South Africa and strongly highlighted in the press. These events, which serve not only as prominent examples of contemporary continuations of the debate over the role of the press,

but also to highlight critical gender debates, will be discussed in Section 4.5 to contextualise the research period. Political, social and economic discourses characterising the media industry and public debate at large form an important part of the larger discursive milieu, and therefore also the possible parameters of journalists' discourses around their role in South African transformation. The historical legacies of apartheid – including the repression of the freedom of the media and wielding of the press for the ruling government's purposes – have shaped how the media's (and in particular the press's) role is understood and contested today, including by journalists. These contextual issues have, therefore, also been borne in mind when unpacking the research data.

4.2 The Changing Face of Local and Global Journalism: Tabloidisation in Perspective

South Africa is in many ways increasingly being absorbed into the global market and patterns of consumption. With this comes shifts, too, in the shape of the media industry. The notion of “tabloidisation” emerges in numerous debates and literary contributions to the contemporary field of media studies. Tied to emerging and strengthening political economics, tabloidisation is occurring in both minority country contexts (notably Britain) as well as many majority countries. Literature as discussed above has pointed to the growing popularity and prevalence of the tabloid press in South Africa, and the research data has highlighted that tabloidisation, as a multi-faceted phenomenon, has considerable relevance to the research at hand. This pertains to notions of journalistic professionalism in South Africa more broadly and to particular instantiations of gender in the media. Therefore, a reflection on some of the key features of tabloidisation, and critical considerations around it, will be valuable.

As Barnett (1998) cautions, the term “tabloidisation” is often used to denote several different features of media trends and output. The widespread use of this term can therefore potentially obscure its diverse meanings and manifestations (ibid). It should consequently be noted from the outset that the term can connote a variety of textual characteristics (in terms of style, content and format) as well as broader discursive trends or processes in the media, and is employed by academics, professionals and lay-people in various different ways.

The word “tabloid” originated from the name given to a painkiller that was sold in compressed tablet form, a name that was soon also applied to an emerging “compressed”

form of journalism that was easy to read (colloquial), simplified and in a more manageable format¹⁴. In terms of layout, the new tabloid had a smaller format, roughly 430 mm × 280 mm. The upsurge of sensationalism and celebrity gossip that tended to accompany this new format has been generalised as a tabloid trait, and the term “tabloid” often refers to this. However, other newspapers with more traditional style and content have also begun to use the smaller format for practical purposes (to make newspapers easier to read on public transport, for example), and the word “tabloid” therefore has also come to denote newspapers that have merely adopted the format. The term “tabloid” is therefore often used to refer to a particular format *and/or* particular traits in style and content. The processes and features related to style and content *associated* with the tabloid format are, however, the heart of the major debates around the role and trajectory of the media in society.

Connell (1998) presents the term “tabloidisation” as signifying “a series of processes that are transforming supposedly *rationalist* discourses into *sensationalist* discourses” (Connell, 1998: 12, emphasis original). He further asserts that a number of related processes are involved in tabloidisation, including a shift from a principally “*reporting* discourse” to a “*narrative* discourse” (ibid) and the “conversationalising” of news (Connell, 1998: 13). Traditional conceptions, values and conventions around reporting the news have therefore been made over towards a more story-telling-oriented approach. Journalistic values and conventions reproducing “impersonal and authoritative” discourses have also moved towards more personal accounts of events (ibid), for example through “human-interest” news pieces. Interestingly, Fairclough (1992) has suggested that this shift is not limited to the media but may be part of a wider social development, whereby a “conversational discourse” is being projected from the private domain into the public (for example, through the use of a conversational style in public documents such as presentations and reports). In any case, a conversational orientation in the media is strongly associated with tabloidisation, with “newsworthiness” being recast as more invested in the private sphere, and news discourses reflecting more personalised narratives (Connell, 1998).

Critiques against tabloidisation are manifold and tend to dominate debates (Barnett, 1998). However, some academics and media professionals have asserted that tabloid should not

¹⁴ Most academic work on tabloids focuses on the more complex arguments around tabloidisation, with little clear outline of lay uses and more format-related details of what has historically come to be known as tabloid. The information in this paragraph is thus drawn broadly from discussions with people and from the popular site Wikipedi.com, which I use cautiously here and have buttressed with academic work.

(as it has tended to be) be wholly dismissed as a debasement of journalistic integrity and the media at large (see, for example, Barnett, 1998; Brookes, 2000; Connell, 1998; and the interview findings presented in this thesis). In addition, some have argued that lamentations over tabloidisation reflect not just concerns over the state of the media, but mirror a wider array of social fears (Barnett, 1998; Brookes, 2000), sometimes making them important less in terms of understanding tabloidisation itself and more in terms of what they tell us about these social fears. Barnett (1998: 75) links apprehensive debates around tabloidisation to “a more widespread anxiety about our educational, political and cultural environment”.

Fears about tabloidisation do, however, also tell us about the press itself: how it is defined and what its roles are seen to be. Barnett (1998) connects debates over tabloidisation to preordained conceptions of “good” and “bad” media texts based on particular assumptions around the role of the media in society. Brookes (2000: 195), for example, links what he calls the “panic” surrounding tabloidisation in part to the threatening of shared (and gendered) discursive “assumptions around a traditional, rational public sphere.” In this way, tabloidisation is viewed as challenging or disrupting certain well-established social constructs, and the need to unpack critiques against it rather than rush to simplistic judgement is argued.

Debates around tabloidisation resonate with various discourses around social norms and values, journalistic practices, media roles and associated gendered constructs. Thus, I will turn to some of the critiques laid against tabloid. Barnett (1998) notes that a prevailing view of tabloidisation is that it represents a worrying instance of the “bad” crowding out the “good”. This is located in tabloid’s emphasis on (“bad”) content such as entertainment, scandal, show business and sex at the expense of what is regarded as more serious and challenging (“good”) news content such as current affairs, the arts and policy issues (ibid). Both the increasing volume and presentation of tabloid content, according to Barnett (ibid), are often regarded as a threat to, or a debasement of, “real” news. He argues, however, that the rise of tabloid content has not displaced conventional news, but rather added to it as the size and volume of media products surges, and that the presentation of tabloid news (employing simpler language and shorter formats) is not always necessarily inferior or hazardous (ibid).

Barnett (1998) contends that a purely sceptical perspective of tabloidisation often rests on mythical assumptions of a “golden age” in journalism. Tabloid could offer an accessible and non-elitist alternative to the kind of journalism that has dominated in the past (ibid). In fact, tabloid media can contribute towards making abstract social issues more memorable and accessible to audiences than conventional news (Sparks, 2000). In addition, Deuze (2005) has argued that there is a need to be sceptical of the tendency to homogenise and dichotomise “real” journalism and “popular” journalism. His research with journalists and editors in the Netherlands indicates significant discursive overlaps between the journalistic values, norms and ideals expressed in relation to both (ibid). Therefore, while tabloidisation has been thoroughly critiqued and associated with a move away from ideal journalistic professionalism, counter arguments have also been raised, urging critics to unpack this phenomenon with greater care and complexity.

One perspective of tabloidisation that critically unpacks the critiques laid against it links broader debates over tabloidisation with feminist media theories. Therefore, I will discuss it briefly here before moving on to feminist critiques of the media, noting that tabloidisation and the theories around it are linked to issues of gender representation in the media. Since tabloidisation as a phenomenon involves a variety of (conflicting) discursive shifts in the media, it emerges as an interesting factor in the production of gendered texts.

An important feature of tabloidisation is the way in which certain normative discourses surrounding what constitutes news have been challenged. Because of the new forms of news emerging as part of processes of tabloidisation, the distinction between “hard” (traditional) news and “soft” (tabloidised) news has been made. The latter has been increasingly incorporated into “news”, but represents a changing set of values and norms about the nature of news. In this way, tabloidisation creates new - often hybrid - genres, formats, content categories and presentational styles that transgress traditional journalistic boundaries (Brookes, 2000). Most notably, traditional journalistic conceptions of the provision of information through the news have become blurred or integrated with the provision of entertainment (ibid), previously regarded (at least rhetorically) as a separate endeavour. The increased sexualisation and visualisation associated with tabloidisation and new content categories such as “human-interest”, for example, represent a breakdown in established boundaries between the “rational” public sphere and “emotional” private sphere

(Brookes, 2000: 195). The binaries challenged by tabloidisation (and the very blurring of boundaries that forms the basis for many of its critiques) are also highly gendered.

The “rational” public sphere and “emotional” private sphere are respectively associated with masculinity and femininity (ibid). Therefore, issues around family and sexuality, for example, are consigned to the naturalised, “feminine” private sphere whereas “cultural”, “masculine” interests such as politics and economics are consigned to the public sphere (ibid). Some of the very features brought into the media through tabloidisation are those associated with this notion of the private sphere, which have been marginalised in a gendered hierarchy of media norms and values. Viewed in this light, tabloidisation has in some ways brought aspects associated with the “feminine” into the public domain, or “feminised” the media.

This is potentially a source of optimism for feminists, who have decried the marginalisation of arenas associated with women. Glancing over prevalent critiques of tabloidisation, however, gendered hierarchies placing the “private” in the category of “soft” (lesser) news are apparently still dominant. However, this is not the only concern for feminists. The break down between public and private spheres, and the “feminisation” of the media, should not be taken uncritically as signifiers of gender transformation in the media. As will become apparent through feminist critiques of certain tabloid features in the literature (and the research findings presented later), the relationship between tabloidisation and feminist concerns around the media is fraught with contradictions.

For example, while Silveirinha (2007) positively links tabloid style to the feminist notion of “the private is political” - and therefore cautions against an instinctive patriarchal devaluation of “other” (tabloid) news - she also points to examples in which tabloid style trivialises gender issues such as gender based violence. Holland (1998) also considers feminist tensions around tabloidisation in her exploration of the rise of *The Sun* tabloid in the United Kingdom. She notes that a fissure exists in feminist readings of *The Sun's* tendency towards sexualisation and the establishment of the “page three” phenomenon. In reference to the institutionalisation of the “page three” pin-up in *The Sun*, Holland (1998: 23) notes that “its message to men was age-old, but its message to women was that women are now free to be sexual... along the lines of, ‘loosen up, discover sexual pleasure’”. Yet, despite the ostensible emancipatory discourse of this message, Holland (ibid) reflects that it also

perpetuates the patriarchal male gaze and that “the sex remained male oriented.” As she adroitly articulates:

“On the one hand, sexualisation could be seen as a logical development of feminisation, continuing to draw into the wider debate issues of sexuality and sexual relations that had been hidden but which women themselves, not least in the feminist movement, now insisted were of public importance. On the other hand, there was a deep contradiction in the presentation. Although women were invited to enjoy themselves, to follow their desires and to drop their inhibitions, the divided address, accompanied by many a nudge and a wink, made it clear that *this* woman’s pleasure is above all a pleasure for men. In this context, the visual is no longer associated with women and with a less linear style of understanding, but with a masculine insistence on the inalienable right to a lustful gaze” (Holland, 1998: 23, emphasis original).

Challenging gendered public/private dichotomies is therefore not an unproblematic trajectory towards a transformed media. It seems that in some cases new media forms are re-appropriated in the reproduction of deep-seated patriarchal values and interests. The narrative, conversational and personalised style of tabloid creates new vistas along which established news conventions can be renegotiated and certain gender concerns can potentially be addressed. However, as will become clear in the findings of this research, when it comes to gender, tabloidisation involves conflicting discursive orientations that can reproduce patriarchy just as well as they can challenge it.

The section that follows examines more closely the range of feminist critiques against the media - tabloid or traditional - that have been raised in the international and South African research arenas. It serves a dual purpose: first, to introduce some of the main arguments feminist scholars and researchers have made about the media in order to contextualise the research findings I present later on and, secondly, to provide a scan of the feminist media studies field, both South African and international, against which the location and contribution my own research findings can be seen more clearly as I present my methodology and findings in the following Chapters.

4.3 Challenging Representations: Feminist Critiques of Media Products

4.3.1 *An international overview of feminist media studies*

As early as the 1960's and 1970's, feminist authors Betty Friedan (1963) and Germaine Greer (1970) raged against representations of femininity in the mass media (van Zoonen, 1994). As feminist concerns in the Second Wave progressed beyond the parameters of gender equity struggles characterising early liberal feminist and suffragette concerns, the women's movement began to engage with the symbolic conflicts characterising women's liberation struggles (Thornham, 1998; van Zoonen, 1994), leading to increased attention to media and communication studies.

Feminist media research, without an orchestrated research programme to direct it, is highly divergent methodologically, theoretically and in terms of focus (van Zoonen, 1994). It is also an increasingly prolific field. The synopsis, presented here, of key arguments and ideas emerging from this field, both locally and internationally, will therefore necessarily be incomplete. However, I hope to present a broad sense of the field of feminist media studies, some of the major themes that have, to date, been addressed within the field, and my own impressions of how contemporary research on gender and the media within South Africa specifically fits into this broader picture in terms of its concerns, advancements and limitations.

Broadly speaking, feminist media studies can be said to be the study of the media through a feminist lens. It is transdisciplinary, in that this is undertaken via many different disciplines and fields (McLaughlin & Carter, 2001), such as media studies, communications studies and gender studies. Recently, it has flourished into a strengthening and ever more influential area of social enquiry, becoming a more distinct and recognised field (ibid). However, like all feminisms it has its methodological and political divergences (ibid). In particular, feminisms from the so-called "Third World" have delivered often-uncomfortable challenges to the field (which, if one scans the available literature, is still very much dominated by northern-based research and writing) in terms of methodology and feminist politics (ibid). They have also opened up new vistas of inquiry in the field and made important contributions. My own research has aimed to further this project by contributing to literature on gender and the

media within the global south, and South Africa in particular, although my location in relation to this project is quite tenuous (as I still represent a white - read: western - elite¹⁵). Suffice to say there, however, that there are various burgeoning new areas of research in feminist media studies that are delivering challenges to the field, locally and internationally, and it is becoming ever more prolific and diverse.

While there is progress in establishing feminist media studies as a recognised field (exemplified, for example, in the first international accredited journal dedicated to feminist media studies being launched in 2001), the boundaries of the field and what falls within and outside of it are still very mercurial. Even in my own experience, as I progressed in the research process I found it difficult to establish whether my work constituted an example of a gender studies project (with a strong African feminist influence from my undergraduate education) that focused in this case on the media or as an example of feminist media studies. This will, in many respects, unfold in the course of this thesis and I will be more explicit on the position I have come to towards the end. However, in assessing the field of feminist media studies it is important to stress at the outset that in many respects it defies very clear or definitive boundaries (as is often the case with feminist research which is inherently transdisciplinary). McLaughlin and Carter (2001) in outlining the emerging field of feminist media studies observe, however, that this is due not to intrinsic chaos but to the richness of the field.

“As with the broader fields of communication studies and cultural studies, expansion in breadth and depth has meant that the definitional contours of feminist media studies have become much more difficult to identify” (McLaughlin & Carter, 2001: 5).

Looking at the literature, my own impression of the international field is that increasingly complex and more nuanced themes are being tackled, in many ways echoing aspects of what I have conceptualised as progressive feminist approaches. These include challenges to, and the unpacking of, often taken for granted concepts and dichotomies around “gender” and “feminism”, and the gradual flourishing of approaches that go beyond liberal-inclusionary paradigms to ask questions about the construction of gender itself and strategic issues in terms of gender transformation at this level. Gallagher (2001) similarly observes

¹⁵ I will explore these tensions further in Chapter 5 as part of the outline of methodology.

that, while there has been with the emergence of feminist media studies a prolific and widespread use of more simple - “unsophisticated” - content analysis and analysis of sex-role stereotypes, and that while today there is still “a good deal of simple counting going on, mostly in North America”, these approaches have been and are being recognised by critical communications scholars as limited. Indeed, she argues that “if the early years [of feminist media studies] were marked by the push of activism that contributed to a narrow empirical research approach, the subsequent coming of age of critical feminist scholarship has helped to pull activism away from simple criticisms towards more subtle and persuasive arguments” (Gallagher, 2001: 14). At the international level, then, feminist media studies as a field can be seen to be both difficult to draw distinct borders around and progressively engaged in deeper explorations into gender and the media.

In terms of major themes within the international field, through the literature review I undertook I distinguished three broad areas of research and writing. These include, firstly, methodological questions and critiques around the media and communications studies fields themselves; secondly, critiques of representations of gender in the media and; thirdly, gender analyses of the media production context and media industry.

Briefly, feminist critiques of communications studies, according to van Zoonen (1994), echo salient feminist evaluations of scientific study more generally. These include critiques of male-biased themes, theories and approaches employed in scientific study, claims of neutrality masking (masculine) hegemonic modes of thinking that prize dichotomies, and the devaluation of dichotomised aspects associated with women and femininity (for example, the “private sphere” or “soft news”) (ibid). Thus, communications studies are viewed from the feminist perspective of their inherited patriarchal traditions and approaches, and it is advocated that feminist theory be applied to redress this bias in the subjects researched as well as the ways this research is undertaken.

In terms of feminist critiques of gender representations in media texts, van Zoonen (1994) has highlighted some of the most common themes in this area attracting attention from feminists in communications studies. The first is gender stereotyping and its role in gender socialisation. Feminist critiques based on socialisation/stereotyping theories are deeply concerned especially with the limited portrayal of women in the media. In this regard, the representation of women is often critiqued as being, firstly, sparse and, secondly, highly

limited in terms of the identities, roles and spaces they are represented in. For example, a common feminist critique of the media is that it tends to portray women in highly sexualised, objectified terms or as principally belonging in domestic spaces. Not just television and advertising but the press has also been growingly implicated in sexualisation stereotypes with the emergence of the tabloid press. Proponents of socialisation theories would argue that such stereotypes reinforce gendered norms and values, perpetuating narrow patriarchal constructs, expectations and roles, and socialising children into limited roles.

On the face of it, stereotyping and socialisation theories are social constructionist, clashing sharply with dominant journalistic discourses that are largely premised on a positivistic paradigm. However, as raised briefly earlier, there are feminist critics of the media who have drawn on a positivistic discourse to urge journalists to change the ways in which they approach news production, and the area of inquiry into gender stereotypes is particularly prone to this as well. This argument has it that journalists and many journalistic practices *distort* the lived reality of women, from their experiences to their contributions to society, which are far more diverse and far-reaching than represented in the media (see, for example, Opoku-Mensah, 2004; Gallego et al., 2004). As such, while critiquing journalism they also appeal to a particular journalistic discourse based on positivism in urging that news reporting be altered to “objectively” or “realistically” reflect the diverse roles and contributions of women in society.

As Allan (1998) points out, a number of feminists employing a discourse of “objectivity” maintain that good reporting is gender-neutral reporting, and therefore critique the adequacy with which journalistic norms and values are applied rather than critiquing these norms and values themselves. A related argument is also that the ability to be “objective” is essentially gender-specific (ibid). Therefore, only women can really be justified in speaking for other women in the media (ibid). This makes greater numbers of women in the newsroom essential. A discourse appropriating the notion of “balance” is often employed in this argument, which advocates that “objectivity” or “balance” should be maintained by “ensuring that male values are counterpoised by female ones in a given news account” (Allan, 1998: 122).

However, critiquing gender stereotypes is, in my view, quite a limited approach, particularly when focused on a distortion argument. Distortion arguments assume that there is, in fact,

one particular gender “reality”. Employing a positivistic paradigm, these arguments are in many ways antithetical to progressive feminist theories on gender and patriarchy (highly dependent upon a social constructionist foundation). In the first instance, difference makes this problematic, as this “reality” is shifting over space and time, and from different perspectives. This is not to suggest that these arguments do not have merit in pointing out that partial truths - discourses representing a particular perspective and therefore also set of interests - are commonly portrayed when it comes to the media. Most would agree that women do perform a variety of roles and take on a much greater variety of identities than are reflected in the media. However, from a critical feminist perspective I would argue that this should be viewed as an epistemological gap or form of marginalisation, rather than an instance of poorly applied “objectivity”. Feminism and its call for the transformation of gender relations is, furthermore, an openly political endeavour driven by the desire to overcome inequality and injustice rather than to claim absolute truth. Furthermore, a discourse maintaining the essential distinction between male and female “objectivity” is not very helpful, in my opinion, as it tends to embody a dichotomised and essentialised construction of masculinity and femininity that denies the varied manifestations of gender. The corollary of accepting limited portrayals of women in the media is, therefore, not necessarily to suggest that a particular (“objective”) perspective is possible.

Rakow (2001) touches on this issue in pointing out that there is a common assumption that the media can and should reflect “real women” rather than giving “inaccurate” portrayals. However, she cautions that these ideas are powerfully and frequently critiqued, although they remain persistent (ibid). Much earlier work such as that of Pollock (1977) has also emphasised the limitations of a focus on “false” stereotypes of women in the media, suggesting a more dynamic understanding of the media as part of processes of meaning making. The way in which I have aimed to address the research topic, as will become apparent, draws on these insights.

Other common themes in feminist media studies linked to the issue of gender stereotypes and socialisation (but theoretically divergent in many ways), according to van Zoonen (1994) also include the questions of gendered ideology and, to a lesser extent, the issue of pornography. These themes again raise not only the issue of male biased representation but also the notion that representation through the media has significant impacts on the roles and statuses of women on the ground, to the extent that pornography has been criticised by

some feminists as a form of gender based violence (ibid). As van Zoonen (1994: 21) asserts, “defining pornography as an act of violence raises questions on the nature of representation and its relation to social reality”. The question of the “gaze” has also been integrated into feminist media studies, researched and theorised in different ways (ibid). The “male gaze” in particular has drawn much attention, although the female gaze - on men and other women - has also been looked at (ibid). In essence, what these issues have in common are the advancement of foundational feminist questions of often taken-for-granted representations of gender: from whose perspective/view/gaze is this being portrayed, in whose (power) interests and based on what assumptions about gender?

Ultimately, although feminist critiques of the media have been very varied in theme and approach, underlying most themes are the ideas that, firstly, media representations are still primarily androcentric and patriarchal (although the ways in which this is achieved may shift and small victories may be sporadically won for feminist ideals) and, secondly, that these gendered trends in media representations have an impact on how people become gendered and continue to live gendered experiences. Feminists disagree on the modes and precise impacts of these features, as well as the themes that are of particular interest to them, but these issues tend to be central. From a feminist epistemological perspective, one might say that media representations can be viewed as instances of knowledge production, with its attendant politics and ideologies. As discussed earlier in the literature review, feminist writers such as Jane Bennett (2000) have drawn attention to knowledge production as a critical point of social reproduction and potential transformation. From this perspective, then, the interest would be in how/if gendered representations are patriarchal and what possible impacts this may have.

Moving to the third major area of research, the context of media production has received growing attention in feminist media studies. Feminist critiques of the media, as with other areas of inquiry, have explored processes of knowledge and cultural (re)production to understand and address the root causes of patriarchal reproduction. Exploring the media industry has also been further fuelled by the observation that, as a profession, journalism has been largely dominated by men and that this is especially so in “beats” with a higher value assigned to them, such as politics and economics. Therefore, how gendered norms and values play out in the media industry have been looked at from various angles. This has extended in a number of cases beyond an initial focus on liberal-inclusionary concerns -

such as with women and men's employment, decision-making powers and ownership in the media industry - towards attempts to unearth how the processes, culture, norms and values of the industry are gendered and, therefore, create both gendered media products and gendered differences in the treatment of those who work in the industry.

Therefore, some of the major sources of the media's androcentrism have been identified as gendered ownership/control, employment and professional identity (Carter, Branston & Allan, 1998). In terms of ownership and control, it is often argued that male dominated media ownership limits the potential for gender transformed journalistic content and gender equitable control over it (ibid). Gendered issues around control of the media, and subsequent implications for transformed media products, are also linked to political economy. For example, Carter et al. (1998) note that corporate control over the media, driven largely by concerns around profit maximisation, often leads to the curtailment of alternative voices or dissent in the media. Concerns regarding the "bottom line", they claim, restrict the spaces given to feminist voices which are seen as "controversial" and therefore "potentially threatening to 'market-sensitive' news organisations and their advertisers" (Carter et al., 1998: 4). In this way, patriarchal patterns of ownership and control, and their relationship to market forces, are linked to the gendered forms of representation in the media.

Gendered employment in the media sector is also a point of concern for many feminists. Women's low numerical representation and occupational status within news organisations is often critiqued as a leading cause behind gender biased media products (Carter et al., 1998). Carter et al. (ibid), however, note that these critiques are problematically founded upon the common assumption that a critical mass of women in the newsroom (and, to a lesser extent, an elevated status for women in the newsroom) will transform gendered news practices, hierarchies and content, an assumption that has been strongly questioned (as discussed in relation to the distortion argument). In response to assertions of the inadequacy of a gender "critical mass", some researchers have turned to studies on the impacts of gendered organisational and professional culture embraced in the news industry and infused into the selection of news topics as well as their representation. de Bruin and Ross (2004) assert that the question of a critical gender mass constitutes a limited approach to transformation in news representations, given the *masculine values* through which journalistic values are constructed.

Organisational structures and practices, and professional ideals, both influence gender identities within the newsroom and reflect them (de Bruin, 2004). Through organisational and professional ideologies, it is argued, cultural interpretations of professional processes are inscribed and brought to bear on the practices of journalists (ibid). According to de Bruin (2004), these cultural interpretations are gendered, restricting ascribed values in journalistic practice to implicitly masculine ideals that are effectively taken for granted or naturalised as “objective” processes and approaches. This could mean, for example, that certain facts are regarded as inherently relevant to the news story and others not, and that the “objective” guidelines for distinguishing this are, upon closer inspection, historically born out of and expressing masculine or patriarchal interests. Gouws (2005) argues this point in an analysis of media coverage of gender based violence, with one especially illustrative example being of a rape and murder case reported in the news. In the news article, the facts that the coroner was testing the victim’s blood for alcohol and drugs and that the victim was wearing a certain type of underwear were considered relevant facts for inclusion in the report. This, she argues, is a signal of patriarchal voice implicitly coming through in how fact selection is made.

Professional ideologies, processes and practices can also stunt or block “alternative” (feminist, anti-capitalist, black) voices from breaking through and being heard past those that are dominant and, therefore, also naturalised. For example, Erdman Farrell (1995) has pointed out that journalistic norms lead to limited perspectives on gender issues as events and issues are presented as relatively isolated instances of individual pathology or agency. In this way, she says, “the popular media have neither the language nor the vision to speak of systemic or cultural problems or solutions.. commercial media focus on individual resistance and individual deviance” (Erdman Farrell, 1995: 642). Therefore, she characterises the “media world” as one that “portrays women constantly but ignores the overall context of patriarchy, male domination, systems of radicalised inequality, and, above all, capitalism.. we are provided a very skewed and limited sense of what ‘female agency’ or ‘free agency’ are” (Erdman Farrell, 1995: 643). This is in part due to ideas about the perceived role of “news”, such as relaying current information (read: events, not commentary on broader or underlying issues). Therefore, “feminist perspectives that go beyond individualism and self-improvement are difficult, if not impossible, to sell” (Erdman Farrell, 1995: 644).

Thus, it may be argued that attempts to transform or engender news reporting would necessitate, in the first instance, a *debunking of claims to total neutrality*, and an acknowledgement of the situated nature of news production. It would also require an assessment of the discourses that inform (men *and* women) journalists' approaches to news production. As Arthurs (1994) has noted in relation to the television media industry, having more women in the industry is not a sufficient measure to address patriarchy with the media organisations - instead, what is need is more women (and, I would argue, more men) with a *politicised* awareness of the modes of patriarchal reproduction, and the political will to pursue change.

This statement resonates strongly with debates between feminist approaches based on liberal-inclusionary and progressive paradigms. Equity - a critical mass of women to redress the dominance of men - in the industry and in different representations of women in the media is prized in some approaches while others prefer to look more closely at the construction of gendered values, norms and processes underlying the inequity in the industry and in media representations. Overall, a scan of the literature revealed that debates around the merits of both approaches continue to thrive, as does the counting of women and men and a good amount of literature on stereotypes. Still, importantly there is also a nourishing and forwarding of approaches that increasingly resemble progressive paradigms in the literature. The "international" field, however, represents different contexts very unevenly, due largely to unequal resources in knowledge production as well as contextual and historical specificities. As such, a look at the South African context and some observations of its location within the field follows.

4.3.2 *Feminist media studies in South Africa*

Through a scan of the South African field of feminist media studies and feminist advocacy around the media, I observed that the field has been importantly shaped by the historical trajectories of democracy and the women's movement in recent years. Initially, I was particularly uneasy about some of the foremost prevailing discourses regarding gender and the media in South African literature, discourses that appeared to advocate participation and emphasise "women" as a category at the *expense* of interrogating the meaning of gender, of the diverse ways in which gendered oppression is manifested, and of women's agency within these contexts. However, while these concerns over the South African feminist media

studies and advocacy field remain, for me, over time and through further reading around the women's movement and the press in South Africa, these characteristics were given more context and meaning.

As I have said before, the field (and what constitutes "the field") in South Africa, as with the international field, is difficult to delineate, and no less so to interpret. What I aim to do here, however, is to briefly flag what I perceive as important features and common discourses regarding studies on gender and the media in South Africa, to place them in some sort of context and to argue that there are areas in need of further cultivation, expansion and promotion, particularly with regard to progressive approaches to feminist media studies. This will also clarify to a greater extent why I felt my own research was necessary, and how I designed it to address some of the aspects of gender transformation and the media I considered to be thinly addressed to date.

There is quite resounding consensus among feminist scholars and activists in South Africa that the media is an important site of (gendered) social and political struggles (as well as a source of social and political leverage) and that it is, as of yet, not sufficiently transformed in terms of gender. A number of initiatives have been set up in the last decade to begin to study and advocate around these issues, such as the establishment of the Southern African Media and Gender Institute (SAMGI) in 2003 and Gender Links in 2001. SAMGI and Gender Links have been productive in building research data, arranging training, advocating within and beyond the media industry and establishing networks. However, as Opoku-Mensah (2001) has observed, from a scholastic perspective, especially, the field of feminist media studies is not well established in Africa.

"Press' assertion about feminist theory 'taking off' in the field of communication research may hold true in academic institutions in the western world, however, in Africa, feminist media research is rarely undertaken. From a scholastic perspective, the academic discipline of feminist media studies is critically absent from most mass communication departments in Africa, or [it is] offered as a peripheral area of interest by some gender / women's departments and institutions in universities" (Opoku-Mensah, 2001: 26).

While this was written in 2001, before work by organisations such as SAMGI and Gender Links had begun to leave their mark (and, indeed, since which the academic situation is likely to have changed in some ways), overall this is also my impression from surveying gender and media studies in South Africa today. In addition, what studies and literature have begun to emerge and proliferate the field (academically but also in terms of advocacy) has been crucially shaped by discourses and politics of post-apartheid participatory democracy. Like feminist trajectories in South Africa (discussed in Chapter 2), gender and media work in South Africa has been influenced by the importance placed on the participation of women, particularly within public professional and decision-making spaces. A strategic emphasis, as well, this approach importantly aims to halt and change the domination of men in the media (as *sources* of the news as well as *makers* of the news) at the dawn of democracy when issues of representation are at the fore and the ground is fertile for the demands of women to be heard in the realm of public participation.

With the South African apartheid press as a backdrop, it is easy to see how assertions of the need to ensure a diversity of voices, especially of those marginalised in South Africa, becomes paramount within the media, especially the news media. And, as discussed earlier in relation to the work of Hassim (2006), asserting “women’s” rights in this context has also been strategic amidst fears (and proof) that women can be left behind in democratisation processes and participation.

Literature provided by Gender Links (Spears et al., 2000; Lowe Morna, 2007a; Lowe Morna, 2005; Lowe Morna et al., 2003a; Lowe Morna et al., 2003b) and individual authors such as Opoku-Mensah (2001), Thorne, Pillay and Newman (1996) and Lewis (2002) has pointed to this emphasis. “Diversity” is a word commonly used in reference to the need to gender transform the media, from the perspective that certain voices have been marginalised and that, in the constitution of the new democracy, the media should be a platform that reflects and can be used by all constituencies in South Africa as part of their right to participatory democracy. From a feminist perspective, this should especially include women, and poor rural women in particular. Part of the focus on women’s participation also pertains to access to the media and media technologies, access to material (and social, political, communications) resources being a huge issue in South Africa following the geographic, economic and infrastructural marginalisation instated by the apartheid government and in

light of the fact that women have tended to have even less access to resources such as these.

Some well-known studies informing feminist critiques of the media in South Africa have been particularly influential. The Global Media Monitoring Project studies of 2000 (Spears et al., 2000) and 2005 (Lowe Morna, 2005) on gender and the media in Southern African Development Community (SADC) regions, as well as the more recent Gender Media Baseline Study for South Africa and the Southern African region (Lowe Morna et al., 2003a; Lowe Morna et al., 2003b) have largely become the reference points for gender and media activism in South Africa. These studies primarily critique the low representation of women in the media, particularly the news, as producers of media products, subjects of news stories and sources in news stories. In the SADC region, for example, only 17% of news subjects were women in 1995, with a negligible increase to 18% in 2000 (Spears et al., 2000). The second Class Ceiling Study (Lowe Morna, 2007b) also points to low numbers and statuses of women in the newsroom, as well as the newsroom environment issues that perpetuate this.

Gender stereotypes in the media have also been critiqued through these studies, which indicate that “blatant” and “subtle” stereotypes still prevail in the media in South Africa (Lowe Morna, 2005). These studies primarily quantify news pieces according to “gender stereotypes”. Gender stereotypes are largely held to be those depictions of women that “limit” the perceived roles of women in society (Lowe Morna, 2005; Spears et al., 2000). This includes the pervasive sexualisation and objectification of women, as well as a focus on women's domestic roles (ibid). Women, it is noted, are far more likely to be identified according to their familial status within the news, for example as wives and mothers (ibid). Furthermore, women are more likely to be constituted as victims in news pieces, further entrenching depictions of women that hold them to be vulnerable, submissive and/or emotional and irrational (ibid). In contrast, the studies revealed that men are depicted in ways that re-entrench their dominance in public spheres, their physical capabilities and their leadership roles (ibid).

The depiction of women remains the focal point for the majority of critiques on gender stereotyping in South Africa. “Gender” is therefore often applied (and thus interpreted) as a synonym for “women”. While the reports reviewed do indicate certain gendered dichotomies

- implicitly constituting gender as relational - as well as representations of masculinity, critiques pertaining to gender and the media (in South Africa as well as internationally) are often still too silent on the notion of masculinities and their *interplay* with femininities. Where a focus on “gender stereotypes” prevails in qualitative assessments of gendered media representation, the relational, variegated and complex characteristics of gendered power are sometimes at risk of being sidestepped in favour of the identification of more overt and “traditional” gender stereotypes. Furthermore, it would be useful to discuss and interrogate the ways in which quantitative categories such as “stereotypes” were constructed, to determine what they may include and exclude.

It is my view that, to a large extent, gender and media critiques in South Africa dichotomise and homogenise “women” and “men” to a large extent, rather than probing “gender” as constituting social, economic and political identities that shift and vary across time and space. While issues of numerical representation and gender stereotypes are indeed important aspects of gender-equitable transformation, a fuller conception of gender transformation would entail a more complex questioning of gendered power. Furthermore, equitable representation cannot be seen as sufficient in addressing gendered epistemological concerns, as I have already discussed. While studies interrogating the numbers of women in the newsroom, their statuses therein and their experiences of the newsroom environment are also critical towards transforming the media industry from a gender perspective, it is my contention that theory pertaining to gender transformation in the South African media needs to be strengthened on some fronts.

This is not to say that this is not beginning to happen, nor that the work highlighted isn't extremely important too. Easily accessible, politically oriented data on gender and the media, such as that provided by Gender Links, is an important strategic step towards transforming what is still a very male-dominated and exclusionary industry. In particular, it seeks inroads into transforming the media through, I believe, discourses that are more pervious to change (namely those sympathetic to liberal-inclusionary ideas). In South Africa, too, a scan of recent literature does suggest that there is in fact a broadening of a progressive feminism paradigm in gender and feminist research on the media. For instance, more and more literature is beginning to look at masculinities and men as well. Particular areas of inquiry are also seeing this broadening more and more, in part I think because they

necessitate it. These include, most notably, research into gender based violence (GBV) in media representations and the representation and reporting of HIV/AIDS issues.

In the case of the former, analyses pertaining to representations of GBV in the media have become increasingly prolific, and these analyses have, to a large extent, made inroads into the deeper engendering of media analyses. Discourses legitimising GBV and the accompanying gendered “rape myths” seen as propagating GBV have been a particular locus of concern for gender analysts and activists (see, for example, Gouws, 2005). The role of current notions of journalistic professionalism in undermining counters to GBV is commonly critiqued (see, for example, Gouws, 2005; Omarjee, 2001). Isolated reporting of incidents, for example, is criticised as propagating the notion of rape as sensational news rather than the systematic violation and subordination of women (ibid), constituting an integral part of South Africa's social and economic milieu. As Omarjee (2001) points out, little contextual information is given in news reports to situate rape not only as an act of gendered power, but as part of a broader patriarchal context that allows for the prevalence of rape to go largely unchecked. These critiques of the media speak to the notion of gender as both social and institutional, as well as making inroads towards an assessment of gender in the media that integrates notions of “masculinities” and “femininities” through an assessment of gendered manifestations of power of men over women. It could be argued that qualitative research and literature such as this is highly important towards deepening understandings of “gender” beyond concepts such as “women” and “stereotypes”. That theory pertaining to the sources of gender based violence has also been strengthened in South Africa has perhaps also contributed towards such media analyses.

HIV/AIDS and the media is emerging more recently, too, as an area of research that is providing (and requiring) increasing attention to how *discourses* in the media impact on wider social discourses and, by extension, actions. Research on HIV/AIDS, and the intersection between gender and HIV/AIDS, is a prolific area of research in South Africa and one which is testifying growingly to the social, and socially constructed nature, not only of the treatment of people with HIV by their communities (social stigma being a huge issue) but even their treatment by the medical fraternity, the development of AIDS from HIV and the contraction of HIV, issues previously primarily looked at through a biomedical lens.

With the broadening of social investigations and conceptualisations of a range of issues associated with HIV/AIDS more generally, and the deepening and sophistication of the analysis, research into HIV/AIDS and the role of the *media* is also requiring great attention to complex social variables, for example how constructions and discourses of masculinities and femininities through the media can inhibit or promote prevention strategies and condom use. It appears that, like GBV, HIV/AIDS is challenging gender and feminist media researchers to look beyond simpler configurations of “women” and “men”, and of “gender” as a supposed synonym for “women”, towards far more nuanced understandings needed to get to the root of these social problems. This is still an area in need of development, but it is also important to acknowledge that inroads are being made and, indeed, required by the most serious of social circumstances and issues facing South Africa today.

Not all the literature in South Africa may be as easy to source and find, in many cases perhaps not as widely accessible due to resource limitations, and that therefore there are likely to be areas in which very rich research is being carried out into the media in South Africa, some of which I have not accessed in my searches to date. That said, the literature review I undertook did signal areas I feel are in need of development (and challenging), areas thinly addressed to date, and the potential usefulness of a framework through which to enrich and encourage gender and media research with the promise of enhancing and promoting gender transformation that is more comprehensive than a liberal-inclusionary focus can offer. As a result, this research aims to strengthen knowledge by linking critiques of gender in the media that move *beyond* the key notions of numerical representation and stereotyping, with journalists’ views of their own roles within this. As will be presented in the methodology, I have designed the research in a way that seeks to promote analysis of gender in the media that is able to develop data that is “progressive” in terms of feminist approach and therefore capable of advancing understandings and changes that are more comprehensively transformative.

In conclusion, feminist critiques of the media in South Africa, and internationally, have taken many forms. This research has aimed to draw extensively on the established theory and, at the same time, contribute some new perspectives towards South African literature and research on the subject by looking at the available literature critically.

4.4 Institutionalising Change: South Africa's Gender and Media Policy Environment

Having looked at the research and literature pertaining to gender and the media in South Africa, as a basis for research it is also important to establish what the policy environment in terms of gender and the media is currently like. Critiques against the media are quite prolific, but what does policy actually require from the media industry in South Africa? In searching for this information, I found that it was both difficult to locate and quite sparse. The limited information unearthed in attempting to scope the gender and media policy environment in South Africa is, in itself, telling. While there is much literature on the need for (and suggested improvements to) policy, specific information on existing policy obligations with respect to representations of gender in the media is conspicuously limited, particularly in the case of the news press.

At an international level, obligations in respect of gender and the media were often referenced in terms of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) (Lowe Morna, 2001). CEDAW is an international treaty adopted by the United Nations, ratified by over a hundred nations including South Africa, to protect and promote gender equality and women's rights. This includes the elimination of practices and prejudices based on stereotyped notions of women and men's roles, as well as those that convey the notion of the inferiority of superiority of either sex. The BPFA, however, takes these concepts further by specifically identifying the media, and in particular the mass media, as having a special role to play in the promotion of gender equality. In Section J of the BPFA, gender stereotypes in the media and the equitable representation of women in media institutions are targeted as issues of concern for gender equality.

At a national level, policy on gender and the media appears to be both scattered and limited, often including brief clauses on - or tacit mention of - gender. The Broadcasting Code of Conduct and the Advertising Code, for example, have brief clauses on gender. However, for the purposes of this research, the South African Press Code of Professional Practice (2006) is probably the key policy document with reference to gender. In this document, gender is referred to Section 2, which deals with issues of discrimination in the media. In this regard,

the press code imposes the following policy obligations in paragraphs 2.1 and 2.2 respectively:

- “The press should avoid discriminatory or denigratory references to people’s race, colour, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or preference, physical or mental disability or illness, or age.”
- “The press should not refer to a person’s race, colour, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or preference, physical or mental illness in a prejudicial or pejorative context except where it is strictly relevant to the matter reported or adds significantly to readers’ understanding of that matter” (South African Press Code of Professional Practice, 2006).

Interestingly, paragraph 2.3 of the South African Press Code of Professional Practice (2006) imposes a further policy obligation with respect to race, to the omission of gender and other social stratifications, namely:

- “The press has the right and indeed the duty to report and comment on all matters of public interest. This right and duty must, however, be balanced against the obligation not to promote racial hatred or discord in such a way as to create the likelihood of imminent violence.”

Therefore, gender issues, including those related to sexual orientation and preference, are importantly omitted in the policy obligation to mitigate media representations that promote hatred, discord or violence. This perhaps indicates a lag identified by some gender activists in the promotion of gender transformation relative to strides taken to promote the transformation of race relations in South Africa. In a South African study on gender and advertising, for example, it was revealed that the advertising industry in post-apartheid South Africa expressed a strong sense of responsibility to portray a racially integrated society, but no similar sense of responsibility to portray a gender equitable and transformed South African society (Lowe Morna, 2001).

Other than clauses with direct reference to gender, however, a number of clauses exist in the Press Code with significant potential for gender-aware interpretation. The notion of “public interest” as specified in the Press Code, for example, could easily be read through a

gender lens or read with a blindness to gender dynamics. In addition, the mention of gender in reference to the avoidance of discriminatory, denigratory or prejudicial representation, for example, is open to diverse applications according to the extent of gender awareness informing the interpretation made of particular media texts. Therefore, scope exists to apply current clauses in the Press Code towards the engendering of the press in South Africa, but little of the policy on ethics and the press explicitly identifies, emphasizes or defines the scope and nature of gender issues.

The print media industry in South Africa has set up the office of the Press Ombudsman and an Appeal Panel to mediate, settle and, where necessary, adjudicate complaints pertaining to newspaper and magazine publications. The office is funded by the newspaper and magazine industries. Its authority rests on the commitment of publishers and editors to respect its rulings and to adhere to the Press Code of Professional Practice. The Press Code is also being continually reviewed. Other than the Press Code, Lowe Morna (2001) notes that most media houses have some form of encoded editorial policy or guidelines. However, she adds that a random examination of some examples of these conducted at a Gender Links workshop revealed a prevailing of silence on gender issues in such policy documents (ibid).

Therefore, while having the potential to encourage transformation in some respects, the policy environment in terms of gender and the media in South Africa is quite limited and, importantly, is also relatively open to interpretation. Policy without deeper awareness or understanding of gender and gendered oppression will mean limited application. In this context, the perspectives of journalists is important in establishing some of the origins of the kinds of media texts being critiqued by feminists (as discussed earlier), as well as potentially identifying opportunities for change.

4.5 Contemporary Turning Points: Politics, Press Freedom and Feminism in South Africa at the Time of Research

4.5.1 Contextualising the research within contemporary events and debates

From the time the research proposal was developed and all the way through the processes of research, prominent and significant events were unfolding around gender politics, national

politics and the role of the press in South Africa. Many high-profile events dominating the media further spurred active debate and, in some cases, activism, both through and within the media industry and in society at large. Many of these issues also stimulated debate around the role of the media in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa. These events and debates have contributed appreciably towards the context in which the research was undertaken and were raised frequently by participants during the research.

This section aims to introduce these issues briefly and some of their salient implications towards contextualising the research. South Africa and its media are diverse and dynamic, reflecting a multiplicity of voices and a range of complex changes occurring in the post-apartheid context. As such, I concede that the events and debates I present here are selections made from a vast pool of potential contextual issues, and are not intended to be presented here as defining the South African context in any unmitigated or comprehensive way. They are, however, issues that I consider to be of great interest and significance to my research question in particular, as well as towards understanding the interview and newspaper content data.

4.5.2 Zuma, Zuma, Zuma: Three key dimensions to Jacob Zuma in the media

Jacob Zuma, currently president South Africa, was at the time of the primary research with journalists the former deputy president of South Africa and president of the ruling government party, the African National Congress (ANC). At the time of the research and just prior (roughly the period of 2006 to 2008) he was playing a significant role in South African politics not only in terms of the party politics themselves, but also in terms of national dialogues over the role of the media, and over gender issues in the country. He also controversially dominated much media coverage at that time, for his involvement in high-profile (and controversial) events widely covered by the media, the staunch criticism unleashed by him and his supporters on the media for its critical coverage of him and the voracious and, again, controversial forms of support shown by his supporters. These events not only bolstered his prominence as a politician, but have also, according to many, been revolutionising the South African landscape both socially and politically.

Events surrounding his person and career, as well as the broader issues these have raised, stimulated powerful debate and acted to further unify particular groups and powerfully divide

others. These events and debates around Jacob Zuma have been complex, and a detailed account of these in their entirety cannot and will not be given here. In addition, since the primary research has been undertaken and up until today, developments and changes continue to take place (for example, his inauguration as president), making an overview of Zuma's significance to the research very difficult to pin down as time goes on. However, focusing on the period the primary research was undertaken, those events around Zuma with particular bearing on the research will be raised as background information, especially as they impact on the ability to interpret many of the comments made by journalists and editors in this research¹⁶.

In 2005, Zuma became involved in a corruption-related controversy when his former financial advisor, Shabir Shaik, was convicted on charges of corruption and fraud in which Zuma was implicated. The judge maintained that Shabir Shaik had had a corrupt relationship with Jacob Zuma, leading to Zuma's dismissal as deputy president of South Africa in June 2005. While Zuma himself had not yet been convicted of corruption related to the incidents constituting the centre of Shabir Shaik's trial, this controversy has rolled on politically and legally for three years before its resolution by the National Prosecuting Authority in 2009, when they dismissed Zuma's case after conceding that it had been compromised by political interference.

In 2006, Jacob Zuma was charged with the rape of a 31 year old family friend on 2 November 2005. The trial, which was conducted from March to May 2006, dominated South African press coverage, and several critical features of the trial came to symbolise some of the most divisive political and social debates around national and gender politics. Zuma was eventually acquitted of the charge. His supporters attacked the media as pre-emptively promoting a judgement of Zuma as guilty before the court could rule on the matter. Zuma accused a number of newspapers of using the trial to boost sales by sensationalising the story, and claimed that his constitutional rights to be treated innocent until proven guilty, as well as to dignity, had been violated by the media's coverage of the trial. He proceeded to sue publishers, editors, reporters, the cartoonist Zapiro and newspapers for their coverage and comment of him and his trial. Furthermore, the rape charge and the media coverage of Zuma were held by many supporters to be part of a political plot against him.

¹⁶ General information related to Zuma and the media in this section was drawn from a number of media sources, most notably including news articles from the Mail & Guardian online (www.mg.co.za).

The trial also aroused great debate and reaction among feminists and various people holding different perspectives on issues of gender. Part of the defence used in the rape trial, and considered in the ruling of the judge, was the dress of the complainant (who wore a *kanga*¹⁷ on the night of the alleged rape, which the defence held to be sexually suggestive). Another involved the importance of Zulu “culture” in informing Zuma’s actions (he claimed that, according to Zulu “culture”, once a woman is aroused it is considered wrong for the man to cease sexual advances). In addition, the complainant’s abusive past was advanced by the defence as a mitigating factor (that she had experienced and made accusations of rape numerous times before was taken to show that she was emotionally unstable and unable to distinguish adequately between consensual and coercive sex, including the suggestion that she may experience any sexual encounter as coercive).

The complainant’s relationship to Zuma, who she claimed was like a father figure to her, was put forward by the prosecution as a power dynamic that had impacted on her ability to resist his advances, in addition to his high position in political leadership. Furthermore, the complainant’s failure to “cry rape” (namely, to put up a serious physical fight against a rapist, flee from the scene of a rape as soon as possible and report the event immediately afterwards) was held by the defence, and eventually the judge, to signify a shadow of doubt over her claims of rape. The prosecution, on the other hand, tried to show that it was a common reaction of rape survivors to freeze during rape and take time to come to be able to face what had happened to them afterwards. Historical myths, stereotypes and debates around gender, sexuality, rape and power were therefore publicly fore-grounded during the trial.

The issue of HIV also came to the fore, with Zuma (who had four wives at the time) admitting that he had not used a condom, despite knowing that the complainant was HIV-positive. In court he said that, as a man, he knew his chances of contracting HIV were statistically lower than a woman’s and that he had taken a shower after sex to mitigate HIV infection. These comments sparked outrage from various HIV-prevention groups (among others) and became the comments that came to exemplify Zuma’s unfitness for office to those who did not support him. Zapiro came to regularly depict Zuma in cartoons with a showerhead above his head, which caused much outrage from Zuma and his supporters.

¹⁷ A colourful, rectangular cloth garment worn by women, and occasionally men, specifically in Eastern Africa.

Although recently he did agree not to use the showerhead as a fixture on Zuma's head, he has continued to weave showerhead depictions into cartoons involving Zuma.



Image 1: Cartoon of Jacob Zuma's "AIDS shower", Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 12 May 2006

In the meantime, supporters of Zuma outside the courthouse accused the complainant of being part of a political plot to oust Zuma from power. Some burned placards with the full name of the complainant reading "Burn the Bitch", while others announced that the complainant should be grateful if Zuma had raped her. Both supporters and Zuma himself sang an apartheid struggle song *Lethu Mshini Wami*, literally translated as "bring me my machine gun", the discursive orientation of which, in the context of a rape trial, stirred up severe reactions from some quarters. Feminist groups responded strongly to these events, noting that many of the supporters who had said and done these things were women, highlighting the divide among women in South Africa related to issues of gender.

The trial raised serious debate around patriarchy, power, politics and the socialisation of both men and women. Motsei (2007), in a book reflecting on the various implications of the Zuma rape trial, articulates the impact these events had on her and, arguably, many others concerned with the gendered discourses arising during the trial.

"It was on waking up to the headline 'Burn the bitch' at Jacob Zuma's rape trial on International Women's Day, 8 March 2006, twelve years into South Africa's

new democracy, ten years after the implementation of the new Constitution and fifty years after women marched to the Union Buildings to demand their rights, that the pervasive disrespect for women and women's rights were brought home" (Motsei, 2007: 18).

Motsei continues to reflect on the numerous gendered discourses that emerged in the trial, noting that they are not limited to Jacob Zuma himself, but are rather reflective of much broader patriarchal discourses articulated and subscribed to by men and women. In this respect, Motsei argues that not only should Zuma's suitability as a political leader be questioned, but also the prevailing discourses around gender, sex, "culture" and power that permeate South African society. As such, Motsei considers the Zuma rape trial as a potential turning point for South Africa.

"For me personally, Jacob Zuma's rape trial was both a form of victimisation and a moment of reawakening. Seeing him arrive in court and being ushered in with ceremonial pomp surrounded by an array of bodyguards in dark suits leaping out of a motorcade of luxury automobiles and running towards the court building, I wondered if Thomas Jefferson was correct when he said 'A people get the government they deserve'" (Motsei, 2007: 18).

Motsei's (2007) reflections convey the challenges and debates raised through the Zuma trial in terms of where South Africa stands with respect to gender transformation. As a new democracy with some of the most progressive gender legislation in the world, with a government represented by more women than almost anywhere in the world, and a national gender machinery aimed at promoting transformation, there is a sense that South African women have perhaps been lulled into a pre-emptive sense of security that the road to gender transformation is already paved. The trial provoked a response that could be viewed as challenging women and men to consider the nature and extent of transformation, and highlighting the need for gender transformation beyond parity.

Gouws (2004) notes that an unintended consequence of what she calls "state feminism" in South Africa (whereby feminist goals are implemented through state machinery) is the "apparent demobilisation of civil society". The Zuma rape trial reflected this phenomenon, and acted as a (potential) catalyst for greater activism around the foundational aspects of

gender relations (namely, how men and women are perceived, beyond official rhetoric or numerical representation).

The third key issue involving Jacob Zuma that evoked a flood of press coverage was the issue of the succession race and his appointment in December 2007 as the new president of the ANC. Grumbling dissatisfactions with the former ANC president, Thabo Mbeki, coupled with Zuma's growing popularity led to a succession battle dominated by the two, and saw the ANC increasingly divided. While the details around the succession race are in some respects sketchy (rumours of hand-greasing of ANC delegates or promises of prominent political positions in exchange for their votes abound), the ANC succession battle and Zuma's eventual triumph over Mbeki dominated the media and came to be viewed as a significant turning point for South Africa. The tensions between Zuma and Mbeki camps also continued to shape South African politics, leading to the ANC splintering and the formation of the Congress of the People (COPE) in 2008.



Image 2: Cartoon about the ANC succession race, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 7 December 2007

Many feminists and AIDS activists were dismayed at the election of a man who, despite his official pronouncements regarding the importance of gender transformation and the fight against HIV, had revealed in court that he was a polygamist who engaged in extra-marital sex without the use of a condom, with a woman half his age who he knew to be HIV positive, and seemed unapologetic about how this may affect his other partners. Gender

concerns around the succession race were further compounded by the fact that the ANC Women's League, who had previously promised to vote for a woman candidate to lead the ANC, eventually put Zuma forward as a candidate.

Confusion and fierce debate followed among women's groups as to the reasons for and implications of this move. These debates came to be quite prominent in the media at the time (see the cartoon by Zapiro in Image 3 below). On the other hand, Zuma supporters continued to claim that Zuma was still being unfairly targeted by the media and his opponents within the ANC, and that the Women's League had voted for whom they believed was the best candidate.

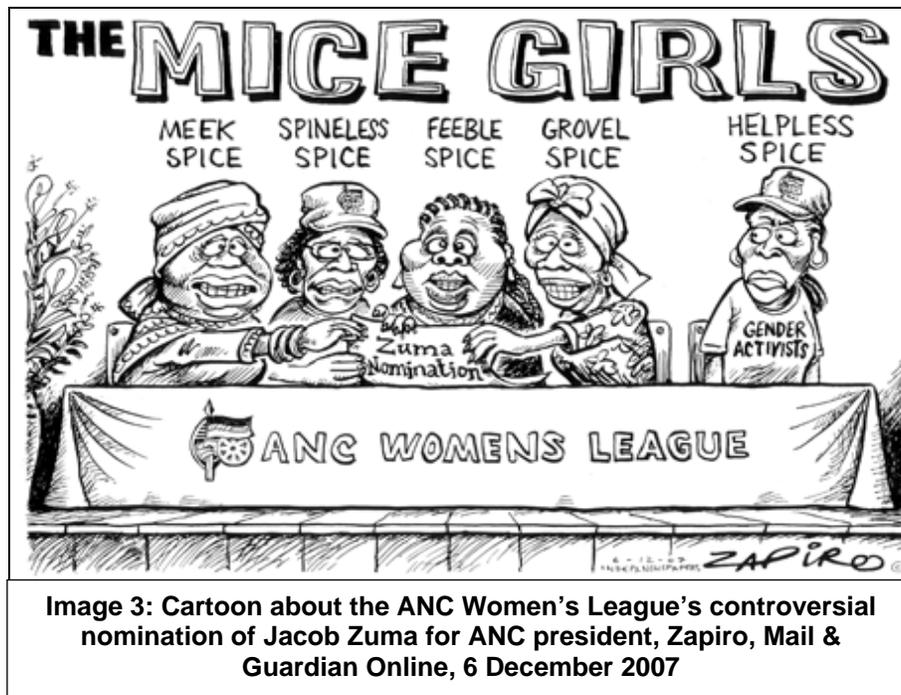


Image 3: Cartoon about the ANC Women's League's controversial nomination of Jacob Zuma for ANC president, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 6 December 2007

One commentator proposing that the media had dealt with Jacob Zuma with extreme prejudice had the following to say in an online contribution to a journalism website (journalism.co.za):

“Journalists, particularly editors, used every possible centimetre of editorial space to rubbish, ridicule and condemn Zuma. Not even the architect of apartheid or perpetrators of heinous crimes of humanity have ever evoked such a response from the media in South Africa. Every rule of fair play, objectivity

and balance is breached in the coverage of Zuma - and excused away by the minders of the profession under the banner of the “public’s right to know” (Munusamy, 2007).

Accusations such as these have naturally stimulated a variety of responses and ardent debate in the media industry.

At the time of the majority of the interviews, the succession race in the ANC had not realised its outcome. However, the corruption and rape charges against Zuma were fresh in people’s minds, as were the various allegations of media bias, his bumpy rise to power and the political relationship he had with Thabo Mbeki. Furthermore, the succession race and the ANC Women’s League’s vote for Zuma, coinciding with the annual 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children¹⁸, formed the context of many of the newspapers reviewed for the research. I have already discussed some of the theories surrounding the role of the media in society, as well as the feminist basis for the research and feminist critiques of the media. The case of Jacob Zuma, at the time of the research, exemplified and illustrated the tensions simmering in terms of these very issues and debates in South Africa around gender and the media. They therefore provide an important context, one I will take up as they arise in the research findings.



Image 4: Scathing cartoons about Jacob Zuma and his relationship with the media, Zapiro, Mail & Guardian Online, 7 April 2006 and 7 July 2006

¹⁸ From here onwards referred to simply as the 16 Days of Activism.

4.5.3 *Partiality, prejudice or public interest? Debates over the media's role in national transformation*

Issues related to the role of the media in post-apartheid South Africa have been quite prominent both in the media and within broader public and political debates. In addition to the accusations and legal action around media coverage of Jacob Zuma, a number of high-profile politicians and government officials have dominated headlines due to allegations and charges of corruption, fraud and various other acts regarded as unethical.

Some sectors of the South African media have taken an active role in these revelations, not only in critically covering such issues but also in investigating and uncovering them. Some parties have claimed that the media appears to be out to target particular individuals or political parties (a claim that has often fed back into politics, by framing certain political groups as victims of a smear campaign and fuelling caveats of a ruling political power centre that curbs opposition via counter-democratic means). Furthermore, some have claimed that the methods sometimes employed by the media industry to produce these stories are unethical or even unconstitutional. On the other hand, concerns that such accusations will be used to stifle press freedom have been strongly articulated. Both of these arguments re-emerge as strongly as they have spurred by recent events and, I would argue, due to their historical roots in South Africa's apartheid past, in which news coverage akin to propaganda was supported by the government and press freedom was suppressed.

The media's role as watchdog has been debated as a consequence. Furthermore, questions around the possibility, desirability and meaning of an "impartial" or "fair" media have gained prominence. The notions of media coverage in the "public interest" - what this means and how it could relate to notions of "national interest" - also continue to be debated. In this respect, some foreground the media's role as a critical watchdog, while others point to the need for the media to promote some kind of national cohesion (and, therefore, not aim primarily to critique and expose the flaws of government). As will become clear later, these very issues arose during the research. I will not delve into the precise details of these events or which media groups, individuals or political actors have made various arguments. However, in order to contextually frame the question of impartiality, prejudice and the notion of public interest in the media as background to the findings, I will just briefly say, here, that

these debates have impacted upon and reflected broader discourses around the role of the media.

One example of an event that was highly current at the time of the research and linked to these debates is the case of the Health Minister, Mmanto Tshabalala-Msimang. Her suitability as the minister of health was called into question when the Sunday Times newspaper (known for its investigative journalism) uncovered and published hospital records suggesting that the minister was an alcoholic who drank while staying in a private hospital, had been aggressive towards hospital staff and had later received what some believed was a suspiciously swift liver transplant. The Sunday Times became embroiled in a legal controversy around the constitutionality of the manner in which the private hospital records had been obtained, and around whether the confidential information warranted publishing as part of the “public interest”.

At the time of my research at the Sunday Times, the mood in the newsroom was tense as the editor and one journalist awaited news as to whether or not they would be arrested on the grounds of illegally seizing and publishing confidential documents. The story, which was widely discussed both in terms of the revelations about the health minister and the implications for the role of the media as watchdog, caused a great stir in the media industry at large. The research context was therefore palpably impacted upon by events and debates such as these.

4.5.4 Crossing the invisible line: Setting the limits on “free speech” in the media

Another controversial incident unfolded during the research (although in this case after the interviews had been completed), which stirred up great debate regarding the media’s role. This was the firing of the popular Sunday Times columnist David Bullard on 10 April 2008¹⁹. A highly controversial column by Bullard published the previous Sunday, entitled “Uncolonised Africa wouldn’t know what it was missing”, was subsequently described as extremely racist and counter to the values of the newspaper and the country, leading to the Sunday Times editor firing Bullard. Mondli Makhanya, the editor of the Sunday Times,

¹⁹ Information pertaining to this incident was gleaned from the internet, especially the websites of the Sunday Times (www.thetimes.co.za), the Mail & Guardian (www.mg.co.za) and the Business Day (www.businessday.co.za).

described the message expressed in the column as being “that black people are indolent savages” (Makhanya, Sunday Times, 13 April 2008).

In the following week’s Sunday Times, the editor apologised for publishing the column and reflected on some of the implications of the column and his reasoning for firing Bullard. In addition, the same issue of the newspaper carried a page dedicated to letters submitted in both support of and opposition to Bullard’s firing. After about a week, during which time media interest in the incident was very much sustained, Bullard issued an apology for the offence his column had caused, while also highlighting the role of a columnist as being to push boundaries through expressing controversial views. In his apology, he noted “I can’t claim to believe everything I have written because some columns were written purely for sensation” (Bullard, Business Day, 18 April 2008).

For the purposes of this research, three aspects of these events were of particular interest. Firstly, while the firing of a columnist is more extreme than most instances of controversial columns being published, this incident shows some of the ways in which columns stir up public debate around very sensitive issues. Unlike news journalists, columnists have a great deal of leeway with respect to what they discuss and how, and are often valued for their ability to stir up public debate. In particular, as will also be discussed in relation to the findings for this research, spaces such as columns can provide a means through which to express some of the controversial private views held by members of the public, ones not acceptable if articulated in most public spaces. This is part of the reason the expression of these views can act as a catalyst for a furore of debate; columnists are in a better position than most in the media to articulate issues seething beneath the surface of acceptable public speech. As the Sunday Times editor noted in this case, Bullard’s column triggered a surge of public support for and against the views contained in it, revealing some of the sharp divisions in the country. An extract from the Sunday Times editorial regarding Bullard’s column highlights this.

“It [10 April 2008] was a sad day, as some of the anger directed at the Sunday Times revealed a dark, ugly side of South Africa..... The outrage [by members of the public at Bullard’s firing] was directed not just at the Sunday Times; it was directed at post-apartheid South Africa and all it represents..... What is disconcerting is that there are many people in our society who agree with what

Bullard wrote last week. *The Bullard matter allowed the opinions that are normally reserved for behind closed doors to come out into polite company.* This tells you that we still have a long road to travel in forging the united, non-racial nation that we set out to build in 1994” (Makhanya, Sunday Times, 13 April 2008, emphasis my own).

Secondly, while radio talk shows, the news and letters to newspapers extensively covered questions around the content of Bullard’s column and whether or not the views he expressed warranted his firing, little was said in public debates about the fact that the column was published by the Sunday Times in the first place. However, in his editorial regarding the column, the editor did address this issue to some extent, claiming responsibility for the column’s publication prior to Bullard’s firing, and noting that “systems” in the newspaper were being looked at to ensure that such texts did not slip through the gate-keeping process. I raise this because this columnist was fired for the publication of a column that was (through action or omission) put into publication under the editor’s control. The editorial responsibility to check and approve everything published in a given publication is very important (as also emerged in the findings), and this incident raises questions around agency and accountability in the media (relevant to the research question which probes the role of journalists and editors in creating gendered texts).

Thirdly, the Sunday Times editorial on the matter raised the significance of discourses related to free speech, and that these discourses are shaped and reshaped according to social values at the editorial level. As the editor himself noted, Bullard was given much space over the years to express through his column views that were not only very controversial, but also at times counter to the editorial stance of the newspaper. However, in this particular case, the editor said that Bullard had gone too far.

“The right to free speech is something everyone on this newspaper holds dear. We hold diverse views on different issues and would lay down our lives in defence of everyone’s right to express themselves. Our pages are a testament to that. But we are NOT in the business of promoting prejudice..... Last Sunday he [Bullard] crossed the line” (Makhanya, Sunday Times, 13 April 2008).

Free speech as a media value is stressed here, while it is also made clear that this “right” to express “diverse views” has *limits* attached to it, particularly that such speech does not promote prejudice. The case of Bullard is therefore worth bearing in mind when going in to discuss the research findings. The identification of the line being crossed in terms of promoting or not promoting prejudice depends in part on the values of the newspaper and its editorial leadership, as well as the extent and manner in which certain social constructs are (or are not) seen as dangerous in this regard. This is significant to the issue of gender in the media. For example, in a context in which gender differences (and inequalities even) are often discursively aligned with biological sex, and therefore naturalised and legitimated, would an editor, a journalist or, even, members of the public view media representations of women as primarily mothers and men as primarily career persons as promoting prejudice or not?

In the case of Bullard, an increased discursive sensitivity appears to exist to the ways in which social constructs around race and Africa have, do and could fuel racism. Whether similar awareness is applied in terms of gender constructs in columns would, presumably, depend on the social currency of certain gender transformation issues, as well as the lens through which they are viewed by editors and other staff at media institutions. Thus, it is important to note that Bullard’s firing raised questions around the discursive *parameters* and *limitations* of “free speech”, and the ways in which particular social values constitute what qualifies within this. This case was well publicised and debated in various forums, but not all columns with potentially hazardous social implications and prejudicial discourses meet this kind of publicity or, indeed, these kinds of punitive measures. As such, it is an interesting event to bear in mind going into the research findings later on, as it raises a contextual issue around discourses of prejudice and the media in South Africa.

4.6 Conclusions

This Chapter has, essentially, introduced literature and current events that help to build a context for the research and the research findings presented later on. Many of these events and issues would be difficult to discuss in as much detail while presenting the research findings and discussions, and they have thus been introduced here to set the stage for later discussions. These contextual issues provide a starting point from which to explore the

views of journalists and editors, as well as to analyse the media texts themselves. They raise key debates around the press media in South Africa and abroad, its historical trajectories and its current modes of expression. They also raise questions around gender in South Africa and in the media in particular, through the lens of feminist critiques of the media, gender and media policy and the salient events with a bearing on gender politics in South Africa that have been widely covered by the media in recent years.

Stepping back, this Chapter has highlighted the fact that, when it comes to the role of the media in South Africa, debates rage on. History has played an important role in shaping discourses around the role of the media in South Africa, and current events have breathed new life into these debates. In terms of gender, too, this Chapter has shown that the feminist media studies field in South Africa has also been significantly shaped by South Africa's history, and that current events again have sparked debate around not only representations of gender in the media but broader attitudes around gender. In conclusion, I will argue that, in this fertile and extremely significant current context of thriving debate provoked into new life by South African politics, as well as of the continued shaping of the new democracy and the media's role therein (a process that is still ongoing), the research I have undertaken is important towards understanding how the media does and can play a role in gender transformation beyond women's inclusion in public spaces.

In this Chapter I have attempted to show that, while many factors are leading to increased complexity and nuance in feminist media studies in South Africa, and despite policy measures aimed at transforming the press, understandings of gender, its significance and the multiplicity of manifestations and impacts it can have still need to be strengthened. Drawing on the feminist frameworks I have outlined in Chapter 2, therefore, and following on from the theoretical and contextual historical background I have sketched regarding the media industry (generally and specific to South Africa), this research aims to be part of this project. Attending more closely to elements of gender transformation and the media in South Africa that, I feel, have not been sufficiently addressed to date and drawing on empirical research to delve deeper into the significance of the events and debates characterising the South African media landscape these past years, the research presented here will, I hope, build on understandings of the strides made and lags in the pursuit of more comprehensive gender justice in South Africa and its media than has been seen to date.



First, however, I will describe in the following Chapter the methodology that was applied in the research. The Chapters that have thus far been presented have highlighted the importance of feminist theory and politics in the undertaking of this research, as well as some of the main areas of interest. The following Chapter will, therefore, discuss in relative detail (in the tradition of feminist research) decision-making processes and theoretical inputs with a bearing on the shape of the empirical research and the way in which it has been unpacked, analysed, interpreted and presented.