

**HOW THE SOUTH AFRICAN PRINT MEDIA COVER ECONOMICS NEWS: A
STUDY OF INFLATION NEWS IN FOUR NEWSPAPERS 1999 – 2001**

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MOMELEZI MICHAEL KULA

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ABSTRACT

There is a considerable amount of literature arguing that economics and business journalism is growing. This subfield of journalism is important as economics issues impact on everyday lives of the people. Media have an important role to inform people about the economy and give them a voice to take part in public debates. The down side though is that economics journalism is criticised for not serving the public well in this aspect. Evidence suggests that economics journalism lost its critical character and that there is closer in economics debates.

Using content analysis, this study examines coverage of inflation as reported by South African print media. Three major findings emerged: 1) Evidence shows that there are a variety of cases of inflation. 2) There are also similarities among newspapers on what they view as causing inflation. 3) However, media do not draw sources from all sectors of society. The elite, who are educated people and government officials, are over-accessed while the ordinary citizens - although also affected by inflation – are marginalized. Company and government sources top source lists in the media.

It is argued that sources play an important role in shaping the news content. They do so by identifying problems and prescribing potential solutions. They set parameters and define terms of reference. However, media also play a mediating role. They do so by selecting sources and structuring sources in stories. They may choose to quote or report what their sources say and even comment on it.

This study concludes that in South Africa ordinary citizens have no voices in economics debates. Media used bureaucratic sources only and that is a consonant agenda on inflation coverage amongst newspapers. The heavy reliance on bureaucratic sources and the exclusion of some sectors of society in sources lists raises questions about impartiality of these sources on issues relating to their organisations and institutions. These are not viable sources that could provide information that could expose abuse of power.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Choice of research

The research problem of this study is how a salient economic issue – inflation – is reported in South African print media. Gavin and Doddard (1998) note the importance of analysis of media coverage of inflation as an issue of interest to the public and one perceived to influence government policy. For instance, inflation targeting in SA provides an objective for monetary policy (Mboweni 2000). In turn, monetary policy drives social programmes as well as the delivery of social services. It is therefore important to examine how South African media report inflation, and especially what media reports show as causes.

How the research on economics journalism and inflation specifically was chosen is an outcome of a number of considerations. The issues are all interrelated and often overlap. These are also interesting issues to interrogate since they are both central to every citizen's life. I will group these considerations into six broad themes: (1) Centrality of economics to people's everyday lives. (2) The link between economics and politics. (3) South Africa's new democracy. This relates to economic-political link and people participation in debates and policy formation, noting especially the introduction of inflation targeting. (4) The growing coverage of economics news. (5) Recent business scandals and critique of economics journalism. (6) The lack or scarcity of scholarly research in this field and its importance for journalists, academics and trainers, governments and people in general.

First - centrality of economics in everyday life. People's experiences are important in that they connect economic activities and social life to politics. People do not only have to read about their economic situation in books and newspapers, they have first-hand experience when they do shopping and cannot buy the same amount of goods and services with the same amount they did two months back; When they cannot find jobs; And when their house bonds soar and tax increase. However, as argued by Parker (1997: 3) "the press is the single most important source they (people) have for information about the economy – and explanations for its performance... our personal experience is only an uncertain drop in the sea of economic actions and assumptions around us".

Second - the link between politics and economics - people's economic experiences. Included here is the way such issues as tax cuts or increase, poverty etc, impact on people's attitudes and preferences of governments. Political parties use their policy positions to win support while voters choose which political party to vote for based on a particular political party's economic policy approach they think will bring positive economic spin offs. As Gavin et al (1998: 451) argue, "the economy is a hotly disputed realm in all political systems, and economic turbulence is linked in successive studies to political support for parties". However, although it is expected the media play "some sort of mediating role in the relationship between the condition of the economy and political support, relatively little systematic empirical research in this area has in fact been undertaken" (Sanders et al 1993: 211). In South Africa there are no substantive studies on media treatment of economic issues.

Third - the recent political developments in South Africa and the country's young democracy. The link between economics and politics is important in a democratic dispensation, especially when it concerns people's participation in policy issues. As such, the level of citizen participation can be seen as one of the measures of democracy. Participation is manifest in public debates, which accommodate everyone by being open and accessible. South Africa as a new democracy is still going through the transformation phase, which means a lot of policies are being formed¹. It is important to understand how the South African public participate in the processes that result in policies. That is, their inclusion or exclusion in public debates on a particular subject.

Fourth - the increase in coverage of economics globally. Over the past two decades there has been a notable increase in economics news (for example, see Nieman Reports 1991 Vol. 45, 2000 Vol. 54). This increase corresponds with increased economic sophistication and change of focus from primary and secondary sectors to

¹ The 1994 installation of the government of South Africa (as headed by the African National Congress) ended a period of apartheid that had created severe unemployment among the African population. Consequently, the government established an initial expansionary policy designed to improve South Africa's economic and social standing. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) focused primarily on job creation through public works programmes such as water supply, sewage works, and educational attainment, and other social-economic indicators. The Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR), established in 1996, however, primarily concentrated on reducing government deficits and inflation while improving the rate of economic growth through privatization. (Diamond, Manning, Vasquez and Whitaker 2003:2)

tertiary sector activities. There is also an increase in global movement of goods and services. The increase in economics news therefore appears to be in response to the growth of cross-border economic activities, which implies involvement of foreigners and foreign factors in domestic activities and debates.

Fifth - the recent spate of business scandals and criticism of economics journalism elsewhere in the world is at the centre of contemporary economics journalism debates. This is due to the fact that these scandals and criticisms are currently shaping economics journalism. Indeed, a lot is at stake for the media as this impacts on credibility especially this specific field of journalism.² There has been a great deal of criticism of economics journalism in the past two decades. Most of this criticism is not based on systematic studies in journalism and media studies. Some of it comes from people who feel hard done by the media or newswriters and those who are dissatisfied by direction the profession is moving.

Lastly, a substantive research into the state of economics journalism can assist in locating these issues in South Africa. This would help us understand the extent to which these criticisms are applicable to South Africa, and the need for alternative explanations. Such research could help mediaworkers and trainers to better understand this genre of journalistic practice. Ordinary citizens, government and policy-makers could also benefit from a systematic research in this area as they consume media products and are affected by the media coverage.

Purpose of the research

This study investigates trends and patterns in reporting of inflation as an economic issue in South African national daily newspapers. The purpose is to get an understanding of pertinent issues around the economics journalism field. It has been indicated above that economics journalism has grown considerably over the past three decades, together with criticisms that have been levelled against it. There is a need to undertake a substantive look at the criticisms and the claims that this field is growing. The study will test six hypotheses that are spelt out in the methodology chapter. The

The recent Enron and Worldcom scandals that shook American journalism and world financial markets are not the first business scandals to rock economics journalism. They are reminiscent of the Savings and Loan, and the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) scandals that occurred in the early 1990s, which sparked debates and interrogation of economics journalism.

study looks at inflation coverage in an attempt to get an appreciation of who informs economics news agenda. Using content analysis, it seeks to identify and expose trends and patterns in economics coverage. The overarching purpose is to contribute to debates on media access as sources and the way media use sources.

Since one of the goals is to deepen our understanding of economics news coverage, this study assesses the contribution to economics news agenda by analysing causal attributes for inflation. This entails analysis of inflation stories' sources. The study will endeavour to understand who the media quote as sources for these inflation stories and what these sources say causes inflation. Findings will inform debates on social construction and issues around voices of 'primary definers' (Hall 1978), news sources, and news production practices (Schudson 1996). It is inspired by Hall (1978) concept of signification, that the media relationship with primary sources gives them a crucial role in producing definitions of those who have access to the media as accredited sources. Involved here is the ideology of signifying events in a particular way.

Limitations

The study covers a period of three years making time a limiting factor. The number of articles for analysis over a limited period of time could create pressure which if unmanaged could affect the quality of the work and creating reliability problems. However, with proper planning and good time management, I will make sure that quality is not compromised. Also, to ensure that time pressure does not affect results, I will be consistent in coding an analysis. Resources are another limiting factor. There is only one coder for the study - the author of the study. Although the amount of work could be overwhelming, there is a good side to this. It will ensure consistence in coding. The other resource issue is lack of access to sophisticated statistical programmes such as Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysing data. This is however, not a necessity although it could make analysis quicker and more substantive. It does not have implications for results or quality of the work.

Scope of research

The study is conducted on print media in South Africa. It is specifically done on national daily newspapers. While the study is conducted on print media, this should

not be seen as limiting conclusions about the nature of economics coverage to print media only. Indeed, conclusions could be applied to radio and television, as there is not much difference between media institutions in terms of where journalists look for stories and whom they view as credible sources, which is the focus of the study.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter Two looks at the media as an important component of democracy. Accessibility of the media both to citizens as audiences and sources is central. Equally important is the equitable access, which guards against certain individuals from being disadvantaged in contributing and influencing outcomes in political and policy debates. Attention is placed in the media in Africa media, the reason being that, conditions are different compared to the First world. This is with respect to the environment in which the media operate, that is politics and socio-economic conditions. Secondly, it is the issues of ownership of media organisations. Thirdly, it is the question of media workers, their adherence to ethical standards of the profession. It is this conceived peculiarity of Third World media that some writers such as Curran and Park (2000) have called for different treatment and role of media in the Third world. An important point to note, however, is the functionality of the media in a democracy and its universal equal access by all. What this chapter does is highlight standards that the media has to meet and role to play in a democracy. The argument here suggests that control of the media impact on media role in a democracy.

Chapter Three focuses on the role or work of media workers in their attempts to fulfil media role as an institution. The issue here is their role and how it impacts and results in the meeting or failure to meet standards or media role. Discussions point that media favour the ruling class. News is argued to be a social construct, an outcome of interaction between newswriters, media owners and sources within institutional arrangements that impact in the processes. Objectivity as an attainable goal is disputed and even dismissed.

Chapter Four pays attention to contemporary debates in economics journalism. The chapter illustrates criticism of a closure in economics debate and exclusion of certain

groups of peoples. It looks at the state of economics journalism. It shows the importance of this subfield and its impact on politics.

Chapter Five discusses research methodology. It examines content analysis as a research method employed in this study. The focus is the justification of the use of this particular method instead of another. The value of the chapter is that it provides a guide for a similar research to test reliability of the findings.

Chapter Six discusses results and their analysis. This section forms the core of this thesis. The point is to present findings of the research in light of what is discussed in the literature review chapters. Through analysis of the findings in this chapter, I will be able to make inferences on the applicability of debates on news production in the South African context.

Chapter Seven concludes the research. It presents conclusion and inferences based on findings in literature review, content analysis and the research as a whole. It will state whether or not the research achieved its goal of deepening our understanding of the nature of economics news and contribute to debates on news production processes. Also this chapter gives an indication as to where future research should be done. Finally, the last section provides a list of references used in the study.

Chapter 2

Media and Democracy

Introduction

This chapter looks at the relationship between media and democracy. The two concepts are linked. Media is seen as central to democracy, as Dahlgren (1995:2) puts it, “the health of democracy in the course of the 20th century has more and more been linked to the health of systems of communication though of course democracy cannot be reduced to issues of the media.” For this reason, it is important to include this chapter, to discuss how these two concepts relate. The focus is on the role of media and their importance in a democracy. The first section provides a definition of democracy. The second section looks at the conceptualisation of the public sphere. The third section provides a discussion on the African media and looks into the media in some of African countries.

Defining democracy

Democracy is an ambiguous concept that needs to be treated with qualification. As Keane (1991:168) puts it,

The struggle to control the definition of democracy is an intrinsic feature of modern societies. And yet democracy is not a word which can be made to mean whatever we choose it to mean. Democracy is best understood as a system of procedural rules with normative implications.

Dahlgren (1995:2), concurs arguing that,

Democracy is one of our most persuasive and all purpose hurrah words... The only catch, of course, is that democracy can mean quite different things to different people; the vision it embodies is far from unitary. Moreover as societal and political conditions change, so too can definition of democracy – criteria found to be too ambitious can be modified.

The point in the two quotes is that while democracy has no fixed meaning, that does not mean it can mean anything, and that certain conditions have to be met for a government to qualify as democratic.

Democracy is identified with the majority principle in which the will of the majority of citizens rules (Lively 1975). In large industrial societies the rule of the masses in a

direct manner by actively taking part in decision-making on all public issues presents a difficulty. As a way of getting around the difficulties, there are mechanisms of citizen participation in their governance. Broadly, there are two types of citizen rule in a democracy, participative and representative. For instance, Keane (1991:69) notes, “direct democracy, the participation of citizens in the agora, is suited only to small states... modern democracy requires both mechanisms of representation and the institutional division of state and civil society”. Meanwhile, writers such as Hacker (1996) who support participatory democracy argue for structures that widen citizen involvement. They argue that increased political participation, involvement in decision-making, and interactivity at all levels of the political system, enhances democracy.

Active participation in political affairs and decision-making is central to a democratic regime. As Shmitter et al (1996:51) argue that, “all regimes have rulers and a public realm but only to the extent that they are democratic do they have citizens”. A citizen is a person who takes part in political decision-making (Lively 1975). Dahl (1989:109) takes it further pointing out that, in a democracy “throughout the process of making binding decisions, citizens ought to have an adequate opportunity and an equal opportunity, for expressing their preferences”. The point here is that the quality of citizen participation is as important as participation. It is important that citizens are treated as equals and their contributions be viewed as such because democracy is “a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens” (Dahl 1971:2).

As there is no one definition of democracy, a state or government to be called democratic has to fulfil certain conditions that are seen to be indicative of democratic processes. Popular participation in whatever form is one of such indicators as democracy is about power of the people. It’s about institutions of popular influence, procedures and accountability (Parry et al 1994). Democracy is about institutional structures, systems and practices in the exercise of power (Berger 2000), that are manifest in the rule of law, respect for human rights, accountability to the citizens and periodical elections. As Keane (1991:168) argues, “democracy comprises procedures for arriving at collective decisions in a way which secures the fullest possible and qualitatively best participation of interested parties”.

There are minimal procedures that have to be met for any regime to be termed democratic and Dahl (1998) offers a list of those conditions. Two of such conditions are, the citizens' right to express themselves in political matters without the fear of being punished, and their right to seek alternative sources of information. This puts unrestricted sources of information and space for expression at the centre of democracy.

As democracy is the rule of the people, they can only do so if they are capacitated to engage in decision-making processes. This requires people to be informed of what is happening around them socially, economically and politically. "Each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating... the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests" (Dahl 1989:112) They have to be aware of current debates on policy issues. For people to take part they should be able to express their views and concerns on issues at hand. Through public deliberation people take part in their governance in a democracy. As Page (1996:1) states, "public deliberation is essential to democracy, in order to ensure that the public's policy preferences – upon which democratic decisions are based - are informed, enlightened, and authentic." For public deliberation to be effective, citizens should be able to engage in rational critical debates what Held (1997) sees as a pre-condition of good citizenship.

In short, section illustrates that democracy is a system of governance based on the rule of the people. While theorists do not agree on how this could be done, there is no disagreement on equality of citizens and their active participation in debates. Democracy is therefore seen as a system of governance based on procedural rules and norms that seek to include every citizen. This understanding of democracy is important in locating the role of coverage of economics news as an issue that impact on citizen participation in debates and decision-making. The next section will discuss the notion of public sphere as a platform through which citizens can actively take part in political activities as they play their role as citizens in a democracy.

Conceptualizing the Public Sphere

Democracy requires people to be actively involved as it is the rule of the people (Dahl 1989). Acting on the mandate of the people, representatives make decisions that

would serve the public interest. People need a platform to debate, set the agenda and form public opinion on issues that representatives decide on their behalf in parliaments. Democracy, as noted by Dahlgren (1995), participating entails mechanisms or channels that could be used by the people in voicing opinion and formulating public agenda. The public sphere is therefore the platform whereby people come together, discuss issues and form public opinion and shape policy preferences.

As Dahlgren (1995:7-8) argues, “since the scale of modern society does not allow more than relatively small numbers of citizens to be physically co-present, the media have become the chief institution of the public sphere.” As he puts it, the public sphere is “a discursive, institutional topographical space – where people in their role as citizens have access to what can be metaphorically called societal dialogues which deals with question of common concerns” (Dahlgren 1995:9). The public sphere concept has its origin from Habermas who defines it as,

The public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relation in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. (Habermas 1989:27)

The discerning argument in Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) is the development in history of a space where private individuals came together to form a public body free from state and private interest. Through the use of reason they engaged in rational critical political debates to influence the state. “The public sphere was realized not in the republic of scholars alone but in the public use of reason by all who were adept at it” (Habermas 1989:105). For Habermas, he requirement of use of reason and being free from constraints in debate necessitated those taking part to be owners of property.

Only property-owning private people were admitted to a public engaged in critical political debate, for their autonomy was rooted in the sphere of commodity exchange and hence was joined to the interest in its preservation as a private sphere (Habermas 1989:110).

However, the content of debates was not limited to participants but also directed at the public at large. Although the bourgeois public sphere was exclusionary, public critical debates were open to the public,

The public sphere of the first generations, even when it constituted itself as a specific circle of persons, was conscious of being part of a larger public. Potentially it was always also a publicist body, as its discussions did not need to remain internal to it but could be directed at the outside world (Habermas 1989:37).

As capitalism progressed together with the transformation of organs of information especially the emergence of mass communication, the public sphere lost its rational critical component. State and private organizations penetrated the public sphere with the state penetrating the private realm and private organization assuming public power, “refeudalising” the public sphere (Habermas 1989).

The Habermasian concept of public sphere has been criticised as being elitist with its exclusionary nature and the elevation of rational critical debate. It is also criticised for exaggerating the potential of the idealised bourgeois public sphere to emancipate people from state and private organisations (Calhoun 1992). Calhoun (1992) argues that Habermas overestimated degeneration of the public sphere. He argues that consequences of mass media are not as wholly negative as Habermas suggests, there may be room for alternative democratic media strategies. Hallin (1994:2-3) rejects Habermas’ portrayal of the history of journalism as decline of the golden age of the public sphere, arguing that, “replacement of reading public that debated critically about matters of culture by the mass public of culture consumers is confused and ultimately unsustainable.” He argues that the solution to the infiltration of the public sphere by state and private interest lies in professionalisation of journalism to preserve the public sphere. In modern journalism the relationship between media and state is close, but there is a move towards professional autonomy (Hallin 1994). Calhoun also argues that, Habermas fails to address power relations, “the networks of communication, the topography of issues, and the structure of influence of the public sphere except in very general terms of the existence of faction and parties.” (Calhoun 1992:38)

Despite the criticism labelled against the Habermasian conception of the public sphere, it is still important in understanding the link between communication and politics. Garnham (1992) argues that the criticisms do not detract from the continuing virtues of the central thrust of the approach. It provides “a sounder basis for the critical analysis of current developments both in the media and democratic politics and for the analysis and political action necessary to rebuild systems of both communication and representative democracy’ (Garnham 1992: 364).

The conception of the degeneration of the public sphere is important when looking at the problems facing media and democracy. As Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) argue, the role of the media in democracy is to act on behalf of the citizens and offer options for meaningful political choices. However, there are tensions and disparities between democratic ideals and mass media, these “disparities undermine the capacity of the system to serve these democratic ideals” Gurevitch et al (1990:270). These constraints are system-based and resist change. They argue for reconfiguration of democratic media role that could be used to measure performance of journalists (Gurevitch et al 1990:270).

To sum up, this section illustrates that the concept of public sphere as first coined by Habermas is important in understanding the role of an independent space where citizens could come together unhindered by government and private interest, and form public opinion and policy preferences. However, Habermas’ concept of the public sphere has been criticised as being elitist and idealized. Also that it overestimates degeneration of rational critical debates in mass communication. Despite the criticism, the concept is important in understanding the link between communication and politics, even more so, the problem of media regulation, ownership and government interference. The following chapter looks at African media and democracy in light of the concept of the public sphere.

A different perspective for African media

The past decade has seen considerable growth of interest among scholars in African media and democracy (M’Bayo 2000; Curran and Park 2000; Ansah 1991; Berger 2002; 2000; Faringer 1991; Hyden, Leslie and Ogundimu 2002; Ziengler and Asante 1992; Eribo and Jong-Ebot 1997 and Bourgault 1995), central to these writings is the

issue of conceptualising the role of the media from an African perspective. Most argue for the uniqueness of the African polity and its relations with the media. Central to the argument is that the African media situation is not the same as the First World, due to the peculiarity of the developing world's political, social and economic situation. Writers like Berger (2002; 2000) and Curran et al (2000) argue against the universalisation of media perspectives developed from the developed world. These writings seek to put media analysis within a socio-political context. This allows for an interrogation not only of the media but also of the situation in which the media operate together with the concepts that are used to analyse it.

For the African context different as it may be, the concept of the public sphere is still important. In Africa there are other factors that contribute to the decline of the public sphere. As it shall be discussed in this section, threats take the form of government interference, globalisation and deteriorating journalistic standards (M'Bayo 2000). Notwithstanding the importance of the inaccessibility because people could not afford media resources or limited by language or inability to read which are also crucial limiting factors in Africa; focus will be on regulation. It is one of the main factors that deny people access to the public sphere inhibiting freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information.

When applied to the African scenario the concept of public sphere is criticised by some writers. For instance, Blumler (1998:55), argues that the "Habermasian idea of public sphere in which rationality undistorted by interested parties prevail, appears impractically utopian." However, Habermas' concept of transformation of the public sphere is still important and applicable. As argued by Garnham (1992:361) first, for the "focus upon the indissoluble link between institutions and practices of mass communication and the institutions and practices of democratic politics". Second, "focus on the necessary material resource base for any public sphere". Third, "to escape from the simple dichotomy of free market versus state control that dominate so much thinking about media policy". As Garnham (1992:361) points out, Habermas distinguishes the public sphere from both state and market. This is important in interrogating problems created by development of oligopolistic capitalist market and development of modern interventionist welfare states.

In Africa the main issue is regulation of the media and government interference. It is difficult for African media to function without interference from government. There is a strong government presence putting pressure on the media through harassment and censorship (M'Bayo and Mogeke 2000). Writing about Cameroon media, Tahsoh (2000:141) argues that there is no guiding philosophy that informs policy options and approach to media regulation. Policies are a reaction to fear, stability and national development and survival, reflecting government philosophy at the time. The press is seen as a tool for national unity and development as a result subject to highhanded government control. For instance, Tahsoh (2000) argues that in Cameroon there is a fear that the media could serve as a disruptive force if were left uncontrolled. As a result the government have maintained tight control over media since independence.

Onwumechili and Nwanko (2000:201) argue that politicians control journalists and manipulate government press through legal means. The role of government media is more likely to be developmental theory, which means essentially an arm of government used to mobilise people for national goals. Private media that do not toe the government line are forced through laws, regulation and military decrees designed to restrict media freedom. The private media is also to blame. They make wild press attacks and irresponsible partisanship and recklessness (Onwumechili et al 2000).

Development journalism became popular in the 1950s and 1960s following the independence of African states. Musa (1997:133-134) notes that,

The central thrust of development media theory is the idea of the media functioning in partnership with the government to achieve set of goal of rural and national development. To this end, the theory asserts that the media cannot be perceived as an independent watchdog ...Instead, the overriding goal of the media should be the promotion of economic development.

Development journalism has lost ground amongst some media scholars. As it is the government who mobilises development initiatives and often propaganda is filtered through (Berger 2000). Other writers such as Kariithi (1994) and Musa (1997) argue that development journalism is dead. They maintain that it is aimed at securing certain interests, mainly those of politicians seeking re-election. Ultimately, political impact of journalism exceeds the development impact (Berger 2000).

Instead of development journalism, media could provide information that people could use to better their economic conditions. As argued by Kariithi (1996) the role of economics journalism is to improve audience understanding to improve participation in economic process. It is not just providing information but also to propagate economic reform message. It should aim at transforming economic trends to topical issues. The role of African media is to demystify economics developments and demonstrate how they dictate the quality of life. The point Kariithi (1996) drives home is that the role of the media goes beyond providing information; it has an educational and interpretive aspect. This is an echo of the early writings (for example, Kariithi 1995 and Odhiambo 1991) which argue that, in the developing societies, media should ensure popular participation in economic policymaking by reporting and interpreting economics news issues.

Nwanko (2000) argues for a holistic approach to public communications. In an African communication situation there are no clear boundaries among communication elements that are operative. Yet there has been a negation of traditional or indigenous forms of communication in favour of modern public communication. He argues that press problem of politics are specific to nation states within a defined ideology, philosophy and goals within a particular context. How they are managed and solved is dependent on resources available and their effective use. However, in Africa development of new communication technologies opens up weak communication systems to external communication influences. He argues that it is premised upon “African press and politics to forge their own identities based on their context, needs and resources” (Nwanko 2000:20).

In Africa there are differing reports about the role played by the media and much has to do with the media environment within which those media are operating, history and culture of countries and regions. The media environment in this case refers to the atmosphere with regard to government policies, media ownership and to a certain extent media consumption patterns relating to access and literacy. History refers to the past and present politics with respect to types of governments and changes in regimes from colonial, dictatorship, authoritarian and democracy. Culture refers to the

everyday way of life, family and community ties, religion, and how people relate to political, social and economic institutions.

African press is going through the natural phases of growth just as European and American press did. As the societies transform there is hope for improved press conditions (M'Bayo 2000). He argues that democratisation of communication will foster participation and exchange of ideas amongst citizens. The desire to voice one's opinion in a public forum is part of democratic culture. Some of the outcomes of the democratic process in Africa are media expansion and liberalisation of airwaves. The establishment of multiparty politics will encourage this process and where there is no opposition the press will continue to feel the void M'Bayo (2000).

One case is happening in Zimbabwe, where the media take sides in the battle between the ruling party and the opposition, the Zimbabwean media has been politicised and therefore cannot be said to provide a public sphere as they have special interests. State owned media is used as the mouthpiece of the government carrying government propaganda that seek to serve interests of ruling party politicians. Ronning et al (2000:164) quote a monitoring study done by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPC) that shows, between 68 and 80 percent of stories are based on one source and more than half of the stories are characterized as 'the voice of the ruling ZANU (PF)'. The establishment of the private media in Zimbabwe provided an alternative voice for the people. An interesting point about the Zimbabwean private media is that in the absence of a strong opposition that take government and the ruling party to task, the media assumed the responsibility of defending public interest (Ronning et al 2000). The role of the press in a dual legacy of democracy and authoritarianism is to extend the public sphere for unrestricted access, providing a space for democratic action. Ronning et al (2000:171-6) argue that this is what is happening in Zimbabwe,

It is a struggle over maintaining this open space and extending it, which is currently a factor in the conflict between President Mugabe and the ZANU (PF) leadership on the one hand and the independent press on the other.

Conflict between the press and government is important for a healthy democracy. Kasoma (2000:229), writing about Zambian media, argues that "there can be no

democratic government without a free press. Conversely, a free press can only exist where there is democracy. It is also important to remember that the two should coexist in quarrelsome marriage and not in harmony”. However, as Kasoma argues (2000), governments have a problem in dealing with adverse publicity because regardless of the manner they choose to respond they loose out. Also notes that there is a disturbing low rate of truth telling in African journalism. This is the outcome of government harassment and censorship. Well-trained and articulate journalists are forced out of the country leaving behind untrained, irresponsible crop of journalists, resulting in a drop in standards (Kasoma 2000).

Also, as Globalisation becomes more apparent, competition in the industry is intensified and the shift of focus is evident. The increase in speed and supply of media content result in a fall in the value of information and lead to a different role of journalism (Berger 2000). More than ever before journalism has to be critical, analytical and contextual, as Berger 2000 argues, it should guide citizens in the information jungle. However, in reality it is not happening. Journalism is losing its critical watchdog character in the face of competitive market for audiences, driven by the desire by owners to make money. “Watchdogs here become show dogs for their owners” (Berger 2000). Berger is critical of the way the media respond to competitiveness by putting more emphasis on non-journalistic content such as entertainment and sport. News media are making reputations as carriers of sports aimed at scoring large numbers of audiences to sell to advertisers. Journalism is supposed to challenge individualism and political apathy (Berger 2000) producing a critical audience that engages in discussions and thereby participate as citizens in shaping and setting of the public agenda.

The media could not be seen as an interest-free or control-free and universally accessible realm, but as a realm whereby interests are compromised for the sake of finding a common good. If the media as a public sphere is seen in this way, then that could open doors for analysing the nature of the public interests, the compromise and how they impact on the notion of the public sphere, understanding who dominates the public sphere, and who sets the agenda at whose interest? Berger (2002) makes a crucial point that:

The analysis of the public sphere in African countries therefore needs to take into account not just who is excluded but who is included and with what effects...Africa's media does not exist in a sealed compartment but includes much international content... from outside newsmakers, content suppliers and donor funders (Berger 2002:31).

This brings into the fore the question of who dominates the public sphere, who sets the agenda? The issue of power relations within the public sphere is important in understanding the direction in which the African governments are being steered. In short, while some argue that there is a need for a different approach to the role of media in Africa, the concept of the public sphere is still applicable. Media in Africa is characterised by government interference and the influence of market forces that lead to a drop in standards. What is clear though is the importance of the role of the media in a democracy - to provide means for people to take part in public debates by having access to channels of communication to receive information and impart ideas.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter highlighted the importance of the media role in a democracy. It has illustrated that for a political arrangement to be democratic it has to be based on active participation of the people in their governance. This can be achieved provided that there is a public arena within which they can come together unhindered to engage in debates in formation of public opinion. The media is identified as providing such an arena. It is not enough for the media to provide people with information but also be the means through which people disseminate their ideas. It has to be relevant and appropriate so as to be useful in the exercise of their rights as citizens. The chapter illustrated that at the centre of media and democracy is the question of access to means or resources that provide information and enable dissemination of ideas by citizens.

Chapter 3

News production as social construction of reality

Introduction

Chapter Two illustrated that media have a role in democracy, serving as public sphere. It also showed that media role in a democracy diminishes as private organisations and states interfere in the public sphere. The section on Africa illustrated that in Africa the issue of media ownership and control is impacting on the role of media in advancing democracy and that the public sphere is reduced or degenerates as argued by Habermas (1989) as governments in some countries control the media. This chapter argues that the issue of government regulation and control is not the only threat to the role of media and democracy. Another threat comes from within the media themselves. According to sociology of news, the media function in a way that threatens democracy by excluding certain sections of society. The argument here is that in the social construction of reality, procedures and processes are followed in news production, gathering and presentation. The result of the processes is over-access and exclusion of certain groups of society. Consequently, the reality that is presented by media is in accordance with those who happen to have access as sources. The discerning argument in this chapter is that news is not an objective reflection of reality. News is a product of interaction between newswriters, news organisations and other institutions in society. As such, news is biased towards the power-holders in society.

Sociology of news production

Contemporary journalism faces severe obstacles in its quest to fulfil the role of a democratic agency (McChesney 1999). As argued by Keane (1991:69) “communications markets are self-paralysing. They regularly create endemic contradictions and dilemmas which belie their claims to openness, universality and accessibility”. The question of access to the media - and other resources for disseminating ideas - goes beyond inhibited access by lack of resources and censorship. It touches on issues of structural constraints that go beyond overt controls of the press. While a free and independent press is assumed to be autonomous and objective, numerous studies in sociology of news reveal that a number of factors are involved in news production processes that shape news. Such factors include

institutionalisation of news production (Schudson 1999), markets (McManus 1995), routinisation of news production process (Tuchman 1978), gatekeeping process (Shoemaker 1991), structural constraints and human agency (Croteau et al 1997) principal-agency (Napoli 1997) and sources (McNair 1998 and Fishman 1977). These sociological studies have investigated the question of access to news and concluded that there is an inequality of news access and many other equally useful conclusions. Those who wield more power in society have greater access to the media.

Broadly there are three approaches to the study of news production (Schudson 1999:177). First is political economy whose view “relates the outcome of the news process to the structure of the state and the economy, and to the economic foundation of the news organisation”. Political economy theorists such as Chomsky (1998:xi) argue that media “serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate state and private activity”. This view holds that there is a conspiracy as the media are owned and operated by the dominant class. Media serve an ideological function, a vehicle through which the capitalist system legitimates and sustains itself. Another way through which media serve dominant class is through institutionalisation of news production process (Shoemaker 1991 and Schudson 1997). The second is the social organisation of news work, which “comes primarily out of sociology, especially the study of social organisation, occupations and professions, and the social construction of ideology”(Schudson 1999:177). This view holds that journalists are constrained in their work by organisational routines. The third is the cultural approach, it “emphasises the constraining forces of broad cultural traditions and symbolic systems regardless of the structure of economic organisation or the character of occupational routines” (Schudson 1999:177). As Schudson (1999:195) argues “none of the perspectives by itself, can account for all that we might want to know”, they are not to be viewed as mutually exclusive, they give a fuller account when viewed together.

This study utilises Shoemaker and Reese (1991) model, which cuts across these approaches by studying news production from five levels. As argued by McManus (1995:301) “The Shoemaker and Reese model elegantly recapitulates the history of news theorising and set out the various levels of analysis that a complete picture of news production should have.” As noted by Reese (2001), this hierarchy of influences model looks at individual journalists within organisational and ideological constraints.

It provides a multi-perspectival approach that helps examine individual journalists, practices and the system. The point here is to look at forces which set media agenda. The five levels range from: individual, routines, organisational, extra-media, and ideological with each successive level subsuming the preceding one forming ring like circles (Shoemaker 1991). As Reese (2001) argues,

This model helps to meaningfully organise vast array of eclectic research by considering the level or perspective at which explanation is primarily sought. The hierarchical aspect draws attention to the idea that these forces operate simultaneously at different levels of strength in any shaping of media content.

Individual level

The individual level of analyses looks at the extent to which individual newswriters are responsible for selection and passing of news items and the role he/she plays in shaping news. “How gatekeepers evaluate and interpret messages... characteristics of the individual gatekeepers’ personality, background, values, roles conception and experiences” (Shoemaker 1991:34). At this level attention is paid to characteristics of individual newswriters, their training, background and attitudes on how they influence the content. The point is to understand to what extent do their characteristics impact in shaping news. The research analysis is aimed at uncovering subjectivity of journalists. Studies at this level are old, and include gatekeeping study done by White (1951) and Johnstone et al (1972).

Routines level

Communication routine analysis looks at the extent to which selection is determined by impartial rules or routine. It considers the constraining influences of journalistic practices. “Individuals do not have complete freedom to act on their beliefs and attitudes, but must operate within a multitude of limits imposed by technology, times, space and norms” (Reese 2001:180). This level is important in illustrating the extent to which an individual newswriter acts as a gatekeeper or merely carrying out a set of routine procedures. This includes issues such as the effects of deadlines on choices of stories and sources and availability of sources. Tuchman (1978) points to the routinisation of news production process as a way of constructing news. He argues that the media transform occurrences into public events and also shape the public’s definition of the happenings through its presentations. The news net, which is

embedded in legitimated institutions and the centralised newsgathering process, is taken for granted. This prevents the emergence of new forms of newsgathering and production. It perpetuates routinisation of news production and institutionalisation of news beats, giving the impression that they are the most ways of newsgathering and processing.

Tuchman (1978:32) argues that the news net “imposes order on the social world because it enables news events to occur on some locations but not on others”. Croteau (1997:103) points out that the news net is “made up of wire services, fulltime reporters, and stringers – to catch newsworthy happenings”. It is itself a hierarchical process, which determines whose version of reality, is used: the editor, staff reporter, and stringers. Newsworthiness is negotiated and compromises are made. This assessment of occurrences is also partly determined by the availability of reporters to cover an event. For instance, “a story justifying the presence of a reporter at 11:00 AM might not justify assigning one late in the afternoon” because there are fewer reporters or no reporter to assign (Tuchman 1978:43). The newsworthiness of the same story is viewed in a different light. As Croteau (1997:108) puts it, newsworthiness “is not a property inherent in events but is instead something that is attached to happenings by journalists”.

For newswriters knowing sources is an indicator of professionalism status. The more sources you know the easier it becomes to file many stories. This goes with the notion that “in news, verification of facts is both a political and a professional accomplishment” (1978:83). It is like that because verifying facts is intermeshed with using sources. The two are mutually embedded in using sources to verify facts.

In the process of selecting sources, three generalisations are made (Tuchman 1978). First, is that “most individuals, as news sources, have an axe to grind”(1978:93). Second, “some individuals, such as committee heads, are in a position to know more than others in an organisation (1978:93)”. Third, “institutions and organisations have procedures designed to protect both institutions and people who have come into contact with it. The significance of either a statement or a ‘not comment’ must be assessed according to the news-worker’s knowledge of institutional procedures” (1978:93)”. These generalisations are important in understanding the choice of

sources made by newswriters. As Tuchman (1978:133) argues, “news media are more accessible to some social movements, interest groups and political actors than to others” and that those who have power have more access. “Easy access to the news media requires ongoing contacts between a reporter and a news source” (Tuchman 1978:141). The choice of source is not random as it tends to be determined by the person’s location and occupation in the social structure. It is also related to the possession of resources that enables continued contact with media workers.

As argued by Murdock (1973), the definition of a “newsworthy situation” coincides with definitions of legitimated power-holders in society. This definition appears in three forms: political speeches, themes reiterated in editorials, and the underlying definitions permeating the texture of news reporting (Murdock 1973:159). He argues that selection and interpretation is not a random reaction to random event but a logical outcome of particular ways of newsgathering and production of news. The control of the process is taken away from newswriters as they just follow set procedures or routines of going about doing their work.

Routines serve as pointers to news events. As argued by Schlesinger (1978), the backbone of each day’s production is the routinisation of the process, which enables prediction of stories. This provides a framework of expectations for deployment of resources. This process does not require journalist initiatives or investigation of news items as they depend on sources who provide information to all media. Hard news imposes on journalists; “dissidence and non conformity are not the accepted style in hard new production” (Schlesinger 1978:161). While leverage may be granted to other news genres such as feature and editorials, news is strictly conformist. As Schlesinger (1978) argues, control is not direct through routine intervention. It is made to be part of the taken for granted by those working in the newsroom through routinisation.

Organisational level

Organisational level analysis looks at how the organization, its structure and culture influence and shape news selection. The analysis includes news policy, organizational socialisation etc. Attention here is paid to organisational goals and policies. The agency theory provides for principal-agent relationship described as,

“A contract under which one or more persons (the principal[s]) engage another person (the agent) to perform some service on their behalf which involves delegating some decision making authority to the agent. If both parties to the relationship are utility maximizers there is good reason to believe that the agent will not always act in the best interest of the principal. The principal can limit divergence from his interests by establishing appropriate incentives for the agent and by incurring monitoring cost designed to limit the aberrant activities of the agent.” (Jensen and Meckling 1976:308)

Journalists do not always work in the interest of media owners. They get away with that under the pretext of professional autonomy. To minimise divergence, owners use methods of control that go beyond monitoring, tying of individual's interest to those of the organisation and performance incentives. Also “editors could consciously or unconsciously seek out reporters with particular professional or political bias”. They “need not constantly reject, edit, or rewrite stories if they have instilled within journalists a strong perception of what is acceptable and what is not” (Napoli 1997:213-214). As Reese (2001) states, journalists turn to self-censorship in anticipation of organisational boundaries. However, it is difficult to pin organisational control in the media. “By definition, we are concerned with power that is exercised periodically, implicitly and not overtly and as a result is not so readily available to direct observation” (Reese 2001:182). However, the opportunity for “shirking” on the part of the agent is due to imperfect methods of control by the principal that seek to monitor the behaviour of the agent (Napoli 1997).

The problem of principal-agent is the subversion of organisational interest in favour of agent's interest. This, as argued by Napoli (1997), is caused by the fact that certain decision making information rests with the agent combined with imperfect monitoring. According to Napoli (1997) in news organisations there is a lack of direct supervision and control and reliance on ethics and journalistic norms. Also, there are differing attitudes between newswriters and their superiors. As Napoli (1997:214-5) puts it “the characteristics of the individual at each level of the hierarchy (owners, managers and reporters) become important predictors of media content”. Motivations of individuals at all levels are strong predictors of the organisations behaviour.

Extra-Media level

Extra-media/social/institutional level analysis looks at the influence of other institutions on media content. The power to shape content is shared by a variety of institutions. The media operate in a structured relationship with these institutions in shaping content (Reese 2001). Analysis includes, influence of sources, audience, markets, advertisers, government through policy, public relations and other media. McManus (1995:305) argues that “at the heart of commercial news production lie four markets: readers and viewers, sources, advertisers, and owners and investors.” He argues that there is a substantial imbalance among the media firm’s principal trading partners – “consumers are more vulnerable to opportunism on the part of the media firm than investors, advertisers and sources” and that they are “less likely to enjoy choice in the marketplace” and “less able to evaluate the quality of the product” (McManus 1995:320). The market approach points to news consumers as having less power to shape content in their favour. It explains the media’s preferential treatment of those who have power in society, people with resources can mobilise them to influence news content. McNair (1998:143) points out that, “output of journalism is increasingly a product of activity out in the world beyond the journalist’s immediate working environment”. He states that public relations as a “source activity” has become a professional group separate from, but dependent on journalism. Public relations professionals have become important for influencing and shaping what is experienced as news (McNair 1998).

Development of public relations highlights the element of construction of news. “The creation of news is achieved by designing of events which would be likely to be attractive to journalists: pseudo-events” and that these “pseudo-events occur because they are covered by journalists” (McNair 1998:147-148). What happens is that,

“The picture of reality which journalism provides has been distorted by the increased use of medialities or pseudo-events... the journalistic reliance on sources for the provision of news, and professional assumption that some, usually institutional, sources are automatically newsworthy, is a major cause of the news media’s routine bias towards the powerful and the institutionally established” (McNair 1998:152).

Information sources are almost exclusively bureaucratically organised and reporters regularly visit only these bureaucratically organised sellings (Fishman 1977). Even at

these bureaucratically organised institutions, reporters expose themselves to strategic points and information centres that are manned by a person responsible for information whose job is to contact the reporter with potentially newsworthy information. This procedure of treating all phenomena of interest as bureaucratically organised leads to incorporation of large bureaucratic settings into reporters' beats, which become routinised, tying reporters to bureaucratic reporting system (Fishman 1977).

This imposes structure on newswriters serving to direct them on how to go about looking for news and where to look. Once newswriters see community as bureaucratically structured, their work is made easy as this provides information as to who is a potential source. The routinisation of news especially around bureaucratic organisations serve as a news subsidy because the reporter's work is done by information officers as interpretation and investigation is done by police, clerks etc (Fishman 1977:307). Reporters tend to rely on these bureaucrats for packaging information for them and their role becomes that of selecting which information or events to transform into news accounts. The reality as provided by media is the bureaucratic version of what is happening. "In basing news on agency accounts, journalists pass on to publics bureaucratic views of the world as plain facts" (Fishman 1977:280). These agencies in the process legitimise themselves and alternative ways of knowing the world are not made available.

Newswriters do not experience the processes themselves; they rely on bureaucratic accounts. This is a practical matter of getting their job done (Fishman 1977:292). According to this perception of newsgathering and production, newswriters are channels, simply passing information from the newsmakers to audiences. They are not involved in the search and making of news as they get information gathered by bureaucrats. These bureaucrats, on the other hand, use the opportunities afforded by their positions in relation to newsgathering and production to further legitimise their position and manage information. They are strategically positioned to manipulate information to suite their needs by directing newswriters to particular angles through the information they provide. They limit the scope of reference regarding the event, as they tend to have monopoly over procedures such as the court proceedings and criminal investigations (Fishman 1977).

Gans (1979) argues that interpretation of reality is a tug of war between journalist and sources on one hand and journalists and media managers on the other. It is resolved through power exercised by all participants in the transmission of information. News is centred on routine activities of officials who are chosen because they have power to supply information that makes news. These official sources are efficient in providing the information wanted by journalists in the way journalists want it, making it easy for them to meet their deadlines. They do not have to resort to pressure to get the attention of the media because as they are already preferred by media workers. These bureaucratic sources wield more power than the audience as national news consists of information supplied by sources rather than news wanted by the audience (Gans 1979:283). He argues that those who do not have power resort to pressure and dramatic ways that threaten society to attract media attention.

However, Gans (1979) views the final product of newsgathering and production as a compromise between source and audience interests. Reporters who judge stories from a source perspective, and editors who judge stories from an audience perspective, make the compromise. Journalists are “autonomous” in selecting their own “facts” and draw their own conclusions, editors suggest points of views to be taken and have a final word. It is interesting how editors determine what interests audiences. There seems to be little information on the interests and preferences of audiences. Schlesinger (1978) argues that there is a missing link between newswriters and the audience, saying newswriters know little about their audience. He argues that “they (newswriters) explain their knowledge by invoking the related notions of professionalism, commitment and experience. The gap is filled by conventional wisdom of professionalism which is self-sustaining” (Schlesinger 1978:116-134).

Rather than viewing news as a product of newswriters, Sigal (1973) argues that news can be seen as an outcome of the ability of sources to define events in a newsworthy manner. Sigal (1973) conducted a study on the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. His study shows that most sources are official government sources. Another notable point is that a number of stories were one sourced and that this one source was an official. For those stories with many sources the official source was among primary sources. “American officials were the sole source in 56, 3% of the 405 single source

stories and were 53, 8% of all primary sources” (Sigal 1973:125). They focus journalists’ attention on an event through the information they provide (Sigal 1973). Newswriters cannot be everywhere to witness occurrences, they get this information somewhere, as Sigal (1973) puts it, they locate themselves to strategic or key areas that are likely to provide information. Newsgathering therefore relies on routine channels, which target bureaucratic organisations (Fishman 1977).

Ideological level

The ideology level analysis looks at the entire social system on how it shapes news selection and presentation. It is an analysis of the influence of culture, ideology, social structure etc. As Reese (2001:183) states, the concern here is “how media symbolic content is connected with larger social interests, how meaning is constructed in the service of power”. Gitlin (1980) argues that media organisation owners and managers are committed to the continuation and maintenance of the capitalist system of private property ownership. Media elites support the political-economic system as their power and prestige is presupposed by it. He argues that hegemonic forces are operating within the media. The methods of newsgathering and production, which legitimise the system, pull towards different directions at times. For instance, “at one moment towards the institutions of political and economic power, and at another toward alterative and even, at times, oppositional movements, depending on political circumstances” (Gitlin 1980:259). As Gitlin (1980:259) argues, “claim to legitimacy, embodied in the professional ideology of objectivity, requires it in other words, to take certain risks of undermining the legitimacy of the social system as a whole”. The legitimising claim to professional autonomy enables media workers to undermine the system at times. The legitimacy of news through its claim to objectivity is the main ideological force as people are made to believe and take for granted that what they consume as news is a true reflection of reality. Reporters through claimed autonomy are made to feel that the news they produce by following routinised professional practices is an accurate mirror of reality undistorted. These newswriters come from the same middle upper class sharing core hegemonic assumptions of their class with their managers and sources (Gitlin 1980).

Socialisation of reporters, together with their middle class background, play a role in assimilating newswriters to the dominant ideology which result in shared outlook

and approach to issues. When this happens, the scope of alternative perspectives and outlook is severely decreased. Cottle (2000) argues that socialisation of journalists standardises news and narrows perspectives. Socialisation in newsrooms and within the profession between competing media organisations establishes inter-group norms and this is consolidated by source-journalist socialisation whereby newswriters become immersed in the work of their sources and as a result identify with their views (Cottle 2000). Friendly and close relationships develop between reporters and sources as they negotiate a long-term exchange relationship of information based on trust and mutual benefit. Dyer and Nayman's (1977) study on the relationship between reporters and legislators found that they hold similar views and agreed on news values. The study shows that some legislators were used more frequently than others. These legislators agreed that they interacted more with reporters than their fellow legislators did. These were legislators that were identified by reporters as more influential than others in the legislative process.

Gitlin (1980) argues that newswriters through journalistic norms and professionalism are permitted an ideological sphere within which they can freely move. However, boundaries are drawn through allocation of space, airtime, and budgets. Choices of subjects and slants are determined by larger interests of the media elites, which take into account larger ideological currents in society. He argues that political and corporate pressures set unspoken outer-limits, routines and strong bonds with sources absorb the worldview of the powerful. When there is a conflict between reporter and sources, editors and reporters, and publishers and editors, it is played out within the premises that do not go beyond the hegemonic boundary (Gitlin 1980). The argument is that journalistic autonomy keeps newswriters within the hegemonic boundaries of the system serving as a shock absorber, both liberating and constraining.

Hall (1978) points to three aspects of social construction of news – first, the industry is bureaucratically organised, second, the structure of news values with individual selection and ranking of stories, and third, the moment of construction of a news story which involves presentation. Hall (1978:54) sees the moment of construction of the story as the most important one as the story is given a meaning through identification and contextualisation, called signification. This is achieved through the use of journalistic practices that embody assumptions about consensual value of society.

“The media define for the majority of the population what significant events are taking place, but also, they offer powerful interpretations of how to understand these events” (Hall 1978:57).

These interpretations of events are in accordance with the dominant ideology in society. This is not the outcome of conspiracy however, as some would argue, but a product of routine structures of news production. Regular, reliable institutional sources are the ones that direct the media to particular topics and events. Practical pressure and professional demands systematically structure over-accessing of the powerful and institutional sources. These sources become the “primary definers” of topics. As Hall (1978) points out, they establish initial definition and parameters of a question for debate, setting terms of reference and interpretive framework. This sets criteria to judge relevance or irrelevance of contributions in discussions. “Media stand in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers” (Hall 1978:58-59) that is why media reproduce the definition of those who have privileged access.

The multi-perspective analysis illustrates that news is a product of social interaction between individual newswriters employed by capitalist organisations, sources and the society within which interaction takes place. It also points to the institutional arrangements that the interaction takes place and how they shape the end product, which is news. What is evident here is that regular and institutional sources and the power holders have an upper hand in the interaction, which forces media to favour the dominant class and the prevailing institutional arrangements. Media professionals make their own product but not as they please, under circumstances not chosen by them. Circumstances are “directly found, given, and transmitted from the past” (Croteau et al 1997:97).

Objectivity and professionalism as structural bias

Objectivity, the pillar of contemporary journalism and professionalism that sets out criteria for acceptable journalistic conduct is not free floating but part of a stratified society. It has a historical specificity and culturally embedded. Its establishment forms part of societal interaction and production processes within an economic and political context. Croteau and Hynes (1997) argue that media players use rules and conventions to routinise decision-making process. Newswriters respond to economic

forces that define goals and shape decision-making process. Croteau et al (1997) see objectivity as one of the most if not the most important norm of contemporary journalism. As argue, most evaluation of new media performance is with regard to adherence to objectivity. When news media is criticized, the main complaint is that it is biased, lacking objectivity. According to Croteau et al (1997:106) “objectivity is more than simply getting the facts straight; it is a doctrine that perceives the separation of “facts” and “values” as a messy business that requires the use of a method or set of practices, to ensure their separation.”

There are six practices that make up objectivity as a method (Bennett 1997:107). First, maintaining political neutrality. Second, observing prevailing standards of decency and good taste. Third, using documentary reporting practices which rely on physical evidence. Fourth, using standardised formats to package the news. Fifth, training reporters as generalist instead of specialists. Finally, using editorial reviews to enforce these methods.

Objectivity as a convention shapes the content of news media through routinised practices. As shown by sociology of news studies such as Fishman (1977) and Tuchman (1978), routinisation of newsgathering and production processes have political consequences. As argued by Croteau et al (1997), certain events are included and others excluded. Legitimated bureaucratic institutions mostly are covered through routinised practices that seek to achieve objectivity. However, objectivity is an ideal that is unattainable (Croteau et al 1997:108). It is a product of the work of journalists who are caught up between institutional constrains and profession autonomy. Media content reflects powerful actors in society rather than “ objective” reality.

Pursuit of objectivity that seeks to avoid personal bias in news production leads to structural bias (McNair 1998). While lack of objectivity in news is seen as a personal bias on the part of newswriters, as argued by McNair (1998), objectivity is a structural bias. Adherence and pursuit of objectivity is not free from political and ideological bias. Objectivity’s demand for source credibility gives preference to certain sources and not others. Elites and established sources from legitimated bureaucratic institutions are preferred sources. These preferred sources for their

efficiency, accessibility and knowledgeability are however, not disinterested and might hold different views on issues than other groups in society (McNair 1998).

Pursuit of objectivity is done by following sets norms and procedures in gathering and processing of news. These norms and procedures are determined by professionalism. According to Solonski (1997), professionalism is an efficient and economic way of controlling the work of journalists. However, news organisations can't rely on professionalism alone to control the behavior of journalists, therefore develop rules or news policies. Professional norms determine legitimate areas and sources for news although they do not point particular events they provide a guide. Professionalism provides journalists with autonomous power that can be used against management but, to minimise the potential conflict between journalists and management, organisational policies are put in place (Solonski 1997: 153).

Both professionalism and organisational policies are control mechanisms that set out boundaries for journalistic behavior, providing a frame of reference for their actions. Although professionalism provides journalists with means of deflecting management interference without threatening their positions, it legitimises and supports the existing political-economic system. Selection and presentation of news and sources are determined by news professionalism and news organisations, therefore journalists can't be said to be ideological, they do not report in accordance with a particular ideological perspective consciously shared (Solonski 1997:144). However, it is not possible to achieve objectivity, the closest is to minimise personal bias (Croteau 1997). Objectivity is an illusion whose pursuit through sets of norms and procedures that seek to minimise personal bias results in structural bias.

Conclusion

The chapter focused on media as made up in part of individual newswriters employed by news organisations to generate content from what is happening in society. These individuals and organisations are situated within a larger society with other surrounding people and institutions. All these institutional and organisational arrangements have a bearing on the functioning of the media and its content.

It illustrated how people, organisations, social institutions and the social structure (society) at large determine news. All the levels of analysis when put together as modelled by Shoemaker et al (1996) provide an understanding of the complexity and interconnectedness of social structure and how they co-operate in the production process. The importance of this social interaction in the production of news process forms a base within which assertion of news as a social construction is made.

The second section, which looked at objectivity and professionalism as structured bias is important in understanding why there is a bias in news despite the pursuit of objectivity and professionalism. Objectivity is inherently contradictory as it gives preference to certain sources at the expense of others. Professionalism on the other hand is both economical and political with adverse effects as it informs and shapes the pursuit of objectivity favouring particular procedures and conventions that result in bias.

The chapter illustrated how news media socially construct a reality. It pointed to the fact that this reality is an outcome of interaction between agents in the news production process. The bias in the creation of this media reality is however, not an outcome of a conspiracy but rather of the routines, organizational structures, institutions and society at large on how the media is positioned. The following chapter looks at economics journalism. It shows that economics journalism as a subfield marginalises ordinary citizens excluding their voice even though economic issues affect them directly.

Chapter 4

Contemporary issues of Economics Journalism

Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated how news is socially constructed. Newswriters follow certain routines and prefer institutional sources. The poor are marginalised and have no voice. This chapter looks at economics journalism as a subfield of journalism. As a subfield, economics journalism is increasingly becoming important. However, as it follows the same processes of news production as discussed in the previous chapter, it is therefore not exempted from the problems these processes cause – the exclusion of the poor and over accessing of bureaucratic sources.

I argue that economics journalism has been criticised lately for being uncritical in dealing with business and state. The way media deals with economics issues is important considering that economics coverage impact on people's voting behaviour, government popularity and people's everyday experiences such as poverty. In short, there is a closure in economics debate. Few have access to the media as sources in economics news. Media have an agenda-setting function (McCombs et al 1972) and elites with access as sources set media agenda. Media agenda is then perpetuated in news, thereby become public agenda. However, the elite especially big businesses do not have complete control or domination of media agenda. To maintain influence, they mobilise resources and create a pool of sources.

Criticism of economics journalism

Economics journalism has come under sever criticism lately. The main criticism is that business journalism lack critical approach dealing with corporates and this has negative effects on the traditional role of watchdog. At the beginning of the 1990s the financial crises - Savings and Loan, and the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) scandals sparked criticism of business journalism. The recent financial scandal of the collapsed the US energy giant Enron and WorldCom, once again had media scholars and media practitioners talking about the crisis of economics journalism (see for example Nieman Reports 2002).

Analysis of the role that economics and journalism could and should have played in preventing or exposing wrong doings of big business in the Savings and Loan and

BCCI crisis identified structural, institutional and cultural obstacles to media coverage (McKean 1993). These obstacles are consistent with sociology of news discussed earlier in Chapter Three. The nature of these barriers explains their continued existence even though they have been identified. McKean argues it is difficult to deal with these obstacles without challenging the whole system.

Criticism of contemporary economics journalism is that it has been influenced by economic boom, which blinded it from its 'traditional role'. As argued by Madrick (2002:7) about the media coverage of the Enron scandal, media has become part of the sales process for big business and media themselves. It has become part of the process that is supposed to be reporting, "many financial media increasingly portrayed themselves as business experts, registering firm opinions rather than presenting several sides of an issue" (Madrick 2002:7).

In South Africa there are no substantive studies on how media treat economic issues. However, there are rhetoric criticisms as South Africa has its share of economic crisis and scandals, for example, the Saambou Bank scandal³ and the rand crisis. "Over November and December 2001, the rand plunged 40% against key convertible currencies to a new record low of R13.86 per US dollar" (Kariithi 2002:1). Schreiner and Prinsloo (2002:2) argue that South African "media have not been guided along market related information, but rather their own opinion. While the media and economical situation generally go hand in hand... this has not been the case with reportage on the currency." Criticism of the coverage of the rands crisis in 2001 is reminiscent of the 1996 rand crisis. During 1996 rand crisis, Rix (1996) criticised the way journalists handle debates around economic policies. He argued that,

Policy-makers are not well served by the lack of real understanding, or even the willingness to research, among SA economic journalists. The record of these journalists since at least February 1996 is characterised by fundamental

³ Startling allegations of criminal conduct by top executives of failed banking group Saambou have emerged in a secret 520 page report on the bank's demise, parts of which have been made available to Business Day. (Rose R. 17 January 2003. Business Day Online. Saambou scandal erupts as secret KPMG report fingers executives. <http://www.businessday.co.za/bday/content/direct/1,3523,1264917-6079-0,00.html>)

errors, misplaced trust in corporate analyses, absence of reasonable criticism of policy-makers and ignorance of real debate. (Rix 1996:4)

Writing about African economics journalism in general Kariithi (2002) argues that,

Serious systematic problems have been identified in media coverage of major economic exposes. First, media are constantly forced to revert to government for additional essential information and new story angles. As a result, most coverage is essentially a rehash of the government's viewpoint, leaving the state as the "primary definer" of critical public discourse... the public is treated to a spectacle of "pack journalism," a tendency by media to follow law enforcement probe and indictments instead of conducting their own independent investigations. (Kariithi 2002:2-3)

In general, criticism of economics journalism is how it presents economic issues and use sources. According to Goozner (2000:24), economics journalism gives a wrong impression of what is really going on. Within the celebrated boom "there are winners and losers, when barriers fall, and it can be argued that the press ignored the losers' issues and concerns, it is only their demonstrations that get coverage". The impression that economics journalism gives is that everything is going well while inequalities continue to grow.

Brady (2001) says economics reporters are cheerleaders of the stock markets. They have abandoned their traditional role of watchdog over holders of power in society. Brady (2001) argues that financial reporting is like sports reporting giving scores and highlights. He claims that there is a lack of explanation for what is happening and why. This criticism is consistent with the findings by Jensen (1997) in US television. Just as sport does, financial reporting creates celebrities out of news anchors and financial analysts. But people have not been told that the same analyst who talk about which stocks to buy work for the same companies they analyse (Brady 2001). Indeed as Parker (1997) noted, there is a diminishing role that is played by academic economists in reporting. The press uses more and more company experts who have a dual role in a story, serving both as "actor" and "expert".

Media have a problem in presenting economics news in a way that would attract and sustain reader/viewer interest. Shiller (2001:60) argues that the media in a bid to win audience resort to obscure debates. Media create debates in every area even where

experts do not feel there is anything to debate on. When this happens the result is the dissemination and reinforcement of ideas that are not supported by real evidence and thereby create the impression that there are experts to every issue. What lacks in these accounts argues Shiller (2001:61) is relevant facts or thoughtful interpretations. There is a danger with this reporting, which stages debates and dramatises issues. Furthermore, Samuelson (2002:24) argues economics journalism does not only reflect mood swings, it also causes them. Reporters and editors sometimes make poor judgments, in “trying not to be dull, at times we present selective realities that delude more than they inform”.

Scope of debate in economics journalism

Notwithstanding criticism against economics journalism, since the 1980s there has been a notable increase in economics news evidenced by an increase in business and economic publications and allocation of more space and airtime to economics news (Kjaer and Langer 2002). This increase in economics news could be said to correspond with increased economic activities associated with globalisation. The importance of the coverage of the economy lies on its political impact. For instance, Mosley (1984) shows that the media condition people’s attitudes toward the economy by the information they present or not present and by the comments on the data, identifying particular relationships between economic variables and prescribing particular solutions. According to the study (Mosley 1984), during economic crisis, identifying causal connections between economic events and prescribing potential solutions is key in influencing voter behaviour.

The impact of economics coverage is shown in Sanders, Marsh and Ward (1993). Their research looks at the extent to which changes in economic conditions and government popularity are affected by media interpretation of economic events. Findings suggest that, there is no direct impact caused by economic coverage. However, coverage has an indirect influence on government popularity by influencing aggregate personal expectations that affect popularity (Sanders et al 1993).

Sanders et al (1993) findings are interesting considering that political parties differ in their abilities to put their economic issues on the media agenda. Gavin (1992) examined news and economy during pre-campaign coverage. Findings show that

political parties differed in their ability to put their economic issues on top of news agenda. For instance, findings indicate that Conservatives were leading in keeping their issues on the news agenda. Labour failed to consistently put their issues on the agenda and Liberal Democrats ranked low on the scale. Those parties that failed to keep their issues on top of the news agenda somehow entered the campaign at disadvantage. Another interesting point that Gavin (1992) notes is the questionable neutrality of expert economic commentators. He argues that there is a danger of unrepresentative group of commentators. He cites findings by Peter Golding, which showed that 90% of top financial executives were Conservative voters (Gavin 1992:610). He does not deny that these commentators were sometimes critical of the Conservative government but that views of most sources tended to be to the right of the political spectrum.

Gavin et al (1998) studied the development of news agenda by examining causal attributions for inflation on two weekday news programmes on BBC and ITN. Findings indicate that there is a 'consonant' agenda on causes of inflation but broader ideological significance of news agenda is less obvious. Also these findings contradict Jensen's (1987) study of economics news in US television that reported an absence of causes and agents in inflation stories. Jensen's (1987) discourse analysis of economic coverage shows that television news advocate a particular vision of society and that media explanations are derived from preferred government officials, experts and company press officials who serve to shape the news ideology. From the explanations provided for economic events, he claims that causal agents are missing. Things seem to be happening by themselves. Also, coverage of economic fluctuations is separated from that of political institutions that supposedly control them. This might then offer an explanation as to the lack of causes, consequences and specifics in economics news stories found by the study. This means that economic events are taken out of context that may serve to explain causes and agents. The study concludes that, "Economic actors, such as big corporations, small firms, wages earners, or consumers, are absent... things seem to move by themselves". Meanwhile, Gavin et al (1998) conclude to the contrary, they identified a number of agents and causal explanations for inflation. Also, Iyengar (1991) agrees with Gavin et al (1998) concluding that media reports on issues such as unemployment are given context and in-depth considerations that provide details on the role of economic actors and agents.

The economic picture presented by the media is constrained by the limited views that are presented. There is a closure of economics debate in the media. As argued by the Glasgow Media Group (1980), only a limited range of views is presented in economics reporting. Even with the limited range, some views are downgraded and underrepresented. The worldview that is presented by the media is the outcome of pre-structured journalistic practices that assume that everyone sees the world in the same way. Objectivity and impartiality, which are pursued professional norms, are unsupported claims to a unique understanding of events by newswriters. “This serves only to obfuscate what is in fact the reproduction of the dominant assumption about our society – assumptions of the powerful about what is important, necessary and possible within it” (Glasgow Media Group 1980:115).

The choice of sources and how they are used in a story restricts access to media debates. Different sources are used differently within the same story. There are four identifiable actors or sources in a story: named groups or individuals appearing in the news variously in interviews, the directly quoted or attributed statements, those named in news reports but not quoted, and those merely mentioned by others within interviews (Glasgow Media Group 1980). The level of mediation and control over the communication process is achieved through this structuring of actors within a story. An actor who is high up in the structure of actors has more control in mediation process than the one situated low in the hierarchy. There is also an extremely narrow section of society from which interviews are drawn from. These are the people who wield more power and are frequently used by the media (Glasgow Media Group 1980).

Economics journalism provides a platform for debates over economic ills and potential solutions. There are different and competing explanations for economic events. As the Glasgow Media Group (1980) study observes, divisions of opinion between sections of society and political groups mark the educated. These are divisions about causes and potential solutions of economic crisis. How the media represent these differing views is important as explanations affect attitudes that determine policy preferences, understanding of economic activities and the state of the economy.

Another finding of the study is that there is a strong similarity of news sources and subjects of news between the two television stations studied, BBC and ITN. “Almost half of the total number of the interviews shown appeared on both channels’ main news on the same evening” (Glasgow Media Group 1980:105). This further limits the range of view represented in media. According to Noelle-Neumann and Mathes (1987), consonance in news reporting is attributed to consensus amongst journalists about news value of events and the tendency among journalists to observe and influence each other. Routinisation of newsgathering process and the reliance on bureaucratic institutions (Fishman 1977) could be argued to be responsible for the consonance in the media as reporters follow the same procedures and go to the same institutions and official sources.

The limited scope of economics debate in the media could be attributed to the elitist nature of economics journalism. As argued by Kariithi (2003), economics journalism is marketed as elite communication as opposed to mass communication. It has an ideological bias, serving as a force that sustains the current system, which is dominated by free market capitalism. Kariithi (2003) sees this as a contradiction of both the principles of free market enterprise and popular participation that underlies modern democracies. This means that economics news needs to be simplified to accommodate every citizen. Closure of economics is a new phenomenon.

While economics journalism is seen as a specialized and closed field (Glasgow Media Group (1980), Kariithi (2003) and Parsons (1990), it has great social and political implications. Literature on economics journalism, scarce as it is, is consistent with the critical position, “media studies problematise the ability of economics news to be impartial or politically neutral”, narrowing the agenda to exclude some (Gavin et al 1998: 452). Studies done in the United States (e.g. Mutz et al 1992) suggest that the media have a mediating role between the public’s experience of economic changes and political downturns. These findings echo the work of Behr and Iyengar (1985), also in the United States, which conclude that although television coverage is partially determined by real life conditions, it has an agenda-setting function, which boosts public concern for particular issues. McCombs and Shaw (1972) study illustrates that media play an important part in shaping political reality. Through the amount of information they provide, media show how much importance to attach to an issue. As

McCombs et al (1972:184) argue, media reproduce the political world imperfectly yet people share media's definition of what is important, suggesting agenda-setting function of the media.

Those who have unlimited access to media institutions set the media agenda. As discussed in chapter Three and will be shown by findings in chapter Six, business and government sources dominate as media sources. While this is an outcome of routinisation and professionalisation of news production as argued in chapter Three, business over the past 30 years made conscious effort to ideologically mobilise journalists. For instance, Dreier (1982) studied the relationship between business and media in dealing with the "theoretical issue regarding the degree of integration, and the capacity for political mobilisation within the capitalist class" (Dreier 1982:111). The study concludes that business has been engaged in ideological mobilisation of the media to report business in a favourable light. The hostility between the business community and the media casts doubts on the theory that media are passive instruments of the capitalist class. While arrangements and journalistic newsgathering and production routines result in low exposure of corporate wrongdoings, there has been a marked increase in their coverage. This can be attributed to the emergence of powerful social protest groups and movements whose coverage appealed to readers and views. This caused a legitimacy crisis for big business, which responded by ideologically mobilising the public and journalists (Dreier 1982). This was done by establishing a pool of experts to serve as sources to the news media, establishment of business reporting programs at universities, establishing and sponsoring awards and prizes for reporting, organising conferences and workshops for journalists and business executives to come together and discuss common concerns, and devising of advocacy advertising campaigns to promote business (Dreier 1987:125-126). Professionalisation of business journalism that led to its independence from sponsors is followed by counter-professionalisation on the side of sources through the influence of economics think tanks, PR firms, interest groups, commercial and experts organisations (Tienari, Vaara and Ainamo 2002).

Attesting to the ideological mobilisation of journalists, Tienari et al (2002:11) argue that in Finland, "banks used many techniques to circle business journalists into a tightly knit group, to be sensitive to banks' interests. They (business journalists)

became almost a part of the managerial elite in Finland”. The dominant discourse adheres to economic and financial rational offering little space to criticise market economy Tienari et al (2002). The point that is illustrated here is that the capitalist ability to impose its ideological hegemony is limited as the capitalist class always faces threat of challenge from below. This necessitates constant ideological mobilisation. The process of ideological mobilisation of journalist serve to consolidate news productions processes and further give business sources and upper hand in setting media agenda.

Conclusion

The chapter first illustrated issues regarding the criticism of economics journalism in serving as a watchdog, by holding power holders accountable. It further illustrated that economics coverage impact on people’s perception of governments and economy. It argued that there is a closure of debates in of economics journalism. It showed how the choice of news sources excludes certain perspectives, thereby limiting the discussion of alternatives. The point here is that the nature of news production narrows perspectives on debates in the media. The few who have power and resources mobilise them to influence the media.

Chapter 5

Methodology

Introduction

As noted in chapter One, this study investigates trends and patterns in inflation reporting by South African daily newspapers. In view of generating empirical data with respect to the research focus, content analysis as a quantitative method was used. The purpose of this chapter is to look at the methodological considerations in doing this research. It provides explanations of how the study was conducted. This is done by addressing methodological issues such as: choice of methodology, methods employed, techniques applied in sampling, collecting, coding and analysing data, and the hypotheses tested. The value of this chapter is also to give a guide for similar or comparative research to be conducted. It further provides a justification for the choice of content analysis as a research method for this particular study.

Content analysis

As a method content analysis is defined as “a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, impartial and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables” (Wimmer and Domminick 1987:166). Definitions of content analysis emphasises its ‘objective’, systematic and quantitative nature. For instance, Berelson (1952:18) argues that, “content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” Budd, Thorp and Donohew (1967:2) also claim that, “content analysis is a systematic technique for analysing message content and message handling”. The purpose of content analysis, as argued by Deacon et al (1999:116), “is to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts, and the statistics are used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation.” It is a useful tool for large volumes of material such as print media or other texts that one can rarely afford to examine all relevant data (Holsti 1969).

Concerns about content analysis

One of the concerns over content analysis as noted by Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold (1998:94) revolves around

The question of how far content analysis could be used for making informed inferences either from texts to conditions, intentions, and factors circumscribing the production of texts, or from texts to their social impact, influence, interpretation and reception. (Hansen et al 1998:94)

However, the primary objective of content analysis as a method is not to make inferences. It is rather to uncover trends in communication and to draw comparison in communication content. As argued by Berelson

In a great many studies there is no real problem of inference at all. This is true for all those content analyses in which the description of content itself is the primary objective. Such studies can be said to contain implicit inferences about the causes or the consequences of the content and some contain them explicitly but such inferences are in the nature of addenda to or reformulations of the basic data. (1952:189)

Hansen et al (1998:95) note that critics argue that like any other scientific research, objectivity in content analysis is also contested as “an impossible ideal serving only to cover cosmetically and mystify the values, interests, and means of knowledge production which underpin such research.” However, what is important about content analysis is that “Systematic methods of content analysis, when properly used, can eliminate much of the possible bias of the investigator.” (Budd et al 1967:15). What is important is that the researcher aim for sound design and rigorously adhere to preset procedures.

Hansen et al (1998:95-97) also notes that the problem of content analysis

...is how far quantification is taken in content analysis and to what degree the quantitative indicators that this technique offers are read or interpreted in relation to questions about the intensity of meaning, in texts, the social impact of texts, or the relationship between media texts and the realities which they reflect... in counting individual units and their frequency of occurrence, content analysis fails to capture the way in which meaning arises from the complex interaction of symbols in texts.

However, these criticism, “touch on problems more to do with the potential and actual (mis)-use and abuses of the method, than to do with any inherent weaknesses of this method as a method of data-collection” (Hansen 1998:98). As a method, content analysis remains a systematic and reliable technique of data collection that yields valid results when properly used.

Validity in content analysis is not a problem especially if there is high agreement in definition of categories. As an instrument it measures what it is intended to measure (Berelson 1952). In studies where by the research question is answered directly from the description of the attribute of the content “the investigator is in large part freed from problems of validity, except to the extent that validity is related to sampling and reliability; the content data serve as a direct answer to the research question” Holsti (1969:43).

Content analysis in communication research

Content analysis is commonly used in mass media research for a variety of reasons. It can be used to describe trends in communication content. “The classification into a single set of categories of similar samples of communication content taken at different times provides a concise description of content trends” (Berelson 1952:29). Such study is Negrine (1999), which looked into the changing nature of parliamentary coverage in Britain and Germany. Another study is Wanta and Johnson (1994), which examined changes in content in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch during different market situations.

The method could be used to compare media or levels of communication. As noted by Berelson (1952) “Different media and different levels of communication not only attract different audiences but they also treat the same topics in different ways.” A comparative content analysis can reveal these differences in content. For instance, Beam (2003) examined content differences between daily newspapers with strong and weak market orientations. Luttbeg (1983) compared stories that appeared on the first three pages of randomly selected American daily newspapers.

Content analysis could be used to reveal focus of attention, such studies are Tuggle, Huffman and Rosegard (2002) and Tuggle and Owen (1999). The former examined the amount of NBC’s 2000 Olympics coverage devoted to women’s athletics and the later examined the amount of coverage given to women’s events and female athletics by NBC at the Centennial Olympic Games.

The method could also be used to examine media treatment of certain issues. Such studies include Harrington (1989), which examined “whether the television networks give greater coverage to these statistics (unemployment rate, the inflation rate as measured by the Consumer Price Index, and the growth rate of real GNP) when they are deteriorating.” Another is Great Britain Royal Commission on the Press (1949) examined the treatment of bread rationing, housing, by-election and certain aspects of the nationalisation of coal. Gavin et al (1998) examines inflation and its reporting by BBC and ITN.

Other uses of content analysis as noted by Berelson (1952:35/46) include disclosure of international differences communication content through a “comparative content analysis, which will reveal differences in the focus of attention of national audiences”. It could also be used to audit communication content against objectives.

As shown by the above discussion, content analysis is an important tool for analysis communication content. It is systematic, providing reliable results and it does not present problems of validity (Berelson 1952). Examples of its use above show that it remains a popular research method amongst communication scholars who are looking into media content. As this study aims to uncover trends in communication content, it is a viable option.

Research Design

Sampling

The sample consisted of four national newspapers over a period of three years, from 1999 to 2001. The four newspapers are *Sowetan*, *The Citizen*, *Business Day* and *The Star*. The *Sowetan*, *The Citizen* and *The Star* were chosen because they are three of South Africa's biggest national daily newspapers based on their readership. *The Star* also carries an insert that covers mainly economics and business news. *Business Day*, while medium size, primarily covers economics and business news. In total 353 articles were surveyed (35 articles from *The Citizen*, 48 articles from *Sowetan*, 107 articles from *Business Day* and 134 articles from *The Star*) as shown in Table 1 (page 47).

Table 1: Number of articles per newspaper a year

Title	1999	2000	2001	Total
The Citizen	11	12	14	37
Sowetan	7	19	24	50
Business Day	13	63	41	117
The Star	32	64	53	149
Total	63	158	132	353

The four newspapers serve slightly different markets especially *Sowetan* and *Business Day*, as shown in the Table 2 below; *Sowetan* serves mainly the lower class. Most of its readers have completed primary and some high school education. The majority of them according to the Living Standard Measure (LSM), which measures the standard of living, are in the LSMs 3 – 7 and the household income range from R500 to R6 999 a month. *Business Day* serves mainly the middle and upper class. Most of its readers have Matric and Technikon diploma or University degree. They are mostly in LSMs 6 – 10 with the household income ranging between R4 000 and over. *The Star* and *The Citizen* readership data are more or less similar. They attract readership that is served by both *Sowetan* and *Business Day*.

Table 2: Readership Profile of the four Newspapers

Source: All Media Products Survey 2001 – SA Advertising Research Foundation

	Citizen , 000	Sowetan , 000	B. Day , 000	Star , 000
Readership	572	1839	116	625
Education Level				
No School	0	0.5	0.6	0
Some Primary	2.3	4.7	0	2.5
Primary Completed	1.6	5.3	0	2.9
Some High School	37.5	40.2	14	27.7
Matric	40.8	37.4	37.9	39.9
Technikon Diploma/Degree	6.5	5.2	17.3	10.7
University Degree	3.8	2.1	22	8.4
Post Matric	7.5	4.5	8.3	7.9
Household Income				
Less than R500	2.2	6.5	0.2	1.6
R500 – R899	7.2	14.2	0.8	6.9
R900 - R1 399	7.2	14	8.5	7.6
R1 400 – R2 499	16.4	19.3	2.6	13.5
R2 500 – R3 999	15.2	17.6	7.5	11.5
R4 000 – R6 999	22.2	17.4	17.2	19.3

R7 000 – 11 999	15.7	7.5	21.3	19.7
R12 000 and more	13.9	3.6	41.9	19.8
Living Standard Measure				
LSM 1	0.7	2.2	0	1.6
LSM 2	2.1	5.8	0	0.8
LSM 3	6.5	11.8	0.3	3.6
LSM 4	9	18.7	2.9	9.3
LSM 5	14.9	22.7	5.6	14.3
LSM 6	21.2	22.8	12.2	20
LSM 7	13.3	8.5	12	11.9
LSM 8	11.6	4.7	10.5	11.8
LSM 9	9.3	2.2	19.9	11.4
LSM 10	11.4	0.7	36.6	15.4
Employment Status				
Work Fulltime	46.6	38.9	62	48.4
Work Part time	13.6	13.9	13.9	12
Does not Work	39.9	47.2	24.1	39.6
Occupation				
Professional/Technology	8.8	7.9	22.2	18
Administration/Managerial	4.4	1.1	16.3	3.5
Clerical/Sales	14.4	14.4	21.6	16.2
Transport/Communication	4	4.2	4.2	2
Services	11.4	11.2	6.3	10
Agriculture	0.5	0.8	0	0.1
Artisan/Related	8	3.1	5.1	4.8
Production/Mining	8.6	10.1	0.3	5.7

Data Collection

Raw data was secured from SABINET, a comprehensive online database⁴. The database provides a wide range of information including media clippings. Data was retrieved using search or keywords and phrases. Inflation as a keyword was used to retrieve news articles on inflation. An inflation story or article refers to any article that makes reference to inflation or fluctuation in prices in an inflationary manner. The way the database works, it retrieves all articles with the keyword within the specified period on the chosen newspapers. Articles were then saved on diskettes and later printed.

⁴ Sabinet Online Academic and Library Division is dedicated to serving all Academic Institutions, Government Libraries and other Library clients with value-added access to information services, cataloguing- and interlibrary loan support services. We further strive to provide products and services of high quality as well as exceptional client service. <http://aclib.sabinet.co.za/about.html>.

Coding

For analytical purposes, details of the newspapers; the title – name of the newspaper and issue which is the edition, and four elements; article type, the source, source occupation and causes were identified and coded. The coding scheme was developed specifically for this study, as argued by Kjaer et al (2002:11),

Any content analysis depends on coding categories defined beforehand. As the analysis of business news is a rather new field of investigation, there are no pre-described or conventional categories, which could be used for this type of analysis.

Four titles – *The Citizen*, *Sowetan*, *Business Day* and *The Star* - were coded with issues from 1999, 2000 and 2001 with a total of 353 articles, Table 1 (page 47) shows the number of articles per newspaper a year. There are multiple indicators within the identified elements as shown in Table 3 (page 53) The first element, Article Type, has three indicators - News, Opinion/editorial/analysis and Letter. News refers to those articles that are written in traditional journalistic news style, “objective” reporting⁵. Opinion/editorial/analysis refers to editorial, commentary analysis and opinion pieces⁶. Letter refers to readers’ letters to the editor⁷.

⁵An example of a News article, *Business Day* (22 January 2001 Bank’s outlook is upbeat) Economists’ reactions to the Reserve Bank’s monetary policy committee statement on Friday range from describing it as “fairly neutral” to “mildly hawkish”...JP Morgan economist Peter Worthington viewed the committee’s statement as “fairly neutral” as it said it expected to meet the inflation target and did not hint at possible interest rate cuts or hikes...However, Michael Hume, an economist at Lehman Brothers, described the statement as “mildly hawkish” as the bank is concerned that the weak rand could put meeting its inflation target at risk.

⁶An example of an editorial, *The Citizen* (20 December 2001 Inflation target not set in stone) If South Africa misses the inflation target of between three and six percent by next year, that won’t be the end of the world...A few years ago, especially prior to 1994, economists would have welcomed a rate of eight percent as an almost unattainable attractive goal. When Finance Minister Trevor Manuel set the current target there was widespread skepticism that he was being over-ambitious. Only fairly recently has six percent been seen as reasonable... Now, under pressure from extraneous factors, notably a sharp drop in the currency, it seems the upper limit of the target range will be breached... But inflation target are not cast in stone. They are guideline set by the government. There is no shame in invoking the escape clause which allows the six percent mark to be missed if there are external shocks.

⁷ An example of a Letter, (*The Star* (25 January 2001 A factor of inflation shows CGT fallacy) I refer to an article which appeared in Business Report January 2000, entitled “Sars soon to implement globally accredited CGT”, written by Pravin Dordhan...While praising capital gains tax Dordhan nowhere mention inflation...the big difference between...the effect of inflation on capital gains tax as against income tax is that, with income tax, inflation simply pushes you into a higher tax bracket, but because you pay tax in the same year that you earn the money, the effect of inflation on your tax on income s minimal.

The second element, Source, has three indicators – quoted sources, referring to those sources that are quoted verbatim, reported sources⁸, those sources whose statements are reported by the reporter⁹ and mentioned sources, these are the sources that are merely mentioned neither quoted nor reported¹⁰.

The third element, Source occupation, has five indicators – government, private analysts, academics, unionists and ordinary persons. Government sources refer to sources that are working for the government (civil servants and government ministers). For instance, “Finance minister Trevor Manuel said the Reserve Bank had set an inflation target of 3 percent -6 percent for the year 2002”. For the purpose of this research, the governor of the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) is categorised as a government source. This is due to the fact that SARB governor is appointed by the President, even though the SARB is an independent institution. Also because it is a state agent, just like the judiciary. Private analysts refer to either independent analysts and consultant, or company economists and political party leaders. For an example, “Nedcor chief economist Dennis Dyke said it was difficult to call interest rates, though he said that “these figures don’t help.... The inflation target is looking dicey”” (*Business Day* 20 December 2001). Academic sources refer to experts, analysts, economists who are with academic institutions. For instance, “Risks of rising inflation, the committee said, were supported by the results of an inflation expectations survey conducted for the Bank by the Stellenbosch based Bureau of Economic Research” (*Business Day* 24 July 2000). An ordinary person refers to the man on the street, who is sourced on his personal capacity. Union sources refer to union representatives and spokespersons. For instance, “The employers are saying that they will not give us 8% while (headline) inflation is around 5%” Ntuli (spokesperson of the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa - Numsa) said” (*Business Day* 17 November 2000).

⁸Source quoted verbatim (Malunga) - “On the positive side, PPI inflation did not edge higher than the May figure, holding at 8,6%. The overall picture is still one of declining inflation,” said Malunga (*Sowetan* 26 July 2001)

⁹ Source whose statement is reported (Colen Garrow)- “Brait economist Colen Garrow said an indication of rising food prices could be seen in the price of maize futures trading at R1 617 a ton, compared with just R795 a ton a year ago” (*Business Day* 20 December 2001)

¹⁰ Source mentioned by others sources (Stats SA [Statistics South Africa])-“Investec Asset Management portfolio manager, John Stopford, said it appears that Stats SA have still not explained the steep change in domestic workers inflation from recent levels of around 15%.”

The fourth element, cause, has 14 indicators. These are interest rates, growth, customers, competition, wages, material, business, prices, currency, supply demand, government, oil, employment and other¹¹. A cause/causal attribute refers to any factor

¹¹ For instance, Oil - "Higher oil prices and a weaker rand were the main factors behind a rise in domestic inflation in the second half of last year" (*The Star* 8 January 2001) -The governor warned that if oil prices continue to rise it might be difficult to reach the target of a 6% average rate of change in CPIX – by 2002.... The question exercising Mboweni is whether the effect on the CPI will be limited to the direct effect of higher fuel costs, or whether there will be second-round effects as price increase are passed on to consumers. (*Business Day* 4 September 2000)

Prices - "Food price increase for meat, vegetables and dairy products were some of the main factors accounting for the rise in CPIX." (*Business Day* 20 December 2001) - "Food inflation was 0,1% lower month on month, driven by drops in the prices of vegetables, fish and other seafood, sugar, fruit and nuts." (*Business Day* 31 January 2001)

Currency - "During 2000, when the rand's weakness was mainly against the dollar, the exchange rate had less effect on consumer prices than expected... The review point out that the currency's depreciation against a basket of currencies could create a stronger fee-through into the prices South Africans pay than last year, when rand weakness was primarily a function of dollar strength." (*Business Day* 23 October 2001) - "Strauss said the recent depreciation of the rand could pose a threat to the inflation target." (*Sowetan* 18 July 2001) - "Recent currency weakness may have also contributed to a rise in the producer price index," (*Business Day* 26 July 2001)

Wages - "Wage push inflation is declining as a factor, as recent productivity numbers show, and a hoped for social accord could further relax this pressure." (*Business Day* 22 March 2001) - "The bank identified upside risks as a higher-than-expected impact from the exchange rate, and another much talked-about inflation driver, higher wage settlements relative to productivity" (*Business Day* 23 2001)

Government - "The Bank also said in its review that administered prices, in contrast with many economists' views, were not dominant factor in the inflation determination process" (*The Star* 20 March 2001) - "The rise in regulated prices and those set by government agencies, know as administered prices, are imposing a major cost on the economy in terms of higher inflation and interest rates as well as growth that is foregone." (*Business Day* 26 July 2000)

Growth - "It (Reserve Bank) cited potential risk factors going forward as stronger domestic growth which, if overdone, could eventually put upward pressure on capacity and the inflation rate" (*The Star* 20 March 2001)

Employment - Many question the wisdom of strict inflation target for an economy which cannot afford the austerity and heavy job losses that typically accompany the measure needed to keep a lid on prices." (*Business Day* 22 March 2001)

Interest rates - "South Africa's inflation figures released by Statistics South Africa yesterday, showing a decrease, boosted hopes of an interest rate cut later in the year." (*Sowetan* 16 May 2001)

Supply/Demand - "Analysts said the main risks were the oil price, the rand, further recovery in demand and the danger that higher producer prices would feed into consumer inflation." (*The Star* 1 February 2001) - "Demand was already picking up slowly, and it was unlikely the Bank would risk fuelling demand further with an interest rate cut only to have to hike rate if inflation exceeded expectations, King said." (*Business Day* 20 September 2000)

Customers - "The headline measure rose 0,3% month on month, driven by increases in prices for housing, household operation and personal care." (*Business Day* 31 January 2001)

regarded in the story as a impacting on inflation. It could be stated directly or indirect, explicitly or by implication or its relationship with inflation causes. Interest rates refers to both bank lending rates and Reserve Bank rates (Repo Rates). Growth refers to growth related fluctuation in prices. Customers refers to the behaviour of customers which affects prices, whether they are spending more or they are saving. Competition refers to competition between businesses, monopolies, and oligopolies whose behaviour affects prices. Wages refers to wages, salaries and labour costs. Material refers to the cost of material for production and the behaviour of suppliers that has an effect on pricing. Business entails costs of doing business. Prices refers to the rise and fall in prices such as houses, basic goods and services etc. Currency refers to the change in the value of the currency, such as devaluation in relation to major currencies. Supply/demand refers to the changes in price due to the availability or unavailability of a particular food or service or increase in price because of increase in demand and the vice versa. Governments refers to government related changes in price, it could be through subsidies, basket prices (controlled or regulated prices), policies etc. Oil/fuel refers to the price of crude oil and cost of fuel. Employment refers to full employment and unemployment, their impact on prices. Other refers to all those causes, which could not be figured out where they belong or those once off causes that do not warrant to have a separate grouping. To ensure consistency and reliability coding was done by one person, the author of the study.

Data Analysis

After data was collected and coded, it was subjected to statistical analysis. Multiple variables were subjected to statistical manipulation, compared and contrasted to draw any identifiable trends and patterns to establish if there is any association between variables.

Competition - "Telkom's pricing is another piece of bad news for inflation watchers, and underlines the importance of monopoly pricing for SA's inflation rate. It also emphasises the risks of privatising a monopoly." (*Business Day* 6 November 2000)

Other - "Another factor was the extent and duration of the downturn in the US economy" (*The Star* 20 March 2001)

Table 3: Data by category

Shows data by category, article type, source occupation, type of source, and causes

Type of article	Total
Articles	353
News	278
Opinion and editorial	71
Letters	4
Sources	723
Source occupation	
Government sources	279
Private sources	408
Union Sources	31
Academic sources	7
Ordinary persons	0
Type of source	
Quoted	224
Reported	430
Mentioned	69
Total sources	723
Cause	470
Interest rates	74
Growth	22
Customers	2
Competition	3
Wages	39
Supplier/Material	0
Business	11
Prices	83
Currency	69
Supply/Demand	11
Government	18
Oil/fuel	113
Employment	13
Other	12

Hypotheses

There are six hypotheses this research seeks to test. They are based on earlier studies and findings in economics journalism and the nature of reporting. The aim is to test their applicability to the South African media. Nieman (1991; 2000) documented that there has been an increase in economics news evidenced by the increase in business papers and space allocated to economics and business news in general papers. This increase has been more noticeable in the closing decades of the last century.

Accordingly, I expect that there will be an increase in the number of inflation stories between 1999, 2000 and 2001 (Hypotheses 1).

Glasgow Media Group (1980) documented that there is a limited range of views represented in the media, and Parson (1989) cites a closer in economics debates and discourse, arguing that this closer is recent. Consequently, I anticipate that there will be a closer in economics debates in the media (Hypotheses 2).

Gavin et al (1998) showed that there is a 'consonant agenda' on causes of inflation. These findings contradict earlier findings by Jensen (1987) in the US, which showed that there is an absence of causes in economics news stories. It is expected that there will be a consonance on causes of inflation (Hypotheses 3a.). Gavin et al (1998) identified a number of agencies or causes of inflation. Also, there will be a variety of agencies/causes of inflation (Hypotheses 3b.).

Fishman (1977) documented that information sources are mostly bureaucratically organised and reporters attend only to these bureaucratically 'organised sellings'. It is expected that, bureaucratic sources will constitute majority of sources (Hypotheses 4).

Sigal (1973) study shows that most sources are official government sources, with most one source stories the source being a government source or among primary sources in multiple sourced stories. Government sources will be in majority in one-sourced stories and they will constitute a significant number of primary or quoted sources in multiple sourced stories (Hypotheses 5).

Parker (1997) noted that there is a diminishing role played by academic economists as sources in economics news. Reporters rely more and more on company economists and consultants. There will be a greater use of company/private economists than academics (Hypotheses 6).

Conclusion

To conclude, content analysis is a systematic, impartial quantitative method. It is a popular research method for communication scholars. Content analysis as a method is a good method for analysis of trends in communication content. It presents no validity

problems as it measures only what is intended to measure. As the goal of this research is to uncover trends in the coverage of inflation in South African print media, content analysis is a viable option. The study will have no validity problems. The sample for the study is representative of the South African print media. One person, the author of the study to ensure consistency, did coding. Also, categories have been clearly defined. And hypotheses to be tested clearly stated. Finally the study is replicable. A similar research could be done following the say method and process.

Chapter 6

Findings and Analysis of Data

Introduction

This chapter presents results of the hypotheses tested as well as other findings and discussion. Contained in this section is the evidence of what is happening in economics news reporting in SA. This is an important chapter of this research as it contains what the research is about, concrete evidence that is a proof of how the South African media report inflation. The value of this chapter is to achieve the goal and purpose of this study. That is, to uncover trends in economics reporting, deepen our understanding of how inflation is reported and to contribute to debates on media access, use of sources and social construction of news.

Results and analysis

Hypotheses 1 predicted that there would be an increase in inflation stories. It was supported. As shown in figure 1, findings are in line with the claim as in Nieman (1991; 2000) that there is an increase in economics news. This increased interest in economics news has led to growth in business newspapers and expansion of space allocated to economics-related news stories (Nieman 2000). The evidence of an increase in inflation stories confirms expectations and serves as testimony to increasing interest in economics news. This increase of economics news in South African newspapers is line with what is happening in the media elsewhere. For instance, studies in Finland (Tienari et al 2002) and Denmark (Kjaer et al 2002) also evidence of increased reader interest in economics news and space allocation in these countries.

Table 1: Number of articles per newspaper a year

Title	1999	2000	2001	Total
The Citizen	11	12	14	37
Sowetan	7	19	24	50
Business Day	13	63	41	117
The Star	32	64	53	149
Total	63	158	132	353

Findings as illustrated in Table 1, show that two newspapers, *The Citizen* and *Sowetan* showed a steady increase from 1999 – 2001, with *The Citizen* tripling in 2001. *The*

Star and *Business Day* showed an increase between 1999 and 2000 with *The Star* doubling and *Business Day* increasing more than four times, both however, showed a slight decrease in 2001. *The Citizen* and *Sowetan* had the fewest articles in total while *The Star* had the highest number. The three of them are general newspapers, however *The Star* has an insert (*Business Report*) which covers solely business and economics news, while *Business Day* is a mainly business newspaper. Both *The Star* and *Business Day* have a business focus that is probably why they had the highest number of inflation articles.

The increase in inflation coverage between 1999-2001 could also be due to some other factors. One of such factors is the relationship between the number of inflation stories and economic reality in those years. That is, the number of inflation stories versus fluctuations in inflation figures. For instance, according to data from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA website) there was a marked increase in inflation fluctuations between 1999-2001. Data show (Appendix A, page 86) that inflation fluctuated five times on a monthly basis in 1999. In 2000 and 2001 it fluctuated eight times. These changes must have somehow impacted on the increase on the numbers of articles as news is supposed to reflect reality. If this is the case, a question might be how to explain the decrease in the number of articles in *The Star* and *Business Day* in 2001 although there are as many fluctuations as the previous year. One explanation is that fluctuation in inflation figures is not the only reality of inflation. Some other events and issues that are inflation related must have had an input making inflation changes news worthy, and the absence of such events and issues in 2001 might have caused inflation to drop from media agenda. For instance, the introduction of inflation targeting on 23 February 2000 sparked a debate, which had receded in 2001 hence the drop in the number of stories¹².

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there would be a closer in economics debate in the media. This was supported. As shown in Table 4 (page 58) inflation was mostly covered in news – of the 353 articles 77% were news items; 20% of articles were opinion, analysis, commentary and editorial; only 2% of the article were letters. Also, ordinary

¹² In the two months period, February and March 2000 around which inflation targeting was introduced, coverage amounted to 8% of stories in *The Citizen*, 12% in the *Sowetan*, 15% in the *Business Day* and 12% in *The Star* which is a significant percentage (12%) only two months out of 36 months.

people are not used in inflation stories as sources, with unions and academics sourced accounting for four and one percent respectively. Opinion/editorials and letters are a way through which people take part in debates and voice out their views on issues covered in news. The few number of articles in these two categories bears testimony to limited participation.

Table 4: Type of articles

Type of article	Total
News	278
Opinion and editorial	71
Letters	4
Total Number of Articles	353

Hypotheses 3 (a) predicted that there would be a consonance on the causes of inflation. The four newspapers are similar in what they view as causes of inflation. Findings show that there is a level of consonance in South African print media. There are 13 causes of inflation that were identified for study. As illustrated, Table 5 some causes emerged as dominant than others. On the major causes at least two ranked a cause the same. For instance, of the four newspapers on the five major; oil, price, interest rates, currency and wages, in a minimum of two newspapers would rank the same. For instance, as shown in Table 5, Oil was the most cited cause across all newspapers. Prices was second on two newspapers. Currency is third in three newspapers. Interest rates and wage were fourth and fifth in two newspapers respectively.

Table 5: Causes of inflation as reported in four South African Newspapers

Cause of Inflation	Newspaper*							
	Citizen		Sowetan		Business Day		Star	
		%		%		%		%
Oil/fuel	11	26,8	11	22	45	23,4	46	24,5
Prices	10	24,3	11	22	35	18,2	27	14,4
Interest rates	5	12,1	9	18	29	15,1	31	16,5
Currency	6	14,6	4	8	30	15,6	29	15,5
Wages	5	12,1	6	12	17	8,8	11	5,8
Government	2	4,8	0	0	4	2,0	12	6,4
Growth	0	0	3	6	8	4,1	11	5,8
Other	1	2,4	1	2	4	2,0	6	3,2
Employment	0	0	1	2	7	3,6	5	2,6
Supply/Demand	0	0	0	0	3	1,5	8	4,2
Business	1	2,4	4	8,0	6	3,1	0	0
Competition	0	0	0	0	2	1,0	1	0,5
Customers	0	0	0	0	2	1,0	0	0

* The first column on each newspaper shows the number of times a cause was cited by the newspaper. The second column shows a frequency of each cause as a percentage proportion of total causes mentioned by the newspaper. The percentages of the four newspapers are not supposed to add to 100% because they are a proportion of causes in each newspaper.

Oil/fuel

Oil/fuel is the single cause that appeared in all newspapers as the most cause. In the *Sowetan* it ranked equally with prices, both accounted for 22% each. The two of them accounted for 44% of the total causes mentioned in the *Sowetan*. On average (all four newspapers), oil accounted for 24% of total causes. Oil/fuel emerged as the most quoted cause of inflation due to its links to other inflation causes such as the value of the rand, price of transport and its primary and secondary effects in the economy. For instance, the media report it like this,

“Higher oil prices and a weaker rand were the main factors behind a rise in domestic inflation in the second half of last year.” (*The Star*, 8 January 2001)

“Analysts said the main risks were the oil price, the rand, further recovery in demand and the danger that higher producer prices would feed into consumer inflation” and “Imported inflation was the main culprit, reflecting the impact of high oil prices and the depreciation of the value of the rand.” (*The Star*, 1 February 2001)

“The governor warned that if oil prices continue to rise it might be difficult to reach the target of a 6% average rate of change in CPIX – by 2002.... Even so, price increases are expected to take their toll on consumer inflation for some months to come. The question exercising Mboweni is whether the effect on the CPI will be limited to the direct effect of higher fuel costs, or whether there will be second-round effects as price increases are passed on to consumers. (*Business Day*, 4 September 2000)

Prices

The second major cause on average is Prices, it accounted for 17%. However, it was only in *The Citizen* and *Business Day* that it was a second major cause accounting for 24% of causes in *The Citizen* and 18% in *Business Day*. In *The Star*, it rated fourth with only 14%. Price changes are reported as inflationary. For example, an increase in prices of consumables and other commodities is reported resulting in high inflation and a decrease in prices as lowering inflation. Typical examples include,

“Food price increase for meat, vegetables and dairy products were some of the main factors accounting for the rise in CPIX.” (*Business Day*, 20 December 2001)

“Food inflation was 0,1% lower month on month, driven by drops in the prices of vegetables, fish and other seafood, sugar, fruit and nuts.” (*Business Day*, 31 January 2001)

“The economic slowdown and lower oil and other international commodity prices have helped to subdue domestic inflationary pressure in recent month.” (*Sowetan*, 16 November 2001)

Interest Rates

Rating third on average is Interest rates with 15% of the total of causes in all newspapers. Like Prices, it did not rate third in all newspapers. It rated third in *Business Day* with 15%, fourth in *The Citizen* with 12% and second in *The Star* and *Sowetan* with 16% and 18% respectively. Through its monetary policy the South African Reserve Bank uses interest rates as too to control inflation. Media reports were reflecting speculations on rate cuts and policy issues such discussions regarding the use of interest rates. Such reports were primarily on inflation targeting and the Reserve Bank's use of interest rates to lower inflation. For instance,

“In a report in weekend newspaper, Vavi was quoted as saying that he was opposed to plans to introduce inflation targeting because a lower inflation rate could mean high unemployment.... In his major policy address last August, Mboweni made it clear he was keen to obtain a political buy-in from labour, business and the community, but was prepared to take a tough anti-inflationary stance even without their support.” (*Business Day*, 24 January 2000)

“The bank said in its first monetary policy review, which aims to explain the conduct of monetary policy in the era of inflation targeting, that the outlook was subject to uncertainty regarding the expectations for many inflation determinants.

Monetary policy would therefore “remain cautious in order to ensure that the inflation target will be achieved without large and potentially damaging fluctuations in interest rates” it said.” (*The Star*, 20 March 2001)

“Industrial Development Corporation senior economist Dick Mhango said the figures built confidence in meeting the inflation target in 2002. Mhango said the figures clearly supported a further repo rate cut later in the year if the trend continued.” (*Sowetan*, 18 July 2001)

“South Africa's inflation figures released by Statistics South Africa yesterday, showing a decrease, boosted hopes of an interest rate cut later in the year.” (*Sowetan*, 16 May 2001)

Currency

Currency ranked fourth on average with 14% of all causes. It ranked fourth in three newspapers with *The Citizen* 14%, *Business Day* 15% and *The Star* 15% while in *Sowetan* it ranked fifth with 8%. The value of the rand was cited many times on inflation news and much has to do with its depreciation against major currencies in 2001¹³. Report would say for instance,

“During 2000, when the rand’s weakness was mainly against the dollar, the exchange rate had less effect on consumer prices than expected... The review point out that the currency’s depreciation against a basket of currencies could create a stronger fee-through into the prices South Africans pay than last year, when rand weakness was primarily a function of dollar strength.” (*Business Day*, 23 October 2001)

“Strauss said the recent depreciation of the rand could pose a threat to the inflation target.” (*Sowetan*, 18 July 2001)

“Recent currency weakness may have also contributed to a rise in the producer price index,” (*Business Day*, 26 July 2001)

Wages

Wages ranked fifth on average with 8%. In the *Sowetan* and *The Citizen* it ranked fourth with 12, *Business Day* fourth with 8% and in *The Star* it raked sixth with 5%. Reports on causal relationship between wages and inflation related mainly to wage negotiations.

“The National Union of Metal-workers of South Africa (Numsa) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) are involved in heated negotiations with employers over the inflation-linked extended wage agreements signed in 1998 and 1999 respectively. Most agreement link wages increases to the consumer inflation rate, and, increasingly, this condition is coming under the spotlight. (*Business Day*, 24 July 200)

“Wage push inflation is declining as a factor, as recent productivity numbers show, and a hoped for social accord could further relax this pressure.” (*Business Day*, 22 March 2001)

“The bank identified upside risks as a higher-than-expected impact from the exchange rate, and another much talked-about inflation driver, higher wage settlements relative to productivity.” (*Business Day*, 23 2001)

¹³ “Over November and December 2001, the rand plunged 40% against key convertible currencies to a new record low of 13.86 per US dollar.” (Karrithi 2002)

Minor causes

As shown in Table 5 (page 58) employment, customers, competition and others accounted for less than 5% each on any of the newspapers. The exception is *The Star* which attributed 4.2% of its causes for supply/demand. Material was not cited even once as a cause.

As in Gavin et al (1998), “consonant agenda” on causes of inflation is a feature in South African print media as the results show in Table 5 (page 58) South African media ranked major causes similarly. There is, however, a notable difference between causes in South African media found by this study and Gavin et al (1998) study in UK. Their study found that ‘business’ and ‘government’ were the greatest causes of inflation. According to this study, ‘business’ and ‘government’ are not cited amongst the five major causes of inflation. On average they rank sixth and seventh respectively. The likely explanation of this difference is the preferential choice of sources used in South African media.

Table 6 (page 63) shows how sources were used as per occupation by the four newspapers. Company sources and government sources are the most sourced categories of sources. It is therefore unlikely that government sources would say government is the cause of inflation and private or company sources from business also would not say business is the cause. That would mean they are responsible for the economic mean ill – a blame they are unlikely to accept. As pointed out in the literature review in chapters Three and Four, sources play an important role in shaping news. The four newspapers drew a most of their sources from what Dreier (1982) termed ‘pool of expert’ set up by business to serve as sources. As Dreier pointed out, the establishment of the ‘pool of expert’ aimed at reflecting business in a positive way. It is not surprising therefore that business is not viewed as a major cause of inflation.

Table 6: Source Occupation: The number of sources per occupation as used by the newspapers

	Citizen	Sowetan	B. Day	The Star	Total
Government sources	38	45	93	103	279
Private sources	24	49	139	196	408
Union Sources	1	3	20	6	30
Academic source	0	0	3	5	8
Ordinary persons	0	0	0	0	0
Total	63	97	255	310	725

Hypothesis 3(b) predicted that there would be a variety of agencies or causes of inflation. It was supported. There are 12 mentioned causes in inflation stories in the study with only 2% of causes that are not identifiable referred to as other. Inflation causes were attributed either directly or indirectly by way of association. For instance, a direct attribute would say “Higher oil prices and a weaker rand were the main factors behind a rise in domestic inflation in the second half of last year” (*The Star* 20 December 2001). Indirect attribute would say “The economic slowdown and lower oil and other international commodity process have helped to subdue domestic inflationary pressure in recent month” (*The Star* 8 January 2001).

These findings concur with Gavin et al (1998) that there is a variety of causes of inflation. This is shown in as many as 12 mentioned causes and the 2% unidentified sources. This is in contrast with Jensen (1987), who reported an absence of causes in economic stories, creating an impression that things seem to be moving by themselves. As suggested by Gavin et al (1998), the contrast in finding could be due to the length of the period studied. Jensen (1987) one-week study is likely to have been short a period for the study to uncover causes or agents behind inflation. Gavin et al (1998) study of inflation was done over a year, this study examines it over three years and Iyengar (1991) study is over six years. The three of them conclude that there is evidence of causal explanation.

Hypothesis 4, predicted that bureaucratic sources would constitute a majority of sources. It was supported. As Table 6 above illustrates, all of the 725 sources cited in 353 article from the four newspapers are bureaucratic sources. They are from four institutions - government, private sector, unions and academic institutions. There are

no ordinary persons or individuals on their personal capacity as affected by inflation or having views on inflation were sourced.

As the study found that the media used only bureaucratic sources despite inflation affecting all citizens, there are two possible explanations. The first is consistent with sociology of news literature. As discussed in chapter Three, due to routinisation of news production process and pursuit of objectivity, there is systematic over-access of some people as sources while excluding others. The second explanation is consistent with critique of contemporary economics journalism literature discussed in chapter Four. The literature shows that economics journalism is marketed as elite communication (Kariithi 2003) and that to take part in economics debates requires a certain level of education in the field of economics as “economics theory itself has grown more mathematical and arcane in recent years” (Parker 1997:127). The media therefore target institutional sources whose comments are unlikely to be questioned as they are official voices or experts in the field, ordinary people are taken for granted and their views seem not to matter.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that use of government sources would be in the majority in one-sourced stories and that there would be a significant number of government sources as primary sources in multiple-sourced stories. It was also supported. Government sources accounted for 52% of one-sourced stories. Government primary/quoted sources in multiple-sourced stories accounted for more than a third at 36% of the total of primary sources.

There are four possible explanations as to why government sources are in significant numbers. Firstly, Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), a government department is responsible for releasing inflation figures, making it a reference point for journalists covering inflation. Secondly, South African Reserve Bank (SARB), a state agent though independent of government is tasked with the responsibility of monetary policy, which includes control over inflation. Thirdly, the government is viewed as responsible for the economy of the country. Finally, government introduced inflation targeting in 2000. The great volume of government sources in one-sourced and multiple sourced stories can be interpreted as evidence of what Kjaer et al (2002) view as a sign of an increase in issues of regulation and public policy in business

news. In this case the issue of regulation or public policy pertains to the introduction of inflation targeting policing that happened within the period of the study. All these factors must have made government the central point of reference for inflation related stories.

Hypothesis 6 predicted that there would be a greater use of company or private consultants than academics. It was supported. As shown in Table 7 below academic sources accounted for only one percent of total sources while company sources accounted for 56%. Company sources are the most sourced followed by government with 38%, unions with 4% and the least being academic sources.

Table 7: Private sources v/s Academic sources

Source occupation	Newspaper*				
	Citizen %	Sowetan %	Business Day %	Star %	All Newspapers %
Private sources	38,09	50,51	54,50	62,98	56
Academic source	0	0	0,78	1,62	1

* Private and Academic sources as a percentage of the total of sources used by each newspaper.

Extensive use of company sources can be attributed to what Dreier (1982) called “ideological mobilisation” of the media by business. That is, an outcome of the “establishment of think tanks which could function as sources and experts to the news media” (Dreier 1982:124). Companies, such as banks and fund managers have their own economics experts who are readily available to serve as sources. They are easily available for quick quotes than academics. Again, the nature of news production process has an input in this regard, journalists chase looming deadlines while constrained by limited resources that limit search for academics who are in institutions that are situated far from business centres compared to companies that are neighbouring media houses with personnel dedicated to the media.

Discussion

Table 7 above illustrates heavy dependence on company sources. This confirms the claim that,

Professionalisation is accompanied by a parallel process of counter-professionalisation on the side of news sources. First in terms of private organizations, then in terms of economic policy institution propagating national economic themes and problems, and finally in terms of professionalisation of media relations in firms and interest organisations. (Kjaer et al 2001:16-17)

As argued in the literature review in chapter Three, there is a danger in this sort of journalism. These sources work for the same companies they are reporting on. This raises the question of impartiality of these sources. As the findings show, Table 5 (page 58) unlike in the UK study (Gavin et al 1998), where business was found to be a major cause of inflation, here business as a cause is down-played. Arguably, these sources could not be viable sources of information that could expose company wrongdoings. By relying on these company sources the media could be said to be sacrificing its watchdog role in order to get quick quotes at low costs.

This over-accessing of company sources could explain the media's inability to expose company wrongdoings until its too late, a major damage has been caused to the economy, investors and employees. For instance, Tienari et al (2002) show that during the emergence of business journalism especially in the 1980s, business journalists became close to the businesses they were covering. "The banks used many techniques to circles business journalists into a tightly knit group, to be sensitive to the banks' interests. They became almost a part of the managerial elite in Finland" (Tienari et al 2002:11). This concurs with the claim by Henrique (2000) that business reporters have a tendency to merely collect deadline quotes without questioning motives of sources. This cosy relationship between media and business is despite the fact that as a field, economics and business journalism has developed considerably over the past two decades (Kariithi 2003). Also, that after the crisis in the banking sector during the early 1990s recession "strengthened the role of what could be labelled as critical journalism on business and management...Business journalists became more and more proactive in hunting down stories" (Tienari et al (2002:15).

Sidelining of academics in preference of company consultants could be responsible for what Mosley (1980) viewed as a less than a full view of the economy whereby the press jumped from one economics school of thought to another without making any linkages. Talking about economy in a way that is different from that which is presented in intelligentsia. This creates a gap in information that is presented in economics news. Another issue is the contribution of these sources. That is, how they make inputs, assessing and prescribing solutions to economic events. As argued by Kjaer et al (2002:20) economics experts have moved from only making input on political initiatives and decisions, “they now mostly have a corrective function.” For instance,

“Econometrix chief economist Azar Jammine called on government to assist inflation targeting by influencing the price increases instituted by government owned enterprises.” (*Business Day*, 16 October 2000)

“One approach towards curbing administered price increases in some countries has been to impose a limit on their price increases... However, this does come with its costs as very often ‘administered agencies’ need to charge at a rate which allows them to expand, and raise the chances ultimately of lowering costs. Roux (portfolio manager, Investec Asset Management) said it was important for the Bank to convey its expectations of inflation to the regulators of Telkom and Eskom, as well as local authorities, as they were effectively monopolies.” (*Business Day*, 26 July 2000)

Ordinary people have been relegated to the margins on inflation discussions. As seen in chapter Two the media should serve as a public sphere and a vehicle for all citizens to take part in debates on public issues. This is by providing people with means to access information and impart ideas. However, the findings of this study paint a bad picture in this regard. The only people who get opportunities to impart their ideas and take part in economics debates as in inflation are bureaucrats. Titles and job positions continue to be used to indicate professional and political authority of sources (Kjaer et al 2002). Evidently, in this case of inflation reporting, ordinary citizens do not have a voice even though the economic processes affect them directly and adversely. Inflation is an issue that affects them directly and policies that are an outcome of these debates impact on their lives. For instance there is no ordinary citizen as would be affected by inflation targeting was sourced in the stories discussing inflation targeting as in the quotes below,

Reserve Bank governor Tito Mboweni has defended his inflation targeting policy, saying it was important SA business had no doubts about its objectives.... He also said he was also determined not to intervene to protect the value of the rand on the world's currency markets. (*Business Day*, 7 August 2001)

He (Leslie Boyd, President of SA Chamber of Business - Sacob) said Wakeford's (CE Sacob) call for the revision of inflation targets must be rejected as out of hand. I can report that that I am expressing the consensus view of SA business and frankly Sacob is out of hand (*Business Day*, 4 July 2000)

The exclusion of ordinary citizens could be attributed to the elitist nature of economics journalism (Kariithi 2003). As argued by Parker (1997:1) "as economist themselves admit, economic theory itself has grown more mathematical and arcane in recent years. The effect has been to tighten the circle of those who feel confident wrestling with major economic concepts". Consequently the media provides a different reality. This is a bureaucratic version of events and reality, as argued in chapter three, dominant ideology as articulated by these bureaucratic sources is perpetuated and taken for granted as the only reality (Hall 1978). As Tienari illustrates by looking at what is happening in the Finnish business press, that dominant discourse, "adheres to economic and financial rational, offering little space for criticizing market economy or its new-liberal ideals" (Tienari et al 2002:16).

It is clear from the findings that elites have more access to the media as sources. Their dominance as sources put them at an advantage. They have become what Hall (1978) calls "primary definers". Their voices set parameters as to what is relevant for debate. The concept of signification, (Hall 1978) is at play in economics journalism in South Africa. It is clear that sources set the tone, define limits and what count as a cause of inflation. They determine what is a significant important on inflation debate.

Within the parameters set by sources, media do not simple play a reflective role, it also mediates through the level of control they have on what sources say. While sources have power over what they say, media have power over how that is said or presented to the public. This position of the media in the communication process makes them even more powerful as they shape how people interpret and understand

what is being communicated. While the findings as illustrated in Table 5.5 show that South African print media does not draw ‘primary sources’ (quoted sources) from a small pool, there is a notable difference in the use of sources. The media exercise power and control over sources in the manner they use sources in stories. As argued by Glasgow Media Group (1980) the level of mediation and control over the communication process is achieved through the structuring of actors within a story. Most of the time the media report sources rather than quote them as illustrated in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Type of source as a percentage of sources cited in each of the four newspapers

Type of source	Citizen %	Sowetan %	B. Day %	Star %	Total %
Quoted	34,92	30,92	27,05	33,44	30.98
Reported	33,33	58,76	61,96	62,98	59.47
Mentioned	28,57	10,30	10,98	4,22	9.54
Single sourced stories	37,83	34	28,30	30,87	
Government single sources	71,42	52,94	45,45	52,17	
Most sourced Companies	14,28	15,46	26,66	29,87	

The Citizen and *Sowetan* had 41% and 45% of quoted sources respectively and *Business Day* and *The Star* 33% each, is important in showing that there is a variable use or control over sources. *The Citizen* is the only newspaper that maintained an even distribution of the types of source, quoted 34%, reported 33% and mentioned 28%. Meanwhile in *Business Day* and *The Star* a large portion of sources fell on the reported category with almost two thirds at 61% and 63% respectively, with quoted 27% and 33% respectively, and an insignificant percentage of mentioned sources. *Sowetan* had 34% quoted, 55% reported and 10% mentioned sources.

Even those quoted verbatim there is evidence of control in the sense that media select dramatic quotes and heavily edit them. For instance the following quote are not only short but also not the entire statement that was said they end with a comma;

“On the positive side, PPI inflation did not edge higher than the May figure, holding at 8,6%. The overall picture is still one of declining inflation,” said Malunga (*Sowetan*, 26 July 2001)

“An interest rate cut this year would make him (Mboweni) appear too liberal,” Balim said” (*Business Day*, 22 September 2000)

“The target will be met. Yet, in the short term, inflation is yet to peak,” said Magan Mistry, and economist with Nedcor Investment Bank”... “We are ruling out any dramatic weakness in the rand...We are not going to see (it) move beyond R7, 30 to the dollar again for the rest of the year,” said Razia Khan, an economist with Standard Chartered London.” (*Business Day*, 6 October 2000)

The way the media structures sources could be taken as an indication of the professional independence of journalists, deciding how to report particular issues (Kjaer et al 2002). It is clear from the findings that elites have more access to the media as sources. Their dominance as sources put them at an advantage. They have become what Hall (1978) calls “primary definers”. Their voices, irrespective of their mediation by newswriters, set parameters as to what is relevant for debate. The concept of signification, (Hall 1978) is at play in economics journalism in South Africa. Findings show that newswriters do not only quote and report attributes by sources but also structure their utterance and even comment on them. However, it is clear that sources set the tone, define limits and what count as a cause of inflation. They determine what is a significant important on inflation debate.

Conclusion

The findings paint a bleak picture, showing how the media deviates from its norms and standards. The media that are supposed to be a public platform through which citizens participate in public debates have turned into a bureaucratic arena that affords a selected few officeholders means to shape public opinion and define reality for the public. Criticisms of bias towards certain sources are confirmed. Findings present an overwhelming evidence of inequitable access to the media, control of sources and the ability of the media to put certain issues on the agenda.

The point of concern here is the quality of reporting as shown by the trends. The media has power over what reality is reflected and how. This power is exercised through the choice of sources and how they are structured in a story. The South African print media by using only bureaucratic sources presents a bureaucratic version of reality. Extensive use of government and business sources may have

exonerated both business and government from blame for inflation. Certain effects such as exclusion of certain groups and domination of certain issues proceed from this kind of sourcing and reporting. In this case the South African public has been excluded from policy debates concerning inflation.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

On literature review

The purpose of this research was to look at the nature of economics journalism with the view of showing trends and patterns in reporting economics issues in South Africa. The aim was to deepen our understanding and contribute to debates on media access, use of sources and to inform debates on social construction of news. This is against background criticisms that economics journalism is uncritical – while there are claims that it is growing. The study endeavoured to provide concrete evidence obtained through substantive research. It sort to measure media output against norms and standards. Central to the study is the application of the debates on the nature of economics news reporting in a South African context.

Chapters Two, Three and Four provided discussion on the role and functioning of the media. In chapter two the focus was on the role of the media, here the issue is the role of the media in a democratic society. Media role forms the bases for drawing of standards however; pinning down the role of media in a democracy proved to be a complex issue as writers had differing views about democracy itself. Writers however, agree on the fact that democracy entails people participation in their governance. One way of doing that being their right to take part in public debates, access to means of information, and dissemination of ideas without constraints. This formed the bases for the role of the media as it is viewed as providing suitable means of citizen participation. As argued in chapter Two, this is based on the assumption of disinterestedness of the media, their ability to reach more citizens at the same time than any other means, and people's equal access to the media. It emerged that the role of media in a democratic society is to provide citizens with information they could use to take part in and influence policy and decision-making by providing means to impart their ideas. Equal access to the media as news consumers and sources is a prerequisite in the role of media, as democracy requires equality of all citizens. There are indications that South African media is failing citizens on economics news. Bureaucrats and big companies have better access to the media as sources, putting them at an advantage in defining and shaping economic perceptions.

As argued in chapter Two, the role of media in a democracy is to provide a public arena for debate. This arena is supposed to be independent from both state and private interest, to allow every citizen equal access. As argued by Habermas (1989) in the age of mass communication the public sphere lost its critical character as private interest invaded the public sphere. Criticisms of economics journalism attest to the uncritical character of the media when dealing with corporates and states.

Chapter Three focused on the operation of the media in the processes of producing and disseminating news. Here the issue was on whether the media is fulfilling its role as discussed in the second chapter. That is, adherence of the media to its norms and standards to fulfil its democratic role. It emerged from the literature discussed in chapter Three that the functioning of the media – how it operates and its position as an institution in society could not provide equal access to all citizens. The point here is that, there are structural and systematic constraints that prevent the media from performing according norms and standards. News is viewed as a social construct, a product of interaction between media owners, newswriters, sources and advertisers. It emerged that the poor are marginalised and excluded as sources as company and bureaucratic dominate.

Preference of certain sources is an outcome of processes and routines followed during news production. Newswriters follow routines in pursuit of objectivity. While this prevents personal bias on the part on newswriters, it results in structural bias. It legitimises the institutional arrangements and preference of bureaucratic sources at the expense of ordinary citizens. The worldview of these institutional sources is perpetuated and they become primary definers (Hall).

Chapter Four illustrated that although economics coverage impact on government popularity and policy debates and that there is a closure in economics debates. Certain groups have limited access as sources. It is argued that economics journalism is marketed as elite communication. Criticisms are levelled against economics journalism especially in that it excludes the majority of citizens. This questions the agenda of those who are given preferential treatment in this subfield of journalism. Even more so it is uncritical in dealing with corporates, foregoing its role as a watchdog, keeping power-holders in check. Evidence paint a bleak picture as does the

literature. The selected few who serve as sources set the news agenda that shapes opinions and perceptions on economic activities and policies.

On findings

Chapter Six provided evidence that qualified criticisms of economics journalism. A lot of evidence that emerged from the study point to the validity of the claims and criticisms as discussed in chapters three and four. Findings show that the media is failing to adhere to its norms and standards. The claim that economics journalism is growing is not sufficiently supported by evidence; the challenge remains the quality of reporting in this subfield. Reliance on company and government sources is one of the reasons of economics journalism's leniency towards business and government or power holders in society at large. The exclusion of academics could explain why there is a narrow range of economic perspectives presented in the media despite economics debates in intelligentsia. Equal access, which is one of the main requirements for media in a democratic society, is the main casualty in economics journalism. This is elite communication affording access only to office holders and powerful people in society, confirming claims that there is a closure of economics debates. This exclusion of ordinary citizens strips them off their right to take part in policy debates and influencing decision-making, for instance, the introduction of inflation targeting policy in South Africa in 2000. As the findings show that in inflation stories it's only bureaucratic sources that were sourced, this means that ordinary citizens did not get an opportunity to take part in debates that possibly played a role in the introduction of the policy.

It emerged that the news agenda is some how influenced by the sources the media use. While the media has a level of control in how they present and interpret what sources say, sources shape what is talked about in the media. Sources determine what is viewed as causing inflation. The difference in what causes inflation between this study and Gavin et al (1998) illustrates this. Due to the nature of sources used in South African media, mainly government and business sources, the effects are that 'government' and 'business' were not viewed as major causes of inflation while in the UK media, the study showed that they were the greatest causes.

This study has made contribution to three areas of debates about the media. Firstly, is the question of accessibility of the media. Accessible media is critical as the media are supposed to serve as a public sphere. Debates on the accessibility of the media are centred on the ownership and control of media organisations. Those who want the media to be free from government control see the market as the best way of ensuring that the media is free from outside influence and therefore better positioned to serve the public interest. Those who want government control argue that the market without government intervention cannot ensure unlimited access. Media in South Africa are protected from interference by the constitution that guarantees freedom of expression and of the Press. However, as illustrated by sourcing patterns it cannot be said that the media is universally and equally accessible to every South African citizen at least not as sources. The question of control is therefore not the only factor that impacts on accessibility. As argued in chapter Three and shown by findings, the way media operate and use sources impact negatively on access to all citizens as sources.

Secondly, debates on ideological bias of the media revolve around how the media are perpetuating the dominant ideology of the ruling class. As discussed in chapter Three, some argue that this is an outcome of the media being owned and controlled by the ruling class. Others argue that it's an outcome of how the media operate and the nature of its relations with other institutions in society – such as advertisers, government and the market etc. In any case, the point is that the media tends to rely heavily on certain sections of society for sources and therefore present news and views from their perspectives. The contribution of this study is the confirmation of this reliance on bureaucratic sources in economics news.

Finally, the overall contribution of all the findings is on social construction of news. Literature reflects how the reality as presented by the media come into being. This study points out that through the choice of sources and how they are used within the story impact on how the story is interpreted and understood. Journalists select sources following routines in pursuit of objectivity they structure these sources in a story. Some sources are placed high up in the source hierarchy and these are interviewed and quoted sources wielding more power. Others are merely reported or mentioned by other sources. Journalist structure source utterances and even comment on them, putting themselves at the centre, playing the mediating role.

Equally important is the role of the story and how it is obtained, which in turn shape our reality and blind us to some realities.

On methodology

Content analysis as a quantitative research is a rigorous method. There is no reason to doubt that the results of this research are valid, depicting high standards of reliability. To ensure consistency in the coding phase, one coder who is also the author of this study did coding. A similar study following the same methods as indicated in chapter five can be conducted to test reliability of the study, its findings and conclusions. Content analysis as an instrument measures what is intended, especially if all the categories under study are well defined, as it is the case with this study. Impartiality of the researcher is important, it was ensured by minimising subjectivity by clearly defining variables and categories for measurement. Content analysis proved to be a good methodology for the study. This is illustrated in the results of the whole research, which have achieved the aims and goals of the research.

On further research

While a lot of questions are answered about economics reporting in South Africa, the trends that have emerged from the study raise some questions. These questions can be answered by embarking on further studies within this sub-field of journalism. Three areas within economics news coverage could be explored. The first could be a longitudinal study that goes decades further back to see if the trends that emerged from this research are a new phenomenon or they date a long way back. This research could be a comparative study that would cover at least three countries to see if these trends are particular to South Africa or are global in nature.

A second option could aim at addressing shortfalls of content analysis - content analysis provides half the picture – there is a need for a study that would involve other methodologies to fill gaps in content analysis and answer the questions it raises. A triangulation methodology could include content analysis, textual or discourse analysis and even a survey.

Finally a third option could be geared at answering questions of media effects. It could be an audience analysis – this would enlighten us as to what effects this sort of journalism is having on media consumers.

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