



# Chapter 2

## Media diversity



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**T**he South African media system is undoubtedly pluralistic in terms of the different forms of media – from audiovisual, through print, to online. There is arguably no media system with the same level of pluralism on the African continent. From daily national newspapers to regional papers and community papers and to national, regional and community radio and television stations to cinemas (even in decline) and online-based media there is an appearance of saturation and of catering to the needs of the entire nation. The growth of mobile telephony should add to media pluralism and diversity, as access through mobile phones is growing, especially among the youth, for whom it is the preferred platform for media consumption.

Government policy and regulation post-1994 has opened space for new media outlets. The creation of agencies such as the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) has also aided the pluralisation and diversification processes in ways that have changed the media landscape in the two decades since the advent of democracy, and the strong constitutional protections for freedom of expression and media freedom have provided a nurturing environment for media expansion.

Compared to the rest of the African continent, most of the media system is privately owned and commercially driven. Even public service media such as the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and the community broadcasting sector are largely dependent on commercial sources of funding – and this dependence is one of the factors limiting the diversity of programming, and even of editorial independence. South Africa is one of the very few African countries without national newspaper titles owned and controlled by the government.

In this regard South Africa appears to fit a media system profile typical of liberal western democracies, in which a defining feature is a market-based system of pluralistic media independent from the state but not necessarily from powerful commercial interests and the political forces with which they intersect. However,

South Africa is not a country with the levels of economic development and social equality of European and North American countries – it only shares with these countries levels of media freedom from direct state and government control. Direct censorship, with regular arrests and imprisonment of journalists, is not a feature of the South African media landscape.

The key question, though, is whether the South African media system is both pluralistic and diverse. The answer is not an easy one, for several reasons. The most obvious is that the media landscape shows a diversity very different from that of the apartheid era. This is important and cannot be ignored. However, it is universally acknowledged that South Africa is a society marked by growing socioeconomic inequality, poverty and high levels of unemployment, especially among the youth – inequalities resembling the racial inequalities that are a legacy of over 300 years of colonialism and apartheid. Media systems are shaped by and bear the marks of the social systems in which they are embedded. Although the advent of democracy in 1994 made all South Africans equal before the law it did not create social and economic equality. This is the task of the new society. Neither did it create equal access to a plurality and diversity of the media. This is another task of the new society. Access to both a plurality and diversity of the media follows patterns of socioeconomic inequality and geographies of economic activity.

## Diversity of and in the media

Before one assesses the South African media system for diversity it is important to make some propositions about diversity in relation to the media. Diversity is not the same thing as pluralism, which says a lot about numbers but does not necessarily speak to range. Second, diversity means many, but different. There can be no diversity without pluralism, which is a necessary – but not a sufficient – condition for diversity. Diversity of media is not only a function of one aspect (the demography of media owners or media producers) for there can be diversity of ownership in the media without significant

diversity in the content of the media and the audiences it serves. Full diversity in the media should cover the whole value chain, from ownership through media producers, to the content (or presentations of social reality) they produce, to the audiences that consume. In relation to content it is not only an editorial and programming focus and perspectives that are important but also – in a multilingual or diverse linguistic context like South Africa – the range of languages that are used across different media platforms. The range of images or representations is also of critical importance to full media diversity, especially in visual media. It is also true to say that in a society some can enjoy both a plurality and a diversity of the media available, yet some can have a much leaner media diet that is only pluralistic. So there can be diversity for some and a plurality for others.

## Diversity of media ownership

On the face of it, the South African media landscape is both pluralistic and diverse. But this appearance is deceptive because some forms of ownership are more dominant, control larger parts of the media system, and carry influence that is disproportionate demographically but congruent with the distribution of power in society. The print media sector is dominated by a few companies that produce print media products which are targeted at and appeal to different or diverse audiences yet do not have the same levels of quality information. Often, the quality, papers which carry informative and analytical journalism necessary for the informed citizens of a democracy are targeted at educated, affluent and urban markets. The less-educated, who are often also the poor, are provided with papers with lesser quality information and tabloid journalism with generous doses of the sensational and mystical which, while entertaining, do little to raise the critical faculties of their readers and their ability to engage critically with the concerns of their society.

The largest circulation daily, the *Daily Sun*, is a tabloid leading every day with headlines that could win a prize for fantasy. This paper is also the cheapest and therefore accessible to the majority of people who cannot afford to spend a lot of money on information. Its popularity is therefore partly because it is the only choice available for some, especially working class people. In this instance one cannot speak about plurality. There is only one mainstream widely accessible paper at that price. To be sure, the *Daily Sun* does have different types of content – not just the bizarre and amazing – but this is diversity



within a paper that does not question the social order and the ideological underpinnings of policy choices. Instead, the *Daily Sun* limits itself to questioning the conduct of the authorities and their management of public affairs.

These large print media companies (until the very recent change of ownership of Independent Newspapers to a black-led consortium) were and are white-owned, often also having a majority white management and senior editorial staff. Their major titles are in English and Afrikaans even though these are not the home languages of the majority of the population. Independent Newspapers does publish newspapers that are popular (and thus commercially viable) with readers in isiZulu in KwaZulu-Natal, where isiZulu is the dominant language. What this example shows is that diversity in the use of languages in print media is often a commercial consideration, and is not motivated by the needs of citizens.

South Africa does not yet, after 20 years of democracy, have black-owned commercially viable and profitable print media companies that publish several major titles although the recent purchase of the Independent Group by Sekunjalo has changed this. Many of the other major print media companies have black shareholders in some form or other, especially as black empowerment partners, and employ highly qualified and experienced, accomplished and award-winning black and women editors, managers and journalists. Black editors and journalists, like their white counterparts, have shown themselves to be strong and even strident defenders of editorial and programming independence. The presence of black editors and women in media structures has contributed to both pluralism and diversity. But it is important to note that no race demographic is all-determining when it comes to media diversity and pluralism.

But there is a relationship between ownership and control which creates a glass ceiling. This contradiction of excellence in black skills in journalism and media management often causes some to argue that ownership does not matter or is inconsequential. But the occasional occurrence of dismissal of black editors, journalists and managers over the last 20 years confirms that the demography of ownership does matter. Owners do not only have the power to allocate resources, set editorial policy and direction, but also – crucially – to hire and fire editorial and management staff. Majority black ownership in print media was, until the buyout by the Sekunjalo led consortium of Independent Newspapers South Africa (then a 100 per cent foreign owned profitable company) limited to the ownership of the *Mail & Guardian* by a black Zimbabwean, Trevor Ncube, who also publishes newspapers in Zimbabwe, and the plethora of community newspapers outside the major urban centres that are struggling to survive and of which most are unlikely ever to achieve commercial viability, let alone sustainability. These community papers often serve black communities in small areas. A key factor here is that ownership diversity is difficult

to achieve for media that are commercially driven. Their ability to survive depends on astute management; and, to some extent, how historically political factors have shaped the media landscape and the economy. It can be argued that the demographic colour of the market forces is white in the sense that racial discrimination privileged whites in the economy.

The most successful media company, Naspers, which publishes a range of newspapers in Afrikaans and English including the largest circulation daily the *Daily Sun* targeted at the lower end of the market, is a descendant of Nasionale Pers. Nasionale Pers was historically close to the nationalist apartheid government and benefited from some of its regulatory

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measures which have proved to be a bonus and advantage in the post-apartheid era. This closeness constituted support for the apartheid philosophy and its implementation. Naspers's licence for subscription television has given it the advantage to dominate subscription television in South Africa and Africa. On the back of this experience the company has been able to take advantage of new developments in digital technology and the Internet to access investment opportunities in Russia, China and Brazil which are large markets. Today these investments make a major contribution to its income and profits. In the post-apartheid context Naspers is making a contribution to media pluralism and diversity of the broader landscape in its own way.

In contrast, black owned papers which supported the liberation struggles, like *New Nation* and *Sowetan*, were casualties of the post-apartheid media landscape in different ways. *New Nation* simply died. The *Sowetan* tried to adapt to the new commercial environment so as not to die but ended up the stable of a media company that has some black shareholders but is not black controlled. Times Media Limited, publisher of the largest circulation Sunday paper the *Sunday Times* is one of the major media companies. As part of this stable The *Sowetan* has also lost some of the essence that made it connect to the inhabitants of Soweto, and now targets only some segments of that community as part of its commercial strategy.

It is worth pointing out that the ANC-led government has (for some good reasons like attracting investment) not been as opposed to foreign ownership and control of print media as it has been in the traditionally more regulated broadcast environment.

## Diversity in the airwaves

The broadcast environment appears on the face of it to be a story of diversity of ownership

that does not exist in print media. The largest broadcaster is the SABC, a publicly owned broadcaster with four television channels and 18 radio stations. There is a privately-owned commercial sector with some degree of black ownership. E-tv, the second largest broadcaster after the SABC, has significant black ownership and control, including ownership by union investment companies.

However, companies with white ownership such as Primedia are significant players in the radio space with radio stations like Radio 702 that pull in large audiences and are influential through a talk-radio format. New black-owned entrants in the different provinces have diversified ownership and are a direct result of policy and regulatory measures to open up the media space to historically disadvantaged individuals, social groups and communities.

The emergence of a community radio sector is also a significant marker of ownership diversification in post-apartheid South Africa. The broadcast sector can claim to have greater diversity of ownership than any other media sector in South Africa today, but the bugbear of commercial imperatives has affected it as well, so while ownership might be fairly diverse it does not mean that content is necessarily diverse. Neither does the lack of a direct correlation between ownership diversity and content diversity mean that ownership does not matter. It simply points to a factor that constrains ownership diversity.

Black-owned broadcast media struggle with commercial viability and long-term sustainability to varying degrees. It is true that management ability and experience in crafting commercial strategies is an important factor to consider when assessing viability and sustainability – so is the general economic environment and management of the economy in cases where media are dependent on the market for survival. The SABC's and the community sector's content is influenced by commercial concerns in ways that curtail or limit their respective roles as

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sources of general public and community information in the broadest sense of the word.

The film exhibition sector (cinemas) in South Africa also demonstrates lack of diverse ownership and is often part of larger media companies that are white-owned or dominated and controlled.

## Diversity of and in media content

Content is what the audience consumes, and the audience is often unaware of ownership. Nor do audiences choose media products because of the demography of ownership, even though ownership is one of the key factors that shape content. The demographics of ownership do not, on their own, influence diversity of and in content. In short, white-owned or black-owned companies cannot simply produce content for their racial or social group, especially in a market-driven media system. What matters is what audiences attractive to commercial sponsors – and even public entities, including government or advertisers – are deemed to want or need.

A market-driven system where commercial strategies are a matter of survival and are also profitable has several effects which undermine diversity of and in media content. There is a need for some content to have to meet – to some degree – the test of commercial support. Then, over time these commercially supported forms of content become dominant and often define what is seen as the norm within content and what has proved to be commercially successfully.

As scholars of the relationship between media and democracy have pointed out, content or information necessary for the citizens of a democracy to know and exercise their rights should not be subject to tests of commercial acceptability in order to be circulated in the public domain. For South Africa, which most agree has one of the best constitutions in the world and media policy and regulatory documents firmly committed to diversity and intended to create a new society, diversity of and in content

is critically important. Inclusivity, vibrancy and the sustainability of democracy are not possible if the political suppression of diversity of and in content which existed during apartheid is now replaced by commercially-driven censorship and licensing.

How do the market and commercial imperatives curtail or limit and undermine diversity of and in media content in the South African media landscape?

## A market-driven system where commercial strategies are a matter of survival and are also profitable has several effects which undermine diversity of and in media content.

First, they often limit owners who might wish to serve social groups that are not traditional or profitable audiences. Although the black Sekunjalo consortium bought Independent Newspapers South Africa it does not follow that their newspaper will broaden the content, audiences and views and perspectives of their papers. Commercial imperatives might dictate that the owners keep to urban readers of certain levels of income and largely those who can read English, except for the two successful titles they publish in KwaZulu-Natal, including the daily *Isolezwe*. So, contrary to the current discourse about Dr Iqbal Survé's threat to editorial independence, the greater long-term threat is the discipline of the market. Independent and Dr Survé might find that their papers have to keep supporting economic policies that have contributed to growing inequalities that disproportionately affect black people, women and the youth. Independent might continue an editorial line whose ideological influences were as if the papers were still owned by a foreigner who is part of an economic system that promotes European and North American ways of shaping the economy and society.

Second, market-driven media subject to strong commercial imperatives limit voices and views to the elite segment of society which colours the perspective represented in the media. In turn, public debate and influence on public policy is skewed. Despite being owned by trade union investment companies, e-tv does not have content that could be said to be aligned, or even sympathetic, to the left-wing or socialist views of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). Instead e-tv's programming is typical of commercially-driven privately owned television stations. It promotes the values consistent with capitalism, individualism and consumerism, and much of its entertainment

Third, lack of diversity of and in content also lessens media influence on the public and the government until, as in South Africa, the government believes that according to electoral outcomes it has more support among the voters than that is reflected in the media. The media is then marginal to the majority of the public. This might account for why, despite strong criticisms of the performance of the ANC government, this has no effect on their electoral appeal and predictions of reduced support have so far not been reflected in election outcomes. This situation does not serve the long-term interests of building a new society and a democracy.

Fourth, media content often exhibits a disproportionate allocation of space and voice to issues, concerns and interests of the affluent and elite in society. This is a limitation of the diversity of content and in content. The media does not carry very much content on issues to do with the transformation of South Africa's socio-economic landscape and in particular poverty, unemployment and inequality which is critical and central to creating a new society. Where these issues are covered, the focus and perspective is largely about the implications for business and the self-interest of the elite in ensuring social stability. The media does not

frame the issues from the perspective of the poor and the constitutional imperative to create a just and equal society. This lack of balance is evidence that the media can be said to reinforce social inequality instead of questioning it and creating space for debates on how to achieve equality.

Where inequality, poverty and unemployment are given space they are framed as threats to the affluent and a problem, not as challenges that require social transformation, carrying the implication that self-interest should move society to address the problem. Such a framing favours taking ameliorative or containment approaches



Media diversity is about serving diverse audiences and addressing their needs and wants. Print media start-ups have been supported but with limited budget available none have emerged as daily newspapers.

fare is sourced from the capitals of capitalism in the West and consequently depicts the lives of Americans and Europeans rather than of South Africans. A market-driven system often simply reduces the range of voices, even if it gives access to popular voices able to speak about popular discontents and ideas. There is no democratisation of public discourse but instead a kind of marginalisation of alternative and dissenting views. The result is that even the representative views of the elected government can become defensive, and its action paralysed, and this phenomenon often manifests itself in what is seen as government hostility to the media.

to social transformation and not rethinking social arrangements.

A glaring lack of diversity of and in media content is in the fictional audiovisual media on television and in the cinemas. The dominant fictional material, especially films seen even on SABC channels, is imported from North America and Europe, especially the UK because of the legacy of British colonialism. The point is not that we should not see film from these regions of the world but that they should form part of a diversity of content and in content in our media landscape. Media scholars have argued correctly that the audiovisual, because of its creative representation of social realities, has an influence on how people understand themselves and their circumstances. The more people see themselves, and people like themselves, in circumstances like theirs, the greater the influence. The audiovisual also influences the ways in which people think and gives them ideas of how to tackle their circumstances. A preponderance, or dominance, of film that depicts other societies deprives audiences of the opportunity to see representations of themselves and contributes to lack of affirmation and to undermining their own cultures including critical reflection of their cultures. Film is an important resource for self-realization, building confidence and generating creativity sparked by one's own environment in the broadest sense of the word. South Africa and Africa have had the misfortune of being represented through their worst challenges: poverty, war and disease and instead of a mix of the positive and negative things that happen.

Policy and regulatory frameworks for broadcasting and the audiovisual sector more broadly, have attempted to create diversity through regulating the amount of local content, and there is a local television and film production sector struggling to make a mark and provide programmes, films and documentaries that seek to tell our own stories. Soap operas (or 'soapies') have large audiences and resonate with people's lives. There is nothing wrong in adopting this genre but it cannot be the only popular way of telling stories of everyday life. We need to create genuine diversity, to also

create media forms that tell a wider range of stories about the 'new' South Africa. After all, the subtle messages of the soapies genre are underpinned by values promoted by a consumerist lifestyle – rarely do soapies base stories on the hard side of life or explore rural settings.

South Africa is also a location for production by Northern production companies producing stories about themselves using our locations. To be sure, this generates much needed economic value from the services, employment and goods purchased. The point, though, is that we have the locations in which we could produce works that could tell our story to ourselves and the world. Film and television is almost exclusively in English, even in local programmes – another element of lack of or limited diversity. The language factor limits the range of voices and views, and even creativity, for those who are not necessarily first language speakers of English. It is true, however, that there are creative ways in which local television programmes, including soapies, use multiple languages as a way of capturing the real-life behaviour of South Africans, who switch languages in different situations and for different topics.

Radio is probably the medium that not only demonstrates broader ownership diversity but also diversity of and within content. For starters, it is the medium where more African languages are used. The majority of South Africans have an African language as their home language, and the Constitution's recognition of 11 official languages is given expression through radio, partly because of the SABC's African language stations and the community radio stations that use the languages of their communities. The mere use of South African languages other than English and Afrikaans introduces a wider diversity of topics and issues as well as voices. Radio phone-in programmes and debates definitely gives South Africans who do not have space in newspapers as analysts, experts, officials and columnists a voice without the constraints imposed by lack of high levels of education and command of the English language. (It does not follow, though, that there is necessarily a wider diversity of perspectives and ideological views;



conservative views, even those that go against the spirit of the Constitution, can sometimes be expressed in African languages and justified on grounds of culture and tradition – as if all culture and tradition are by definition good.)

## Diversity of audiences, and audience needs and wants

Media diversity should also be about serving diverse audiences and their diverse needs and wants. Audiences can only choose from the media menu available to them. That is why diversity of and in the media is so critically important. Theoretically, audience needs and wants should lead to media pluralism and also diversity but in reality not all media needs and wants will result in this desirable outcome, especially in a market-based and commercially driven-system. If media diversity is a critical factor in the creation of a new society lack of diversity of and in the media is a hindrance to its realisation.

Quite clearly, given the lack of diversity of ownership and content that is restricted to English and Afrikaans (except for newspapers in isiZulu (*Isolezwe; Isolezwe NgoMgqibelo, Isolezwe NgeSonto and Ilanga*) and the commercial imperatives that restrict newspaper circulation to urban areas) the mainstream print media is not adequately catering for the needs of all South Africans. The success of the isiZulu newspapers raises the question of whether there is a gap in the market, and a market in the gap, for newspapers in Sesotho and isiXhosa, languages spoken by a significantly large numbers of South African. It raises the question of whether the market is conservative in its linguistic preferences or whether there is a lack of commercial creativity and risk-taking by print media entrepreneurs and prospective entrants. Part of the problem might be lack of support by financial institutions who believe that the return on media investments on untested products is too risky and would rather lend money to those who speculate in the financial markets.

Only the MDDA has supported print media start-ups and community radio stations but, with its limited budget, cannot fund large projects like the launch of a daily paper in Sesotho. Print media is important because it develops reading skills that are part of a set of critical analytical skills necessary for active citizenship in a democracy and which include engaging with information and producing information, as well as writing. There is no doubt that the acquisition of skills requires the reception of information in a variety of forms including the written word. Some of the content in the large circulation quality print media is not of general interest – there is more content on investment, the stock market, shares, tourism, travel and interior décor in newspapers that are positioned as general papers than there is about concerns of the general public, in particular changes to their social conditions.

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The popularity of soapies is testimony to the fact that people would like to see local productions that affirm them when they see people like themselves. This need is unfulfilled. The commercial cinemas specialise in the Hollywood fare and ignore films from

the Indian film industry ('Bollywood') and the Nigerian equivalent ('Nollywood') that on DSTV appear more popular with broader sections of the public.

## Deepening and sustaining diversity: What needs to be done?

The government needs to take further steps to build on the successes of pluralisation and, to a lesser extent, depending on the media sector, diversification, that accompanied the advent of democracy in 1994. Policy and regulatory reviews are an urgent task. In the broadcasting sector it is clear that increased funding of the public broadcaster, the SABC

(easily, by audience reach, the largest media organisation in South Africa) and strengthened accountability to the broader public is necessary. It is with more public funding without editorial and programming strings attached, and more accountability to the public rather than government, that the SABC can diversify its content to ensure better news coverage of the provinces and enjoy the means to produce more local content internally and to source it from independent producers. The SABC ought to lead and be the home of diversity of and in content, and to dispel notions that it does not enjoy full independence from advertisers and the government of the day. The oddity of a public broadcaster that is funded largely from commercial advertising and sponsorships is an impediment to diversity of its content. It reinforces the dominance of commercial influences on the media.

The community radio sector needs resources to be sustainable because the reality is that the number of licensed stations is not necessarily the number of stations on air, or of stations with content relevant to the community. Such community stations carry programming that can be described as 'mini-me' of commercial radio stations. If community radio programming or its content lacks diversity, the whole idea of a distinct sector playing a different but complementary role is undermined – and it also means that the policy goal of a diversified broadcasting sector is a mirage. Targeted funding and resources to community stations will ensure that this relatively new sector, vital to local participation in determining the affairs of communities and indeed participatory democracy at the national level, becomes a reality.

The print media requires attention in three ways. First, the government should use its regulatory power to encourage the financial sector to support print media start-ups, especially for newspapers in African languages.

Second, it should use its advertising power to support a broader range of papers including new newspapers that might be launched in African languages but in doing so the government must be mindful of the constitutional guarantee of editorial freedom and media freedom. Greater diversity of editorially independent print media is a potentially good platform for disseminating government programmes and broadening public opinion. Third, it needs substantially to increase the budget of the MDDA so that it can fund large projects such as launching national daily newspapers in African languages.

Quite clearly the government also needs to ensure that the policy and regulatory measures that are necessary to take advantage of the digital revolution are an urgent task that has implications for media diversity. Digital migration from analogue systems holds the potential for a new era of channel multiplicity that has hitherto been limited by spectrum availability. The danger could be that we simply have pluralism of channels without diversity of content. Strengthening the public broadcaster and providing funds for the production of radio and television programmes and films by South Africans is vital. The process so far has been marked by too many starts and stops which undermine media diversity. We must take advantage of technological developments, not lag behind them.

In conclusion, it can be said that the South African media landscape is definitely pluralistic in ways that are both good and bad. To the extent that the pluralism is good it has created a platform for diversity; there is some degree of diversity which requires a shot of policy and regulatory reform to give the diversity sustainable momentum.