

**VOTING AND MEANING IN HOOGGENOEG,
GRAHAMSTOWN: AN AUDIENCE'S RECEPTION OF
GROCOTT'S MAIL'S 2011 MUNICIPAL ELECTION
COVERAGE**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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By

Ajibola Taofeek Amzat (11a0508)

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Supervisor: Professor Harry Dugmore

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the meanings that residents of the township of Hooggenoeg (in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa) made of the election coverage in the *Grocott's Mail* newspaper during 2011 municipal elections in South Africa. In addition, this study also sought to understand the particular set of 'normative roles' played by the paper, both with reference to the well-established body of theory about the normative roles of journalism in a democracy, and in terms of the paper's own conceptualisation of its role in the functioning of local democracy.

Grocott's Mail, the oldest independent newspaper in South Africa, provided extensive pre-election coverage, which included producing and distributing an unprecedented free edition of the paper. The paper also facilitated a town hall debate in order to encourage residents to vote, and empower them to make a more informed choice about their vote.

Three qualitative research methods, namely qualitative content analysis, focus group interviews, and individual interviews were used to examine the relationship between the content provided by the paper and the audience's process of 'making sense' and deriving meaning from the content provided.

The study concludes that *Grocott's* attempt to encourage democratic culture in Grahamstown, in keeping with the more 'facilitative' normative roles that the local media can play, was only partially successful. Much of the election reporting subordinated the voices of the ordinary people, and privileged reporting that focussed narrowly on the voting process, and which foregrounded the views of political parties. Overall this coverage largely failed to resonate with the *Grocott's* readers who live in Hooggenoeg (a largely 'coloured' area of Grahamstown), whose key concerns in terms of their daily life – such as poverty, unemployment, crime, lack of services – seemed, to them, unaddressed by this election coverage and, consequently, was not as engaging or convincing as the publishers/editors had hoped it would be. It can be also argued that *Grocott's* narrow conceptualisation of democracy as entailing only public participation in electoral processes failed to cater for how audiences can be made aware of how they can participate in governance beyond the election period.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to the three females I love most: my mother, Fatmat Bintu; my wife, Olubusola; and my daughter, Mopelola.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

1.0 The Context of the Research

This study seeks to critically analyse elements of an audience's reception of the *Grocott's Mail* (hereafter *Grocott's*) newspaper's coverage of May 2011 municipal 'local government' election in the Makana local council area of Eastern Cape, South Africa. Ahead of the election, *Grocotts* published a large number of news articles, editorial and opinion articles, letters-to-the-editor and illustrations on election-related issues. A week before the election, *Grocott's* also took the unprecedented step of publishing 10,000 copies of an election-themed 'special edition' that was distributed free of charge in the Makana area, rather than sold for the usual R5 (approximately US\$.040) cover price.

In various editorials, the newspaper described these efforts as its "contribution to the democratic process" (*Grocott's* 2011). It also took the unusual step (for *Grocotts*) of organising a 'town hall' meeting to give all parties an opportunity to debate each other. This event turned out to be the only multi-party local debate organised during this election. *Grocott's* approach can be usefully understood with reference to the "facilitative role" of the media, one of the four key 'normative' roles of modern news media theorized by Christians et al (2009: 159). Within this role, the practice of journalism is seen as a key part of democratic practice that deliberately seeks to "stimulate(s) citizen deliberation and build(s) public understanding of issues (Lambeth et al 1998:17; Tanni 2007).

While *Grocott's* clearly saw its efforts as contributing to the deepening of a more deliberative democracy, the meanings made or 'actualised' by the readers of the newspaper remain unexplored. Journalists may cover election events and share information with the public as 'objectively' as they can, but as Herman and Chomsky (2008) argue, media representations of events and processes such as elections are shaped by often unspoken 'ideological' presuppositions of the media creators, and, in

addition, individuals and groups interpret ideological texts and create their own meanings based on their lived-experience (Hall 1980, Morley 1992). Such interpretations are, however, “patterned” (Jensen 1988: 23). The meanings made by audiences are intertwined with the social structure of the audience (and media producers) in complex ways and are best understood through close examination of such social structures -- and their history -- and of how people articulate their understanding of the social structures they are embedded in (Fiske 1987:254). Only through such unpacking can the meanings made by audiences be discerned and surfaced.

1.1 Elections in South Africa and Voter turnout

Elections are identified as one of the indicators of a democratic state (Linz et al. 1995). South Africa’s first genuinely democratic election did not take place until 1994 marking the end of racial exclusivity that was the key characteristic of apartheid (Miller 2005). About 20 million South Africans voted in this landmark election with the turnout of 86 percent of registered voters. The African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela (ANC), won the election with 62.65 percent majority. The closest rival National Party (NP) garnered 20.39 percent (www.elections.org.za).

The marginalized groups in the country hoped that the ANC would rapidly eradicate inequality and ameliorate the racial legacy of apartheid government (Baregu 2004). But progress in this regard has been slow. Partly due to the slow pace of real ‘change on the ground’, voter turnout in subsequent elections, fell off sharply. The total number of people voting reduced to 16 million in the 1999 election (www.statistic.gov), i.e. 3.5 million fewer people voting compared to those who voted in 1994 (Mattes 2003).

By the time the third democratic election was held in 2004, “voter fatigue” (Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen 2010) had started manifesting and by 2009, though the level of voter registration (77.3 percent) was similar to that of 2004, only 59 percent of eligible voters voted in the national election.

Despite the fact that young people aged 18 to 35 constitute a substantial proportion of the South African population, electoral data from 2006 to 2011 period show that though voters’ rolls have increased, there is no significant change in the proportion of

South African youth who registered to vote (<http://www.hsrc.ac.za>). Specifically, the South African youths (constituted by the 20 -29 and 30-39 age groups) have over the past three countrywide elections shown the lowest levels of real participation in proportion to the total population estimate for each group (<http://www.hsrc.ac.za>).

Furthermore, different studies have shown that voter turnout during local elections is consistently lower compared to national election. In the entire province of Eastern Cape, 2, 552, 287 citizens registered to vote in 2000, but only 55 percent of the registered voters eventually turned out for voting. In 2006, the vote cast was 56 percent of the 2,908, 106 registered voters. In 2011, the total vote cast was 58 percent of 3,111,535 registered voters. For Makana between 2006 and 2009, the voter turnout decreased by more than 5 percent (from 57.74 percent in 2000 to 52.38 percent in 2006). Although there was a slight increase in the voter turnout in 2011 elections from 52.38 percent (2006) to 55.93 percent (2011) of registered votes, Makana is like the rest of South Africa where about one third of eligible adults did not register to vote at all, and of those registered, only between 50 percent and 60 percent actually used their vote (<http://www.statsa.gov.za> 2012).

1.2 South African Population and Elections

There have been three official censuses since South Africa's democratic election in 1994, the first conducted in 1996, the second in 2001, and the third in 2011. The population in 1996 stood at 40.06 million and this increased by 10.4 percent to 44.8 million in 2001. Within a period of another 10 years (2001-2011), the population has increased by a further 7 million people indicating 15.5 percent growth (<http://www.statsa.gov.za> 2012) over this period. From 1996 to 2011 the proportion of the young population aged below 18 decreased slightly, whereas the proportion of the young adults who are not only economically active but also eligible to vote increased, as a proportion of the overall population. According to Shryock et al (1976), a population is considered being young when it has a median age of less than 20 and those with median ages of 30 and above are regarded as 'old'. (Those with median ages between 20 and 29

are referred to as populations of 'intermediate' age). In South Africa, according to the various censuses and household surveys, the overall median age has stayed within the 'intermediate age', but has steadily 'aged' 22 (1996), 23 (2001), 24 (2007) and 25 (2011) respectively. The Eastern Cape however has lower average ages, when compared to the rest of South Africa. The province's median age was 20 in 2001, steadily increased to 22 in 2011 (<http://www.statssa.gov.za> 2011).

Despite increases in population, and rising median ages (meaning the proportion of the population able to vote is increasing), voting participation rates (both in terms of registering and voting) are decreasing. Why this increase in voter 'apathy'?

There are many reasons for this although there is little unanimity of causality in the scholarly literature. An internationally praised constitution designed to promote multiparty competition and individual rights is overshadowed by one-party dominance and limited governmental accountability (Heller 2009, Friedman 2009). The depth and breadth of democracy and government effectiveness continues to weaken (Friedman 2009). Among other factors, the voters' apathy is linked also to the crisis within political parties characterized by low levels of 'service delivery', increasingly pervasive corruption, scandals and, perhaps, less vigorous election campaigns (Seethal 2011:12).

1.3 The Context of 2011 Municipal Elections

The 2011 municipal elections in South Africa were held at the peak of global economic recession, which affected South Africa's economy in significant ways. This exacerbated already world-leading levels of inequality. Seekings (2007) lists the causes of economic inequality as persistent unemployment and low demand for unskilled labour, strong demand for skilled labour, an unequal education system, and an ineffective social safety net (despite the massive expansion of cash transfers to poor South Africans). In 2010 alone, South Africa lost an estimated 1 million jobs due to the global economic meltdown (Sefara 2011 cited in Seethal 2012). In response, the government introduced a number of austerity measures to mitigate the effect of the economic crisis, but the

approach led to increased nation-wide protests by the marginalized groups whom the government policies further pushed to the fringe of the mainstream economy (Seethal 2012).

Public services are a key determinant of the quality living of a people; and particularly, an effective means of measuring poverty reduction (Besley and Ghatak 2007: 1). In South Africa, public service delivery is slow and marginal compared to other developing nations (Foster and Brienco 2010). To facilitate universal access to basic services in South Africa, the Public Service Reform of 1994 gave municipal governments the responsibilities to provide services to the local communities through programmes such as the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP). However, the post apartheid dispensation is fraught with the challenge of delivering such essential services (Miller 2005:66). Despite the introduction of various policies and pieces of legislation, municipal councils are still struggling to fulfil their mandates (Miller 2005). After ten years of democracy, national government declared that 136 out of 284 municipalities are unable to fulfil their basic functions (<http://www.da.org.za>). In its assessment of public service delivery, the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance blame infrastructure and service delivery backlogs, overpaid, under-qualified and underperforming managers, financial mismanagement, and corruption (<http://www.da.org.za>) as the main reasons for the failure of government to get services to people who most need them.

These failures have been met with growing anger and resistance. Between 2007 and 2009, the average number of protests in South Africa increased from 8.73 to 19.18 per month, while the percentage of violent protests increased from 41.66 per cent in 2007 to 54.08 percent in 2010 (Naidoo 2011 cited in Seethal 2012:10). Some of the violent protests, which mostly occurred in the black and the coloured townships, were directed at the leadership of the municipal governments.

Municipal governments are targeted for a variety of these reasons, including the ineffectiveness of service delivery, the poor responsiveness of municipalities to citizens' grievance and corruption by the councillors and the local council staff (Atkinson (2007:53).

What was characteristic of the national political climate was also manifest in Makana. Ahead of 2011 elections, residents of various communities in Makana area, for example, had protested at different times about electricity blackouts, uncollected refuse, increasing rates and taxes, and lack of job opportunities (*Grocott's* 2011). Political leaders were accused of showing up only during elections, and only to disappear into the safety of their office after they have won elections. In Grahamstown, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) led many of the protests. UPM noted that, "The anger and frustration that has been building for the past 17 years came to head at this moment" (*Grocott's* 2011).

It is against this background of rising population levels, shrinking economic opportunity, high levels of inequality, poor service delivery that South Africa's fourth democratic local government elections should be examined.

1.4 Understanding voting patterns in South Africa

Scholarly literature on voting behaviour identifies three approaches to the study of how and why people vote (*Anderson and Heath* 2000: 1). The first is a largely sociological approach to voting behaviour, which suggests that 'group identities' impact strongly attitudes and interests, and these attitudes in turn affect people voting behaviours (see for example, *Lazarsfeld et al.*, 1944; *Alford* 1967, *Rose and Urwin* 1969, 1970, *Lijphart* 1979, 1980). This assumption is developed from the notion that social identities influence how people see the world (*Jenkins*, 1996; *Reid and Deaux*, 1996).

The second approach is a variant of the first: the so-called party identification model, assumes that voters are influenced by the political bias of their parents. The loyalty to party is thus conditioned by psychological attachment (*Belknap and Campbell* 1952, *Campbell et al.*, 1960, *Converse* 1964).

The third approach is the 'rational choice' approach. Here the individual voter's preferences are conditional and might vary from election to election. Voters are influenced by party policy positions (*Anderson and Heath* 2000) and make an informed and 'rational' choice.

In South Africa elections, race plays a key role in how people vote (Ferree 2006), so much that many South African elections are largely described as a "racial census" (Jonhson and Schlemmer 1996; Lodge 1999; Mattes 1995; Reynolds 1994; 1999 cited in Ferree 2006). Ferree (2006) however argues that South African voters are not as much motivated by racial identity as by the racial credentials of the political parties. "Though voting looks like 'politics as usual' on one level, on a deeper level, beliefs about performance are intimately related to their beliefs about party's racial credentials" (Ferree 2006).

Though ANC election victory in South Africa is due largely to the patronage of the black majority voters, analysis of voting behaviour is a complex process. As Habib and Naidu (2006) have argued, significant sections of the South African electorate make rational choices during elections, and decide on the bases of information available to them. Anderson and Heath (2000) suggest that the three approaches to voting behaviour can be integrated in a single theoretical framework. According to the authors, if voters are rational actors (as the rational choice approach suggests), "then we can also adopt the sociological approach by arguing that attitude are influenced by the group to which one belongs" (2000). Thus, there is no conflict among the three approaches since individual preference partly reflects individual position in social structures and a complex interplay of actual choices, albeit it made in contexts of social (group) identities.

1.6 Grocott's Mail: A Paper of Venerable Tradition

Grocott's is the oldest surviving independent newspaper in South Africa (www.grocotts.co.za/content/history-grocott's-mail). Over the years, the newspaper has played two key roles in Grahamstown. First it has always had a predominantly commercial function. When the first *Grocott's* edition was published on the 11th May 1870, the mission of the paper was unashamedly to promote trading activity and business within the Grahamstown community. Then named *Grocott's Free Paper* – "An Advertising Medium for Town and Country" – the newspaper, in its first editorial declared:

“Today we present the public with the first copy of GROCOTT’S FREE PAPER which will be published every Wednesday, and distributed freely all over the City, on the morning market, and in several Frontier Town. We merely ask you to accept it, read the Advertisements, and then make large purchases” (*Grocott’s* 2011).

Two years after its launch, the weekly advertising newspaper metamorphosed into a news sheet and changed name to become *Grocott’s Penny Mail*, and now publishing twice a week –Tuesday and Friday (a tradition that continues to this day). With more news, the paper’s second key role started to develop: that of a facilitator of local public debate, through the provision of the information and news needed for such deliberations and through providing elements of the platforms for these deliberations -- mostly through the ‘letters to the editor’ section and newspaper ‘editorials’ and other opinions as well as the paper’s own selection and framing of local (and national) news.

Most of its public sphere role, in colonial and apartheid eras, was of course limited to the white community of Grahamstown. In 2003, with a grant from international funder Atlantic Philanthropies, the paper was purchased by Rhodes University. *Grocott’s* was repositioned to serve as a resource for all Grahamstown people to participate in public life, as well as a platform to market the commercial activities of all local inhabitants (although most businesses in Grahamstown, or at least those who advertise in *Grocotts*) appear to still be largely white owned).

The paper now also serves as a training opportunity for students at Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media studies. According to the newspaper’s former general manager, Louise Vale, *Grocott’s* purpose is twofold: “To produce a high-quality, independent newspaper that serves the whole of the community, and to develop new ways in which journalism is taught at university level” (Garman 2010).

Thus, while, *Grocott’s* has history of being a relatively elitist community newspaper catering for a small “white, educated minority” (Garman 2003), the paper now aspires to being a non-racial publication, serving all in the Grahamstown area. Steenveld (2002:10) observed that, with media transformation in the new South African democracy, community media has become an ideal instrument to foster greater, more diverse media

access and to promote a great diversity of voices in the media.

1.8 *An overview of the social, economic and political background of Hooggenoeg and some background on 'Coloureds' in the new South Africa*

This study does not examine the reception of the election coverage and election special in all areas of Grahamstown but explores the meanings made of election news coverage in *Grocott's* by the readers living in a particular geographically-bounded community, based in the Hooggenoeg area of Grahamstown. The residents of Hooggenoeg are mostly Coloured. This study proposes to do this partly through examining this community's social structure and location within power relations in Grahamstown, and community members' perceptions of this location. (In the conclusion, some tentative extrapolations and suggestions will be made as to how the reception of the paper's election coverage in Hooggenoeg might be reflective of its reception more broadly in Grahamstown).

Hooggenoeg, formerly known as Walker Hill, is a community of a 'mixed identity', constituted mainly by Black and "Coloured"¹, South Africans with a population of about 1400. Though the area is often referred to by Grahamstonians as a 'Coloured area', it was conceptualised by the municipality in 1995 as Grahamstown's first 'non-racial' suburb where only Coloureds and Black Africans would live together (Schoon 2011). A number of families have been residing in Hooggenoeg as far back as 1989. Marginalised

¹ The term 'Coloured' was a category entrenched by Nationalist government's Population Registration Act of 1950. The category was negatively defined as referring to "not a White person nor a Black" (Attridge and Jolly 1998). Coloured identity is a complex, historically located identity that stems from the process of slavery, genocide, rape and perceived miscegenation. Certainly, all formerly colonised countries have produced a racially heterogeneous creolised population but because of the hardening of this category through the racial classifications of apartheid, coloureds in South Africa are unique in many respects (Hendricks 2006). The use, in this thesis, of ethnic and racial categories presents particular challenges for this research, and for anyone working in South African social sciences. Many people so designated do not identify with imposed categorisations (particularly those imposed during the colonial and apartheid eras) while many others create their own sets of meaning of, for example, their 'Colouredness' (See Schoon, 2011; Dugmore, 1994; and Goldin, 1987). These ethnic categories will be problematised in this study.

Coloureds who previously lived in the so-called 'Sun City', a dump site in Grahamstown, and poor 'backyard dwellers' from Grahamstown's more established black African urban areas of Tanti and Fingo village were the first to be allocated Hooggenoeg houses (Schoon 2011). The area is now a settlement for more than 222 "marginalised households"² from a diverse range of backgrounds, with a preponderance of Coloured South Africans. As far as can be ascertained, no white South Africans live in Hooggenoeg.

"We are the rainbow people of God. We are free – all of us, black and white together!" This declaration by Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu during the inauguration of the President Mandela had great appeal, and South Africans often call their country the 'rainbow nation'. But the ideal of a racially equal society is yet to take deep root in the country. In post apartheid South Africa, Coloureds who were previously considered to be "too black to be white", are now "too white to be black" (Interview with Boysen 2011).

Hooggenoeg as a community exemplifies the arguments made by Natrass and Seekings (2001:49) that there is a strong correlation between race and household income in South Africa. Despite progress in the country since the transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa remains deeply divided and characterised by high levels of inequality ((NPC, 2011f: 412). A significant proportion of the population in Hooggenoeg is unemployed and live below the poverty line, with most of those in formal employment working either at Rhodes University, or in local retailers such as Pick n Pay, Shoprite and Checkers as cleaners, attendants or gardeners (Schoon, 2011).

Unemployment is high and poverty is palpable in this section of Grahamstown. Levels of crime are also high. Crime is among the most difficult of the many challenges facing South Africa in the post-apartheid era (Demombynes and Özler 2005:1). For example, the country is reported to have one of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world, with adolescent girls between the ages of 12–17 being particularly at risk (Adar & Stevens, 2000).

Hooggenoeg like every other poor community in South Africa has high rate of crime ranging from rape, burglary, assault and others. According to the residents, an

average of three cases of mugging and rape occur every week in the community or in the surrounding neighbourhoods. During the fieldwork, a young girl of 19 was arrested for stabbing her boyfriend to death. According to her, the boyfriend assaulted her because of R30 that he believed she had spent on dagga (marijuana) and did not share with him.

The crime rate within and around the Hooggenoeg seems to even constrain the mobility of the residents. It distances the community somewhat from other areas of Grahamstown. Parents are sometimes apprehensive about allowing their children to stray beyond the perimeter of the community (Schoon 2011).

1.9 *Theoretical framework*

The research will draw on frameworks and perspectives in the various studies of audience reception and political studies in order to tease out the complex relationship between the media content and audience reception of this content during 2011 municipal elections. Initially drawing on the encoding/decoding model developed by Stuart Hall, the study will apply the model to engage with the coverage on election and the meanings encoded by *Grocott's* vis-a-vis the meanings 'decoded' or made by the readers in the Hooggenoeg community.

Hall argues that audiences can largely accept, vicariously negotiate or completely oppose the "preferred meaning" (1980:136-7). A second key concept in Hall's model (subsequently elaborated on in important ways by a number of other scholars (Dahlgren 1988; Jensen 1990; Fiske 1987; Fish 1980, Morley 1992) is the idea of polysemy. This concept (derived from early theorising by Bakhtin (see Fiske 1987) tries to capture something of the property of texts' 'openness', which enables audience researchers to account for audience's high degree of interpretive freedom (Fiske 1987). Though media messages are "structured in dominance" by the preferred meanings, texts can and do bring into being and sustain more than one reading (Hall 1973a: 3). Hall's model thus allows for examination of contesting discourses emanating from the media and the lived world of the audiences.

The study also draws significantly on Schrøder's multidimensional model of

media reception. Hall's model, though it helps explain the ideological positions developed by given audiences in the process of decoding texts, arguably does not create sufficient basis for understanding how, once such meanings are made, they are used as a 'guide' to action (Schrøder 2003). Schrøder's framework proposes a denser and deeper six 'dimensions' through which audience reception of a given set of texts can be analysed. His framework allows intense focus on the "decoding moment" and rigorous analysis of the each element of reception, to understand more fully whether, for example, people vote, how and for whom, in terms of the key concerns of this study.

Having *a priori* theoretical frameworks poses some epistemological challenge of its own. Rigid reliance on theoretical models can "lead to a false consensus – making the data fit the framework – or failing to see the unexpected" (Simons 2009: 33). Research benefits when theory is built from the data 'upwards' and, arguably, when the data is grounded in the lived experience of people studied. This study acknowledges this problematic and aims to use its theoretical starting points as 'lenses' and frames through which the data can be analysed and key research questions posed can be explored.

1.10 Research questions

As is further outlined in Chapter 2, this research sought answers to two sets of research questions.

A. The first set of the research questions are:

- What did *Grocott's* 'say' about May 2011 municipal election?
How did the newspaper 'speak' about the election?
- How did the newspaper view the role it played during the election?
- Why did newspaper consider it necessary to play the role it played?
-

B. The second set of the research questions is:

- What did the *Grocott's* readers in Hooggenoeg say about the

election?

- How did they speak about the election?
- What meanings of election discourse did the readers in the Hooggenoeg as “interpretive community” actualise?
 - How did the readers’ lived experience and location in current power relations impact on the meaning-making process?
 - How did these understandings shape their perception about election and, particularly, about the various participants promise of change and renewal?

Drawing on the multidimensional model of mass media reception, the questions were broken down into six dimensions of reception: “Motivation”, “Comprehension”, “Discrimination”, “Position”, “Evaluation” and “Implementation” (Schrøder 2000). The first four dimensions of the questions explore the “*interior* reading processes, in which informants’ subjectively experienced meanings are produced in specific situational context”(Schrøder 2000:243). The last two dimensions address the social significance of the meanings actualised by the readers and the possible (political) action that may arise thereof from the actualised meaning.

1.11 Research methods, procedures and techniques

As is further outlined in Chapter 4, this research is situated within qualitative research methodology. Since the study’s research interest lies in describing meanings-making process and the social world of a particular group, it is important to gain understanding of the lived experience in some detail. A qualitative approach allows for this kind of investigation (Schrøder et al 2003). To explore the process of reception however, the study will rely on empirical data about the media text and audience’s interpretation of the text (Jensen 1988). As Jensen argues, “it is the qualitative empirical methods of data-gathering which are most often associated with reception analysis” (1988:3). In addition, Jensen suggests “reception analysis combines a qualitative approach to media as text, producing and circulating meaning in society, with an empirical interest in the recipients as co-producers of meaning. It is, in other

words, *audience-cum-content analysis...*” (Jensen 1988) Schrøder et al. (2003: 126), however, warns researchers to abstain from detailed preliminary textual analysis since the purpose of audience reception analysis is to discover audience meanings and ways of understanding. This study proposed to follow this advice.

The study uses both focus group discussion and in-depth interviews as key investigative methods. Focus groups provide a framework for exploring the experiences and the sense-making process of the participants through their conversation (with each other and with the facilitator). The method will be used in order to generate a socially produced meaning arising from the reading of election news in *Grocott's*.

Focus group data can be enriched when combined with data generated from other methods (Macun & Posel 1998:132): in this case, individual in-depth interviews are used to further interrogate research questions that may arise during the focus group discussion. In addition, the *Grocott's* editor, an editorial board member and managing editor, as well as some of the reporters, are interviewed.

1.12 Larger objectives of study

The key objective of this study is to better understand both the media and audience discourses about elections, with a specific focus on a specific community within Grahamstown, South Africa. This study will, it is hoped, contribute to the relatively limited scholarly literature on the reception of political communication in South African context, especially at a more nuanced, grassroots level. Those studies that do examine local democracy and on the media's role in local elections (for example, Hadland et al 2008; Jacobs 2003; Barnet 2004) often either under-emphasise audience interpretation of media messages or fail to satisfactorily grapple with the contestation of ideological discourse around elections, and, in particular, the contestation of the ideology that forcefully foregrounds the key idea that elections can make a material difference to people's lives or alter prevailing power structures. This study seeks compensate for some of these shortcomings in the existing literature about media and local democracy in South Africa.

1.13 Ethical considerations

Involving human subjects in research imposes certain obligation on the researcher. In this study, the focus group discussion informants may divulge information, for example, about their voting preference in the last election and this may affect their relationship with others in the group. In line with the ethical considerations outlined by Fritz (2008), the researcher took pains to ensure that participants were fully informed about the risks involved in these discussions. The researcher encouraged confidentiality within the focus group, and asked interviews to give their full consent to participate. The participants were also given the option to exit the study if they so wish. In addition, they were assured that information provided during the discussion will not be made available to anyone in a personalised way, i.e. information and data are generalised out from the focus group interviews. Pseudonyms are used in the final draft of the thesis, where participants are directly quoted.

1.14 Structure of the study

This study consists of six chapters. In addition to this overview chapter, the study has the following chapters:

Chapter two presents a detailed overview of relevant literature, particularly on audience research, drawing on different theoretical traditions. It seeks to locate the study within the constructionist paradigm and within other theoretical paradigms. Drawing on multi-dimensional model of mass media (Schröder 2000), the chapter examines the analytical strength of Schröder's model in explaining audiences' meaning-making process.

Chapter three problematizes the concept of democracy and the normative role of the media in a democratic society. It briefly discusses the sociology of news production and the role of ideology in the news making process.

Chapter four discusses the methodological approach suited for reception research in the light of the questions and issues generated in Chapters 2 and 3. This chapter

outlines the research design in detail and discusses the various challenges encountered during the period of data.

Chapter five discusses the findings of the fieldwork. It draws on the theoretical framework outlined previously to make sense of the collected data.

Chapter six concludes by aggregating and locating the findings within the broader social context of South Africa. It attempts to draw out some insights into the role played by the media during elections and suggests ways that media could better enrich South African democratic process.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The chapter examines key writings and important developments in the field of audience reception studies in order to understand the relationship between the media audiences and the texts consumed by media audiences. The first section deconstructs the concept of media audience and locates its different understandings within various theoretical traditions. The second section explores the process of audience meaning-making drawing on two key concepts of “interpretive communities” (Fish 1976) and intertextuality (Kristeva 1986). The third section, which focuses on the theoretical framework used in this study, provides an overview of Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model and the empirical studies arising from the model. This section ends with assessment of Schröder’s multidimensional model of audience reception (2000) and makes the case for why Schröder’s model is chosen as the key analytical tool of this study. The fourth section examines ideology of news making, with particular attention given to the question of how the media discourse interpolates ‘dominant’ worldviews in society, with special reference to elections in democracies.

2.1 The concept of media audience

There are two key problematic conceptions about the concept of audience, one which views ‘audience’ as an empirical object; and the other that holds the view that ‘audience’ is a discursive construct. This conceptual conflict presents not only an ontological concern, but also an epistemological dilemma for the study of audience reception of media products. Bratich (2005:242) described audience as a fugitive concept. The shifting nature of ‘audience’ renders audience research a “messy and slippery business” to grapple with (Lewis 1991:73). For this study, it is important to locate the key

theoretical approaches within these (and other) theoretical traditions, and this is best done with an initial deconstruction of the notion of ‘audience’.

At root, ‘audience’, technically, refers to the act of hearing in face-to-face verbal communication (Radway 1988:359). In speech communication and cognitive psychology, audience is described as the ‘addressed’ (Ede & Lunsford 1984: 156), that is, the individuals to whom a message is addressed. Ede and Lunsford (1984:156) refer to it as “the actual or real life people who read a discourse”. But in its contemporary usage, especially in the mass communications field, ‘audience’ refers to anonymous and disparate collectives of individuals addressed by mass media, either as a group or as individuals (Long and Wall 2009:220). For Gunter and Machin (2009), audience is a collection of individuals that share media experience.

Although these two attempts at definition locate the idea of audience within the context of the mass media, they mask the various meanings of the “audience” invoked in different theoretical traditions (Webster 2009:77). In the ‘effects’ tradition, for example, audience is conceived as “outcome” of the media production (Webster 2009:80-81). According to effect theorists, audience are people acted upon and produced by the media (Webster 2009:80-81). This view is contested by the later conceptions of “active” audience (Bauer 1964) theorists who conceived of audiences more as “agents” instead (Webster 2009:80-81). Agency, in its simplest definition, refers to “the power to do something” (Nealon & Giroux 2003:193), or the ability of the social subject to respond to their historical context (Giddens 1979). The audience is an agent endowed with the capacity to indicate preferences for particular media products (Webster 2009:80-81).

Both conceptions mentioned above foreground the “common-sense reality” of the “audience” (Bratich 2005:242), that is, the audience as empirical object of study. Bratich claims that “the audience was out there, it was just a matter of sharpening the research tools to understand it”. This notion of the “audience” is understood in the first two phases of cultural media research as: reception research and audience ethnography. It is the third phase of the media research, constructionist paradigm, which “deontologises the audience” (Bratich 2005:242) by questioning the assumption of the empirical “audience”. Rather

than being real, the audience is an “invisible fiction” (Hartley 1992), and exists only as “idealization” (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 1998:208).

In *Interpreting Audiences*, Moore (1993:1) notes that there is no stable entity that can be isolated and identified as the media audience. “No single object that is unproblematically ‘there’ for us to observe and analyse” (Moore 1993:1-2). Allor (1988) and Radway (1988) argue that audience is not real, but “a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic gaze” (Alasuutari 1999). “Media audience are shifting constellations, located within varying multiple discourses which are never entirely outside of the media discourse themselves” (Grossberg 1988:386). John Hartley (1987:125) made a similar claim, arguing that; “In no case is the audience ‘real’ or external to its discursive construction”.

Positivist and post positivist traditions share this difference in perspectives. In the positivist tradition, it is argued that there is a reality out there to be studied and understood, whereas the post positivists argue that the reality can never be fully understood, but rather only approximated (Guba 1990: 22).

Constructionist perspectives such as these, as Claude Ake notes elsewhere, raises an important question for the analytical value of using concepts outside of their original context (Ake 1978:11). Though Ake was not writing from a media theory perspective, his argument makes evident the problematic nature of the constructionist perspective of the notion of ‘audience’. It shows that constructionist perspective could easily lead researchers into viewing audience as metaphysical entities and to forget that, in the final analysis, it is collections of people who constitute media audience. And “when the very existence of an object is questioned, all efforts to “know” it are immediately undermined” (Moore 1993: 2).

Therefore, Moore (1993) concludes that, there is reality outside of and beyond the discourses, which constitutes the audience (Moore 1993:2). But that reality is “a dispersed and embedded set of everyday practices which always finally eludes attempts to fix and objectify it” (Moore 1993:2). In line with this argument, Long and Wall (2009:220) aver that “the act of consuming media presents us with observable actions” of

the real person. The audience member is the embodiment of the self-interested consumer (Biocca 1988), and through the media contents they consume, it is possible to know audiences (Bratich 2005). This study works within this ‘realist’ view of the ‘audience’.

Lastly, media ethnography studies provide another lens to view audiences. Within this approach, audiences are conceived as individuals experiencing media as part of daily activities (Moore 1993:3). Radway (1988:368) indeed warns that reception research focus should not be on the audience, but on “the ways, in which historically concrete social subjects articulate together many ideological elements, discourses, and practices across the terrain of daily life”. In this approach, meanings are constructed through everyday routines of the media consumers (Moore 1993:5). Therefore, audiences are social subjects who experience different aspects of life including the consumption of the media products. The researcher approached this study with this understanding of the audience in mind.

The next section provides an overview of various theoretical perspectives on reception research and locates the conception of the audience within each tradition, as a basis for explaining the theoretical framework of this study.

2.2 Evolution of audience research: “Effects tradition”

In the early mass communication scholarship, the dominant historical narrative of communication research oscillated between ‘strong’ and ‘minimal’ *effects* of media on people (Lowery and De Fleur 1988). Researchers were primarily investigating media’s effect on the behaviours of individuals (Lowery and De Fleur 1988). The methodology of the research was also mainly positivistic (Hall 1982). Communication researchers presumed it was easier to predict and measure media ‘effect’ on the audience (Brooker and Jermyn 2002: 5) using basic stimulus-response models. This approach to audience studies was known (and derided) as the “magic bullet theory of media effect” (Lowery and De Fleur 1988). The theory was mostly associated with Harold Lasswell (1930, 1935) and Claude Shannon (Shannon & Weaver, 1949).

The assumption underlying this conception is that audience are passive agents, and

that the process of reception is unproblematic and uncritical (Thompson 1995:25). This perspective stresses the power of the text over its audiences (Morley 1991:16). The Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and the USA, and rapid urbanisation, (and the development of large scale media through printing presses) lent credence to this conception of the media audience as it contributed to the emergence of a more atomised but concentrated mass society” (Webster 2009: 79). As Lowery and De Fleur (1988) note, effect theories emanate from the assumptions about the nature of this new mass society; which was then characterised by the decline of organic traditional communities in response to rising urbanisation, emergence of mass-mediated culture and the fragmentation of communities (Bennett 1982). The growing urban working class created a pool of undifferentiated audiences who were susceptible to the power of media influence (Bennett 1982). It was assumed too, that media had enormous power to influence individuals fairly uniformly, and audiences were thought to be guided by impulse than by reason (Lowery and De Fleur 1988). The Frankfurt school, set up in 1923, reinforced the effect theory by emphasising the dangers of the power of capitalism, in which a small group of owners (and states) controlled both print and the emerging new forms of media, such as radio.

These views were challenged, particularly after the Second World War, when theorists such as Paul Lazarsfeld et al (1948) “opened a new era of thinking” by rejecting “the old hypothesis that the media have great power” (De Fleur & Dennis 1981: 294-297). With others, such as Carl Hovland, Katz (1980, 1987); Joseph Klerper (1960) and Bernard Berelson et al. (1954), these scholars argued instead that the media have limited effects, and the effects are relatively short-spanned (Lowery and De Fleur 1988). They argued that rather than responding unthinkingly to media messages, the audience are instead influenced by opinion leaders whose interpretation of the media message bears greater influence on the audience’s interpretation (Lazarsfeld et al 1948; Berelson et al. 1954). As Liebes and Katz (1990: 29) argued, “opinion leaders have disproportionate influence” so that whatever effect or impact caused by the media was mediated through the opinion leaders. This model was referred to as “two-step flow of

information” (Lazarsfeld et al 1948). Other research works such as Bernard Berelson’s (1949) and JT Klapper’s (1960) also supported Lazarsfeld’s thesis. Following his research on media and its influence on electoral decisions, Klapper’s key findings indicated that only a small fraction of voters were influenced by election campaigning directly, and that the messages were mediated by so-called opinion leaders; and thus the notion of the two step-flow of the media. Other mediating factors outlined by Klapper (1960) include: individual predispositions, selective perception process, group norms and etcetera.

However, the effects tradition has been critiqued for not paying attention to individual acts of reception. Its underlying assumption about people was, for some scholars, simply inaccurate (Lowery and De Fleur 1988). Hall (1982:61) argues that a fundamental pitfall of ‘effect studies’ is its focus on immediately observable changes in human behaviour, and leaving the formal structure of media text un-theorised. A media research theory asking the question “What does the media do to people?” was considered problematic in explaining the role of the media in society as well as in understanding the concept of ‘audience-hood’. For Morley (1991), media effect perspectives were inhibited by internal contradictions. While the media on one hand was conceptualised of, at heart, reducing its audience to something like zombies, few people when actually asked, saw the media doing that to them (although they often did see this happening to imaginary ‘others’ (Morley 1991:16). This inadequacy in the theorisation of the relationship between media and its audience gave rise to what became known as ‘Uses and Gratification’ media theory.

2.3 Uses and gratifications

The Uses and Gratifications (hereafter, U&G) is a largely a psychologically-centric communication perspective that shifts the focus of inquiry from the mechanistic media effects on audience, and instead stresses individual motivation for using and choosing particular media (Rubin 1994:418). The approach conceives the audience differently, and argues instead that the audience uses the media to satisfy various psychological needs. It is often also referred to as utility theory (Davison, Boylan and Yu 1982). Secondly, the

theory rejects the notion of 'passive audience' entirely. Rather than following the theoretical path of 'hypodermic needle' 'effects' model, and asking: 'what does the media do to people?' the critical question underlining U&G theory is: 'what do people do *with* the media' (Halloran 1970)? Implicit in this question is the assumption that the audience are active. Windahl (1981) in his work, *Uses and Gratifications at the Crossroads*, argues that the primary difference between the effects approach and the U&G approach is that a media effects researcher usually examines mass communication from the perspective of the communicator, whereas the U&G researcher uses the audience as a point of departure (Rugiero 2000). In the view of these U&G scholars, more than any factor else, personal utility is the most significant determinant of audience formation (McQuail 2000:387:8). The audience, it is argued, use media contents to gratify their needs in several ways which effects theorists either failed to acknowledge or seemed unaware of. Elsewhere, McQuail et al (1972) list the needs that audience use media to satisfy, which include the needs to escape the drudgery of life (diversion), to socialise (personal relations), to reinforce their self-identity (personal identity) and to seek information (surveillance).

In spite of the paradigmatic shift engendered in U&G perspective, some scholars were less convinced about theoretical coherence of the model, stressing that, the approach is primarily behaviourist and individualist in its methodology (McQuail 1994 in Rugiero 2000:4). Critics such as Elliott (1974), Swanson (1977), and Lometti, Reeves, and Bybee (1977) identified four serious conceptual problems of uses and gratification. The four problems include: (a) a vague conceptual framework, (b) a lack of precision in major concepts, (c) a confused explanatory apparatus, and (d) a failure to consider audiences' perceptions of media content.

Morley, despite acknowledging that U&G represents a significant advance on effects theory, ultimately rejected the model, arguing that "uses and gratifications is essentially a psychological field, relying as it does on mental states, needs and processes abstracted from the social situation of the individual concerned [...] we need to break fundamentally with the 'uses and gratifications' approach" (Morley 1980: 14 in

Schrøder 1999: 40).

The uses and gratification model was also held to be flawed for its simplistic assumption that people deliberately consume media products for some kind of gratification. Some scholars questioned this exaggeration of agency and conscious choice. People don't often make conscious choices to 'expose' themselves to specific media products. According to these critics, an exception is in the case when audience go to the theatre (Schrøder et al 2003: 8). In fact the process of media products consumption is complex and contradictory in nature (Morley 1992: 8).

2.4 Reception study

In spite of the distinction between uses-and-gratifications and media effect research, some researcher have proposed the synthesis of the two approaches (see Rubin 1994:426). Reception studies can be viewed as an attempt to reconcile these different approaches, building on the relative strengths of each. The reception approach is an amalgam of textual analysis and audience studies; two distinct research enterprises which were formerly separate (Schrøder et al 2003:126). The key arguments are premised on the assumption that neither semiotic analysis of media texts nor survey methods used by U&G research is capable of capturing the media experience of the audience (Schroder et al 2003:126). It thus builds on both U&G insights and textual analysis to explain communicative process and audience reception.

The research agenda of reception studies is thus two-pronged: to examine what people do with the media, as well as examining the cultural codes constituted in media texts (Jensen 1988). According to Jensen, reception studies are thus able to escape the weaknesses, which dogged the two former disparate approaches. He argues that U&G studies have rarely transcended the psychological relevance of media content for the individual, and that the studies merely pay attention to the needs which audience use media to gratify, but ignore the origin of audience gratification, that is, a culturally coded content (Jensen 1988). Jensen concludes that U&G does not provide sufficient understanding about the social uses and specific gratifications of media products, except

the opinion polls on general audience perception of the mass media, which though useful, are of limited utility.

Schrøder et al (2003) note that, reception research is not constrained by the ambition to draw conclusions about ideological and other social implications of media texts. Rather it regards meaning as a *joint product* of text and reader. A media text is merely an encoded meaning *potential*, subject to various interpretations by the readers (Schrøder 2003). The ‘preferred meaning’ or ‘preferred reading’ may not be the one actualised by the reader, because situational and social contexts of reading affect the meaning arrived at in the end (Schrøder 2003).

Evans (cited in Morley 2006:13) notes that audience work in media studies can be characterised by two assumptions: firstly, that the audience is always active in a non-trivial sense; and, second, that media content is always polysemic or open to multiple interpretations. The meaning is not in the text, but in the *reading* (Hart 1991, 60). Fiske (1987a, 1987b) stretches the argument when he proclaims the “semiotic democracy” of the audience. His celebration of audience power has been criticised by a number critical theorists (e.g Modleski 1986; Schudson 1987; Morris 1988; Gripsrud 1989). Ang (2009) wonders if an “active” audience is also such a ‘powerful’ audience. She argues that while it is reasonable to acknowledge audience’s agency, “but we must not lose sight of the marginality of this power” (Ang 2009:220). Determining the locus of power, and reinserting questions about the idea of power in relationship to individual and collective agency, is part of the next theoretical shift to ethnographic audience studies.

2.5 Audience ethnography

Audience ethnography as a research perspective shared the same ‘general intention’ with reception research by accounting for the process of meaning-making much more within social contexts (Moore 1993:4). Lull describes it as:

“An integrated means of understanding the everyday world of social groups, their patterns of interpersonal communication, and their uses of the mass media. The intent of the ethnography of mass communication is to allow the researcher to grasp as completely

as possible with minimal disturbance the ‘native’s perspective on relevant communicative and socio-cultural matters indigenous to him” (Lull 1980:199).

The so-called ‘ethnographic turn’ in media studies contributed to the maturing of the field of reception studies as contexts of consumption were now recognised and foregrounded as having significant impact on the reception of media (Helen Wood 2007:76). Methodologically, the approach refers to the studies that privilege participant observation method above other research methods. Schröder et al (2003:72), drawing on the realist anthropologist and micro-sociologist’s perspectives, noted that media ethnography takes its point of departure in the *practices of everyday life* in which people use media because media use is often completely ‘overwhelmed’ by the routines of everyday life. Media itself “constitutes experience in users’ handling of mediated forms of communication” (Schröder et al 2003:72). Reception of media text is better understood by investigating the role of the media in the everyday life, and not the impact of everyday life on the media (Gray 1992, Hermess 1995 cited in Alasuutari 1999: 5). Jesen (1987) puts it this way: “meaning is the stuff that the world of everyday life is made of, individual instances of communication make no sense before they have been interpreted in the total context of the audience’s life world.”

However, there is contention about whether it is possible to do ethnographic study of the media audience in the manner that anthropologists conceived of and practice ethnographic research. Moore (1993) asked: “What is ethnographic about audience ethnography?” This is a difficult question to answer especially if and when “audience” is conceived as a discursive construct. Also, it is noteworthy that while media ethnography may enable us to observe how audiences engage with the media, it often does not allow us to make sense of the media message (Schröder et al 2003). Though researchers often employ the methods of interviewing or document analysis as a method of explaining the unobserved action such as television viewing, this method presents the risk of taking someone's talk as a valid description of how they behave. But as Morley (1992:181) argued, respondents may lie or misrepresent themselves, through their verbal responses; researcher could at least gain access to “the kind of language, the criteria of distinction,

and the type of categorisations through which they (the audiences) construct their world”.

Nevertheless, Ang has argued that ethnographic perspective on audiences need to be placed in a broader theoretical framework so that reception becomes an integral part of popular cultural practices that articulate both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’, both ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ processes. Her view coheres with that of Grossberg who advised that the reception should be seen as one field of “the complex and contradictory terrain, the multi-dimensional context, within which people live out their everyday lives” (Grossberg 1988: 25). This, according to Alasuutari (1999), is a succinct summation of the new agenda for cultural media studies and a perspective this studies tries to give voice to.

2.6 Theoretical approach to audience study

2.6.1 Hall’s model of communication process

This section is an overview of the approach to reception studies developed mostly by Stuart Hall (1973[1980] and Morley (1980). Hall argues for a study of decoding at both semiotic and ideological level. His alternative model separates the process of encoding (creating texts of various kinds) and decoding (audience reaction, understanding and meaning making of the texts) as distinct ‘moments’ in communicative exchange (Hall 1980:129). Hall argues that the decoding moment exemplified by audience’s reading of the text is as significant as the encoding moment (Hall 1980:130), thus elevating audience’s reception of a given text to equal importance to analysis directed at understanding the creation of that text. He indicates that there are “preferred” meanings inscribed in the text with which audiences actively engage. Drawing on Parkin’s (1971) typology of value systems, Hall proposes three reading positions characterising audience’s engagement with the text (Hall 1980:129). First is the “dominant-hegemonic position” through which the media text is decoded “in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” by professional broadcasters (1980: 136). When encoding a message, which already has been signified in the “hegemonic manner”, the professional broadcasters assume dominant code (Hall 1980: 136). When the meaning offered in a television programme is believed by a viewing audience to resonate with his lived

experience, and the audience then ‘decodes the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been coded, Hall argues that the viewer operates inside the dominant or hegemonic code. This is a typical example of a “perfectly transparent communication” (Hall 1976: 32, 59), where texts function as a “framework... of preferred structure of meanings which have been encoded” (Hall1976: 67).

The second reading position in Hall’s framework is the, “negotiated code”. This combines adaptive and oppositional elements. Here, the audience partly shares the text's code by accepting only the “preferred” meaning that resonates with his social reality, and resists or modify the aspect contrary to his position, experiences or interest. For example, an audience may subscribe to certain values of Western culture, and reject others. Strelitz’s (2005) study of how black South African youths negotiate their reading of Hollywood movies is a case in point. His findings contradict the popular narrative about the powerful role played by the media in identity formation. This conclusion agrees with Fiske’s claim that the “reader is an active maker of meanings from text, not a passive recipient of already constructed ones” (1987:260).

Hall then also proposes an oppositional reading – referring to the decoding done in a “globally contrary way” (1980: 136-8). The audience, though understanding the preferred reading, does not, in this conception, subscribe to the text's code and therefore rejects the meaning. For example, a feminist may interpret an article about new scholarships for women to study nursing, not as a way of empowering women, but rather as an instrument of reinforcing patriarchy in the society.

Another key concept in Hall’s model (subsequently elaborated on by a number of other scholars (Dahlgren 1988; Jensen 1990; Fisk 1987; Fish 1980, Morley 1992) is the idea of polysemy. This concept, which was earlier conceived by Bakhtin (see Todorov 1977), tries to capture something of the property of texts’ ‘openness’, which enables audience researchers to account for audience’s high degree of interpretive freedom (Fiske 1987) and agency. The concept was developed in response to the monosemic perspective, which has much dominated literary and cultural analysis (Schröder 2003: 239). As Bruner writes, (1993:1) meaning is “radically plural, always open, and...politics [is] in

every account”. Polysemy undermines the idea of textual determinism. The preferred meaning and actualised meaning of a text do commonly differ because the “codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” (Hall 1980). According to Hall, this struggle over meaning of the text takes place at the connotative level of meaning. And in this struggle, the audience is made up of active participants. This does not mean, however, that the producer and the consumer of text have the same resources at their disposal (Morley, 1993). As Hall argues, polysemy is not pluralism; media texts have a “complex structure of dominance” inscribed by institutional power relations.

This model was explored and empirically ‘demonstrated’ by Morley (1980) in his study “The Nationwide Audience”. The study supported Hall’s proposition that readers actualize dominant, negotiated or oppositional meaning after consuming or reading a media text. After Morley’s study, many other researchers drew theoretical insight from the model to produce their own reception studies (See Corner et al. 1999; Jhally and Lewis 1992; Schlesinger et al. 1992)

By suggesting that the process of interpretations “are structured and patterned at a level beyond that of individual psychologies” (Morley1991:17), the encoding/decoding model is considered an amalgam of communication theory, semiology, sociology and psychology (Morley 1991:17), at least by its practitioners.

2.6.2 Critiques of Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model

In spite of the wide acceptance of Hall’s model of communication process, the framework has been criticized by a number of writers for failing to fully capture the readers’ experiences and responses to media text. Schedler, Glastra and Kats (1998) find the notion of a dominant cultural order assumed in ‘preferred’ meaning/reading problematic. “This notion suggests too much coherence, unity, and continuity and presupposes a central principle structuring the social order such as a dominant social class, capable of backing up that cultural order in actual practice” (Schedler, Glastra and Kats 1998). They argue instead that the plurality and diversity of the media contents have undermined the idea of dominant cultural order assumed in Hall’s model. Nevertheless,

despite his critique of the “preferred” reading, Moores (1993:9) warns that, “to ditch the preferred reading model completely is a grave mistake”.

Also, the model has been criticised for celebrating audience resistance. Stam (2000: 233) notes that the model tends to encourage the “essentialising of readers whereas reading positions are 'multiform, fissured, schizophrenic, unevenly developed, culturally, discursively and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting realm of ramifying differences and contradictions”. The framework, in spite of its usefulness, has for many critics reduced reception studies to the exclusive examination of ideology in the text, resulting in different researchers looking for ideological meaning actualised by the reader (Schrøder 2000:233). Morley (and Hall himself) have conceded that encoding/decoding model under-theorised communication processes taking place in a social context (Schedler, Glastra and Kats 1998). Contrary to the thesis of encoding/decoding model, Morley (1980) discovered in the study of *Nationwide Audience* that social position “in no way directly correlates” with the readings he has collected. Therefore, Morley mentioned that his study has transited from the analysis of ideological structure of text to a wider process of media consumption (1992:1).

Schrøder et al (2003) critique of Hall/Morley’s approach is worth highlighting in this study. These authors reiterate that encoding/decoding does not account for some relevant dimensions of reception by focusing solely on the notions of “polysemy” and “preferred reading”. In the Roe’s study referred to in their work, Schrøder et al (2003) note that the notion of “preferred reading” articulated by Hall and Morley cannot be unproblematically regarded as a ‘property’ of a text. They raised question about whose reading is indeed the preferred reading. Is it the reading intended by the producer of text or the reading actualised by majority of audience (Schrøder 2003)? They argued that the concept of ‘preferred reading’ needs to be defined with greater precision to be useful.

Also, they argued that polysemy cannot be the feature of the connotative level of meaning solely. According to La Pastina (2005), the engagement between media audience and texts needs to be investigated as a *process* located in a broader context. He proposed four stages of this engagement process: reading, interpretation, appropriation,

and change.

But his approach is designed more specifically for the television audience. For this study, a more appropriate schema to make sense of audience reception is Kim Schrøder's (2000) multi-dimensional model. The model provides more detailed analytical concepts through which to analyse audience reception, and is designed to address the reception experience of all kind of media audiences.

Schrøder (2000) proposed a denser and deeper six 'dimensions' through which audience reception of a given set of texts can be analysed. They are labelled "Motivation", "Comprehension", "Discrimination", "Position", "Evaluation" and "Implementation". The six dimensions are refined into two 'metagroups': what Schrøder describes as 'interior' reading processes (encompassing the first four dimension), and the 'implications' process (constituted by the "Evaluation" and "Implementation" dimensions).

According to Schrøder, the starting point of reception process is "motivation". It refers to the dimension that shows the relevance of a media text to the readers. This could be anything that triggers readers' interest, for "if people are not somehow motivated to read a media text they encounter, the reception process is arrested right there" (Schrøder 2000:244). It is the stage where analyst can explore the readers' cognitive and affective process that leads to consumption of the media product as well as every other activity around consumption. The second dimension, "comprehension", explains how readers share understanding of the signs in spite of its polysemic nature. "Since human live in communicative relationships, the meaning of signs is stabilised through the workings of interpretive communities which are what make communication possible" (Schrøder 2000:246). And the experience of individual within the society is determined by semiotic resources available to such individual through the discursive socialisation (Schrøder 2000:246). Comprehension should thus be seen as the degree of closeness between the encoder's intended meaning and the readings produced by the decoder (Schrøder 2000:246). It must be noted however that not all media genres aim for the symmetry between the intended and actualised meanings. In communication campaigns, for

example, the encoder is concerned with having the audience actualise the intended message (i.e. convergence), whereas, the encoder of fictional message is rather interested in the plurality of audience responses (i.e. divergence). Because of complexity such as this, Schrøder argues that a separate analytical mechanism be set up to probe deeper into how audience understands text. Furthermore, the significance of analysing audience comprehension is articulated by Hoijer and Werner (1998). They argued that exposure to the same media message does not imply that the audience will benefit equally from the message. Comprehension is a function of audience qualification to understand the content of a message (1998: 49)

In Schrøder schema, “Discrimination” is the third dimension. This aspect is interested in whether readers are conscious of the aesthetic framings of media text. In the literary studies, the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader (Iser 1980:106). This is important because, the degree of awareness by a reader determines how involved or distant the reader is to the text. The model of readings should include a dimension of aesthetic discrimination that takes the form of a continuum from immersion to critical distance (Schrøder 2000:248).

“Position” is Schrøder’s fourth dimension and refers to the readers’ *attitude* to texts. It is a progression of attitudinal responses, from acceptance to rejection of the perceived standpoint of text. Here acceptance does not mean the adoption of “preferred” meaning that is inscribed in the text. Schrøder notes that those who accept hegemonic positions inscribed in the text usually do so unaware, whereas those who reject the perceived textual position do so knowing that the text tends to reinforce a dominant ideology. Fisk refers to such practice as *readers’ power* in a semiotic democracy (Fisk 1987:71 in Schrøder 2000: 249).

For Schrøder, the dimension of “position” is followed by “evaluation” dimension. This aspect is designed to explore the subjective experience of acceptance or rejection of the inscribed meaning perceived by the readers. It is the stage where analyst locates the readers’ position on the wider social discourses in order to establish the reading actualised by the readers. Though, the readings may fall into any of the three

ideological positions identified in encoding/decoding model, by separating the dimension of “position” from that of “evaluation”, Schrøder argued that we avoid the problematic inherent in Hall’s encoding/decoding which confuses “accepting” with “hegemonic” readings on the one hand, and confuses “rejecting” with “counter-hegemonic” readings on the other.

However, Schrøder concludes that some text cannot be unproblematically categorised as being ideological; indeed, some may have multiple ideological implications that negates single or one-dimensional categorisations.

Finally, for Schrøder, the “implementation” dimension probes into whether readings are used as a political resource or not. Schrøder justifies this dimension when he mentions that most empirical studies do not go beyond identifying reading actualised. It is important to assess, hypothetically at least, the likely *consequence* that a reading will bring on social practice. For example, a counter-hegemonic reading that does not result in social practice is said by Schrøder to be politically impotent. This view is contested by Fisk who instead regards “semiotic resistance” as a form audience power that cannot be wished away. “The power to be different ‘is a resistive power and one that keeps alive the possibility of social change’”(Fiske 1989: 72 in Schrøder 2000: 252).

Schrøder’s framework draws largely from Hall’s model but with greater complexity, sophistication and a focus on allowing a more intense focus on the “decoding moment” and a more rigorous analysis of the each element of the reception process.

2.6.3. Media audience and interpretive community

Before concluding this section, it is important to note that the concept of “mass audience” has been a site of contestation in literary studies for some time. Scholars in the field have at various occasions suggested that the notion of mass media audience should be replaced by the concept of “interpretive communities” (Wood 2006:76). Challenging the notion of the self-sufficiency of the text, Fish (Fish 1979) avers that that the meaning of any text could only be actualised within the bounds of an “interpretive communities” (Fish 1979). Meaning, he argues, is a function of interpretive condition of

production and reception and never a function of formal linguistic structure of the text (Fish 1980). Fish's perspective was informed by Roland Barthes' cultural theory (Bennett 2006). Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' (1968[1977]) and S/Z (1974[1990]) argued that neither the author of a text, nor the text is the source of meaning of any text. Instead, he argued that the meaning is realised only through the interpretive practice of the reader. "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 1968[1977]). Fish affirms Barthes' theorisation when he states that the structure of the readers' experience shapes the interpretation of the formal structure of the text (1980:2, 1976:468). Meaning is not property of the text; rather, "meaning experience" precedes the encounter with the text (Fish 1980). Heidegger (cite in Armstrong 1990:3) argues that we can interpret something only if we have already grasped it in advance.

By interpretive communities, Fish is concerned with a bundle of strategies or norms of interpretation that are *held in common* and which regulate the way in which individuals think and perceive (Freund 1987: 107). To Fish, the reader is constituted by conventions.

"Interpretive strategy is not put into execution after reading; they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give text their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, raising from them...Members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals..." (Fish 1980).

He concludes that the fact that readers belong to the same community explains the stability of interpretation among different readers. Therefore, the defining factors of an interpretive community are the social space, the cultural traditions, conventions, and meanings that unite the people within that space.

In media contexts, Schröder notes that "the way individuals use and make sense of media material is determined by the identities and communicative repertoires they are socialised into as a result of their membership of these groups in the course of their life history" (2003: 5). The study on Dallas, a famous TV soap opera first aired in the 1980s,

for example, finds that various women audiences constitute community of shared interest (Katz & Liebes 1984).

It is worth noting that the concept of interpretive community is grounded in key assumptions of the autonomy of the reader. As Derrida (1976) puts it, 'the reader writes the text'. This is so because reading is done in context. Text is meaningful in the context of the reader experience (Morley 1992). This is a contradiction to the earlier perspectives by literary theorists. Hirsch (1967) asserts that meaning exists in the text, and the source of that meaning is the author. "Only the author provides a 'genuinely discriminating norms'" (Hirsch cited in Juhl 1980:17). Hall's (1980) notion of the "preferred reading" is not inconsistent with Hirsch's postulation. But Hall goes further to note that meanings are polysemous out of which an audience actualised his own meaning (Hall 1980). This meaning is enabled through individual exposure to convention or cultural code systems of interpretive communities.

2.6.4 Media Audience and Intertextuality

It is also important to note, for this study, that interpretive practices of the audience are not only shaped by the cultural codes shared by the members of the interpretive community, but also discursively constituted through a process described as intertextuality (see Bakhtin 1980, Kristeva, Derrida 1976). The relationship of texts to others has been an abiding concern of literary theorists since classical antiquity (Bauman 2004:1). These theorists argue that audience read or write text through cultural codes and interpretive conventions learned from other texts (Ott and Walter 2000). Schirato and Yell (1996: 92& 217) define intertextuality as "the process of making sense of texts in reference to their relations with other texts", and as "the different cultural literacies we bring to any reading of a text". According to Kristeva "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of [other texts]" (1986b: 37).

In Bakhtin's words, a text "is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was

hitherto said, the author (Bakhtin1988:146, 148). This is the reason Bakhtin argues that "unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Bakhtin1980:148).

Intertextuality for Bakhtin, then, describes the textual 'infinite' upon which readers unconsciously draw to momentarily give meaning to text (1980). Since a text exists within an endlessly expanding matrix of intertextual production, readers continually bring new texts to bear upon their readings of that text. Audiences create texts by isolating them from other texts and opening them to the endless play of textuality (Derrida 1976; Scholes 1989). Texts are neither self-contained, nor individually authored; they are endlessly permeated by a social ensemble which is itself a textual ensemble (Ott and Walter 2000).

Intertextuality is also an ideological process. Audiences create texts by isolating them from other texts and opening them to the endless play of textuality (Derrida, 1976; Choles, 1989). To identify a text is to classify it as generically akin to some texts and not others, to read/write it through cultural codes and interpretive convention learned from other texts. Though the art of reading is ideological, it is also heterogeneous, and contradictory. Therefore the infinity of intertextuality ensures that the text will also be plural, unstable and contradictory (Ott and Walter2000).

Drawing on the perspectives of Brummett (1985), Burke (1973), Croteau & Hoynes (1997), Rushkoff (1996), Ott and Walter (2000) note that audiences find in media texts the symbolic resources for engaging "the cultural anxieties, concerns, and demands of their everyday lives". The intertextual nature of media texts allows for meaning production from different sources (Soja, 1989, p. 2). Rather than consuming texts as unified wholes, audiences piece together fragments of texts to meet their individual psychological needs.

2.7 Conclusion

The chapter examines concept of media audience, tracing the trajectory of audience theories from media 'effects' to constructionist traditions. A brief overview of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and the empirical studies arising from the model were

examined, followed by an assessment of Schrøder's multidimensional model of audience reception (2000), which is the key analytical framework for this study. The process of audience meaning-making was also explored looking at it from two key concepts of "Interpretive communities" (Fish 1979) and Inter-textuality (Bakhtin 1980; Kristeva 1976). All of these concepts will be drawn on in trying to make sense of the data collected and in answering the key questions of this study, as outlined in Chapter 1. How this data was gathered is the topic of chapter 4, an overview of the methodology of this study. But before that is outlined, it is necessary to explore different elements of this studies theoretical 'meta-framework', the literature on media and democracy, as this study is not just an audience reception study, drawing on Schrøder's approach, and meshing those with the important notions of intertextuality and interpretative communities, but also a study of meanings made in an overtly political context of an election in a democratic country.

CHAPTER THREE

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

3.0 Introduction

The chapter provides an analytical overview of the complex relationship between democracy and the press. It does this by examining journalistic practice, and how the work of journalists strengthens or weakens democratic culture.

3.1 The notion of democracy

Democracy is an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1955), for there is no single theory or model of democracy; only theories (Dahl, cited in Terchek and Conte 2001). The common strand in the various models, however, is the ideal of egalitarianism. Democracy is meant to improve the social equality of rights, and the quality of life of all. (Levin 1989:19). This necessitates mechanisms not just to ascertain the ‘popular will’, but also to give the most voice to the most people. According to Robert Dahl (1956:132 cited in Graham 1986), “distinction between democracy and dictatorship is to be sought not by reference to rule by the majority but by the “size, number and variety of minorities whose preferences must be taken into account, so that democratic rule rests on the steady appeasement of relatively small groups.”

Two ideals, which underpin this concept of democracy, are the voting right of citizens and the right to participate in decision-making process (Warren 2002:173). While the right to vote is a core part of almost all conceptions of democracy, the right to equal participation in collective judgement is more contested, both in theory and in terms of creating mechanisms to achieve this in reality. Participation can be at different levels, but, formatively, is at the level of deliberation. According to Levine (2003), democracy requires deliberation for three purposes: To enable citizens to discuss public issues and form opinions; to give democratic leaders much better insight into public issues than

elections are able to do; to enable people to justify their views so rational choices can be made. In the view of the deliberative democracy theorists, democracy is too important to be left to the elected representatives or the elites. Rather citizens must be allowed to participate in the on-going work of democratic and functioning governance, and not just start and end with a vote. (Thompson 1970).

This kind of more participatory and deliberative democracy have, however, been criticized by different authors (see Hartz-Karp 2005) who argue that it is not a practical concept for the following reasons. First, citizen participation can reduce the influence of experts who may have a far better understanding of the issues (Irvin and Stansbury 2004). Second, thorough public participation can make the system too slow, and can be costly (Rourke1984; Irvin and Stansbury 2004). Finally, participation is often used for instrumental ends - to achieve political outcomes - rather than its critical purpose of increasing social, intellectual and political capital (Burby2003).

Garnham (2004:357), and many other theorists of democracy, however contend that the citizen participation in democratic politics is desirable despite all these shortcomings and is practical and possible if states strive to give citizens “equal access also to sources of information and equal opportunities to participate in the debate from which political decisions rightly flow”. Democracy works best where citizens engage in conversation aimed at deciding, “what shall we do?”(Merrit 2010: 21).

Often, in late modern democracies, the sphere where much of this public discussion takes place is the media. The media represent this sphere because the press has functioned as a vehicle of public discourse (McCullagh 2002:38). Being regarded as “the connective tissues of democracy (Gunther and Mughan 2000: 1), the media role’s in modern democracy needs to be unpacked, given the research concerns of this study.

3.2 *Media as public sphere*

The idea of the media as a forum of public discussion in democracy has been most closely associated with its initial articulation in Habermas’s work, *Structural Transformation of Public Sphere*.

This conception of democracy is vital in this study in terms of understanding how *Grocott's* succeeded in educating the electorate on local political processes so that their electoral choices are made on informed decisions. Habermas's historical account of the bourgeoisie public sphere made a significant theoretical (and empirical) connection between the media and the democracy (See Habermas 1989). According to Habermas public sphere theory, the ideal of democratic society is attainable partly through the establishment of a democratic communication system (1989). Stated differently, "public communication lies at the heart of the democratic process" (Garnham 2004:357). Habermas argues that there is an area of social life in which public opinion is formed, and the media (such as *Grocott's*) provides the ideal platform. This is an arena where ideally all citizens have access and where they can express views on public matters. The arena is referred to as "public sphere" (Habermas 1989). "The public, then, was a society of conversationalists or disputants" (Carey 1993). The rational debate of the citizens at this arena contributes to the process of government policy formulation (Habermas 1989). The assumption underlying this conception is that the media, and in this case the *Grocotts'*, plays a key role in the functioning of a democratic society. As Masmoudi (1992: 34) argues, "media provide the platform by which citizens express their opinions and contribute to the progress of a nation". In fact, "debates about the media are often 'debates about democracy in disguise'" (Jacobson (2002:281 cited by Wasseman and d Beer 2005:38).

Habermas, however, notes that this kind of public sphere, which emerged in Europe, has been transformed by the development of capitalism and power politics thereby undermining the principle of open debate (Habermas 1989). The media cease to function as forum for rational debate and discussion, but rather act as a means through which the most powerful class, or alliances of powerful classes, secure consensus and promote consumer culture, leading to the decline of the politically interactive public sphere (p.xii). This he referred to as "refeudalisation" of public sphere (Habermas 1989). The media's role then becomes akin to an ideological apparatus of the state and the media function to create a particular social understanding through the process of "classification

and framing” (Hall 1982:70). According to Hall (1982: 69) ideological power is “the power to signify events in a particular way”, and the power of the media is the power to present worldview to “appear universal, natural and conterminous with reality itself”. He argues that consistent and coherent range of oppositional or critical readings of situations and events is not available in the mass media (Hall 1982: 69). This sets limit to the range of information and interpretation that is available in society.

Habermas’ account of public sphere has been a subject of critique. Scholars like Joan Landes, Mary Ryan, and Geoff Eley contend that Habermas's account idealizes the liberal public sphere (Fraser 1990). Rather than being accessible, the bourgeoisie public sphere was mostly exclusionary (Fraser 1990). It was argued also that the Habermas’ conception of public sphere allowed for a single public sphere despite others existing along the liberal public sphere (Fraser 1990). Despite these criticisms, Habermas’ (1989) conception of the public sphere is relevant for understanding the role played by *Grocott’s* in attempts to democratic society (Fraser 1990; Curran 1991). The role played by the media is however shaped by ideologies of a given society. To this end, the role played by *Grocott’s* cannot be fully grasped outside the dominant view about elections and democratic norms in South Africa. This point is examined in the following section.

3.3 Ideology of news production

News, according to Gieber (1964:173), is what newspaper makes it. Media interpretations of events are shaped by ideological criteria (Stratten 1984:2). These ideology-laden texts are presented as news in the media. Here, ideology refers to a system of ideas reproduced in media discourse (Hall 1982, Kress 1983: 56). Schudson (2000:26) observes that news has the character of maintaining the status quo – the portrait of the world that projects the views of the dominant groups in society. Hartley (1982:36) argues that part of the meaning of the news is derived from social structure shaped by dominant ideology. Drawing on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, the supremacy of the views of the dominant groups is secured not by ideological compulsion, but by cultural leadership, that is, “winning the active consent of those classes and groups who were

subordinated within it (Hall 1982). Hegemony occurs not ‘as a mere superstructural derivate of economic and social performance’, but rather as “the result of permanent and pervasive effort, conducted through a multitude of agencies (Miliband 2009:132). Though sometimes free of control of the ruling class, the media and other signifying institutions help to produce consensus and which manufactured consent” (Hall 1982: 86). Kress made a strong argument about the ideological role of the press when he argues that:

“The media constantly process materials thrown up in social life and in the natural sphere so as to integrate them into consistent ideological systems. This process involves the deletion and classification of events and their restructuring, reclassification, and evaluation in the reports which the media presents” (1983:43-44).

Furthermore, the work of journalist is also shaped by the ideology of the profession itself. McNair (1998:13) speaks of a system of professional ethics, aesthetic code and routines practices that characterise journalistic tradition. Ideology is also at work through the socialisation of journalists by organisational culture (McQuail 1994: 200). (*Grocott’s* falls into the category of the newspapers owned by the white. Even though the paper is owned by a university and thus accommodate diverse interests of the multi-racial Grahamstown community, journalists within the organisation, regardless of their background, go through certain acculturation shaped by the dominant values of the white group.)

In liberal democracy such as South Africa, public consent is won not by force, but by taking the real conditions in which people live their daily lives and mirror it back to them in ways which do ‘make sense’ (Hartley 1982). And newspapers, including community newspapers such as *Grocott’s* play the role of mirroring this reality. They do so through the stories they exclude in their reports, or those they tell in their news articles, editorial articles or illustrations, features articles, and through other ‘signifying’ practices (Hall 1982). Hartley (1982) argues further that one of the real conditions most people experience is powerlessness, and this could be the case in Grahamstown. However,

instead of ascribing their powerlessness to the social and economic way the society is organised, Hartley argues, they are made to view it as eternal forces of nature (Hartley 1982). This is how ideology works to constrain multiple realities.

The operation of ideology in news discourse becomes even more hidden “where the media are private and formal censorship is absent” ... and seen as “spokesman for the free speech” (Herman and Chomsky: 2008:1). The press collaborate inadvertently in “manufacturing consent” by depending on advertisement revenues and relying on the elites as news source (Herman and Chomsky 2008). The media “fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy...” (Herman and Chomsky 2008:2). Hall (1977:341) refers to this process as the “preferred meaning”. Though the context of Herman’s and Chomsky’s analysis is America, Lovaas (2008) argues that South African media do not operate differently.

In South African context, the press is largely owned by private business, whom the ruling party, ANC often accuses of hostile disposition towards the government. Yet, the dominant views privileged in the press are no other than that of the ruling class, as analysis section of this study would later reveal in the case of *Grocott’s*. In addition, advertisement by the municipal government contributes significantly to the revenue of *Grocott’s*. In fact, *Grocott’s* once took the municipal government to court for excluding the paper in their advertising budget (Interview with Lang 2011). With these two conditions in place, the South African press hardly could operate without serving, partly, as ideological apparatus of the state and government at any level.

Herman and Chomsky, however, note that the ideology of the media is not always effective. The public have increasingly learnt to distrust appearances in the media and to look at media discourse “as a mere instrument of interest and obfuscation” (Carey 1993:16). The disconnection between the people’s lived-experience and the media message has rendered the political influence of the media impotent (Carey 1993:16). As this study seeks to establish, this could be the case with *Grocott’s*. Thus from the foregoing, the media could attempt to stimulate public interest in voting, for example, but they lack the power to stop section of the populations’ disengagement from politics

(Carey 1993).

3.4 The roles of the media in democratic societies

What sorts of media-society relations should exist in democratic a society? Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) suggested a number of normative functions that should define the role of the press in a democracy, and the same can be said about what *Grocott's Mail* should be doing. These include surveillance of socio-political developments, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views, holding officials to account for the way they exercise power, provide incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the political process, and resist efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence. These roles have been outlined in detailed in Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng and White's influential monograph *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Society*. These authors identified further four roles that have characterised media practice in democracy since the end of cold war, and these are the monitorial, radical, collaborative and facilitative roles (Christians et al 2009: 19).

The monitorial role, for instance, requires journalists to report on power, power elites, and the operation of power, i.e. the state and government (at every level at which power is exercised) (Nordenstreng 2007, Christians et al 2009). This is similar to the role of surveillance of socio-political developments mentioned by Gurevitch and Blumler (1990).

The "facilitative" role of the media has links to the ideas of deliberative democracy where private individuals meet to discuss public matters. In its conception, public opinion arises from deliberation among citizens, and the media are thus expected to promote dialogue through the publication or/and broadcasting of engaging news (Christians et al 2009:158). In this approach, "norms and institutions are open to challenge and debate, and derive their legitimacy from the actual agreement of citizens" (Deveaux 2000: 141, Christians et al 2009:159). Therefore, journalism is a democratic practice that "stimulate(s) citizen deliberation and build(s) public understanding of issues,

and ...reports(s) on major public problems in a way that advances public knowledge of possible solutions and the values served by alternative courses of action” (Lambeth, Meyer, and Thorson 1998,17).

In this conception, ‘the news media do not merely report on civil society’s association and activities but support and strengthen them” (Christians 2009: 31).

The third role suggested by Christians et al, is the radical role of the media placed emphasis on “the absolute equality and freedom of all members of a democratic society in a completely uncompromising way” (Christians et al 2009: 179). Journalists work to expose the conflict of interest between the dominant ruling class and the subordinated groups. Assuming this role, the primary responsibility of journalists is to challenge the structure of social institutions, which reproduces inequality in the society, and proposes instead a new order (Christians et al 2009: 179). This role is akin to the watchdog role of the media. Significant as the role is to building a democratic society, it is “essentially negative and defensive” (Curran 1991:91). This role sometimes is implicated on by the ideological position of the press itself. As Curran notes, a significant number of media controllers are not politically neutral because of their ideological positions (Curran 1991:91).

The “collaborative” role, the final conceptual of the media’s normative role in democracies, sees the media being deployed to serve the state and other power institutions. It is a role meant to foster “a relationship between the media and the state built on mutual trust and a shared commitment to mutually agreeable means and ends” (Christians et al 2009: 198). However, this cooperation is gained often as a result coercion by the state. “The media accede either passively or unwittingly, reluctantly or wholeheartedly- in participating in the choices journalists make and the coverage they provide” (Christians et al 2009: 198). In the end, the media that emerge is the one that defers to the state (Christians et al 2009: 198).

Central to the roles highlighted above is the need to provide citizens with relevant information to make important political decision, and this is captured in what Grocott’s Mail attempted to do. Carey (1993:20) however warns that journalism have to

be conceived less on the model of information and more on the model of conversation, a partner with the rest of the public. He argues that passion for public life can only grow and persist when people can speak and act as citizens, and have some guarantee that others see, hear and remember what they say. The media are therefore expected to be the representatives of the public since the people were no longer represented by the political parties or the state (Carey 1993).

Carey's arguments reinforce the similar argument mobilised in support of public journalism.²

Returning to the media is the main object of examination for this study, *Grocott's Mail's* intention to explicitly generate conversation around election in the last municipal election could be said to be informed by Carey's advice, an effort which arguably located its task during the election within the 'facilitative role'. The newspaper argues that it took that approach because "it would be disappointing to find out that someone did not vote because they could not afford to find out about the procedure, or that a person voted incorrectly because the independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was vague in its voter education" (Grocott's, May 2011).

3.5 Media in transition democracy: some South African context

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 though has brought progress, but inequality remains endemic due to "economic underperformance and deeply entrenched patterns of historic privilege and deprivation" (NPC, 2011f: 412). The subordinate groups within the "Rainbow nation" still have limited opportunities for meaningful engagement with the state (Heller 2009; Beal et al. 2005). Eighteen years after the first democratic election, little neutral space still exists for dialogue (NPC 2011). Steenveld (2002:10) though notes that the media transformation in the new South Africa fosters greater, more diverse media access, and consequently diverse voices in the

² Public journalism defines the press in terms of promoting and indeed improving, and not merely reporting on or complaining about, the quality of public or civic life" (Glasser 1999:4

media; few of these newspapers carry development news or cover issues relevant to minority/low-income groups (Arenstein 2004; Greer 1999:187-189). Drawing on the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky, Lovaas (2008: 21) blames South Africa's adoption of neo-liberalism economic system for the lack of media plurality and diversity. He argues that economic neo-liberalism is a value that the majority of the journalists and editors in South Africa embrace, and that is the value which journalist's performance reflects (Lovaas 2008: 21). Partly, neo-liberal economic system accounts for the marginalisation of minority voice in the press (Wasserman and de Beer 2005). According to Lovaas (2008:)

“Market-driven English daily newspapers continue, through a series of new filters, to limit, shape, and censor ideas for the benefit of the elite private and public sectors...Sources can frame an issue in a certain light—telling some parts of the story and leaving out others—resulting in a manipulated single view”

South Africa media is also blamed for its adoption of western news values and ethics, which according to Fourie (2008) is problematic within the context of African cultural system. The western signature on the normative role of the media in South Africa and the challenge raised by the paradigm has made some scholars think of Ubuntu as an alternative ethical framework for media practice. Ubuntu as a moral philosophy is premised on the concept of community (Fourie 2008). In the media context, the concept foregrounds the developmental role of the media “in the sense of stimulating citizen and community participation, and obtaining consensus based on widespread consultation with the community” (Fourie 2008: 64). The media within this system is expected to privilege the voice of the community. According to Blankenberg (1999 cited in Fourie 2008), the Ubuntu normative approach encourages a journalism that may stimulate interaction among citizens, between citizens and reporters, and between citizens and politicians. Most importantly, the approach also enables people to come to terms with their everyday experiences.

In Fourie's view, however, the pursuit of Ubuntu as a normative role of the media may mean seeking a redefinition of news and new values. According to him, the

notions of objectivity, neutrality, and balance, which constitute liberal media system, may not find full expression in journalisms shaped by communitarian ideals. He argues further that the advent of globalisation has altered the definition of community, the concept on which idea of Ubuntu is premised. The nature of the public itself has and continues to change (Brants1998: 1–6). Also the media whose role is shaped by Ubuntu philosophy may find it difficult to work out a media economics that can guarantees sustainability of news production (Fourie 2008). Nonetheless, it has been argued that Ubuntu media is not different from civic journalism, which also seeks to establish contact between journalist and the community. Like Ubuntu journalism, civic journalism’s purpose is also to strengthen civic culture, and to rejuvenate public life (Dahlgren 1998; Schaffer & Miller 1995). If democracy is therefore the government of the people by the people and for the people as Abraham Lincoln stated, then it is only necessary that the media in democracies play role that strengthen civic culture and rejuvenate public life. The attempt made by Grocott’s during the municipal election could be located within this role. The potential of this attempt to deepening democratic culture of people in Grahamstown is the subject of examination in this research work.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the nature of modern democracy with special attention paid to the deliberative democracy. The chapter also explored the concept of public sphere and the role of the media in a democracy. While the media’s capacity to strengthen democracy is not in doubt, it is also clear that democracy can also be somewhat subverted through the ideological role played by the media. Drawing on South African experience, an attempt was made to show how the conception of the media’s role in a society can enable participation of various groups or exclude the subordinated groups. Finally, the debate about alternative conception of the media role was highlighted. This discussion provides a lens through which the role played by Grocott’s newspaper, in the context of a highly contested election, can be analysed in Chapter five.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological perspectives that frame this study. It sets out the research process from problem identification to data analysis. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses philosophies of research and why this study is located within the interpretivist tradition. The second section describes the research design and procedures. The methods include qualitative content analysis, personal interviews and focus group discussions. The third section discusses the implementation of the research methods and outlines the data analysis procedure.

4.1 Theoretical underpinnings of methodologies

There are two main philosophies of research in the Western tradition in the social sciences: positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is a philosophy that both proclaims the suitability of the scientific method to all forms of knowledge and gives account of what that method entails (Bryman 1988:14). This approach to knowledge acquisition is referred to as methodological monism or methodological naturalism (Von Wright 1971, Giedymin 1975). Positivism is also constituted by the belief that only the observable phenomena count as knowledge (Bryman 1988:14). This aspect of positivism is known as doctrine of phenomenalism, or sometimes empiricism (Bryman 1988:14). Positivism is characterised by other philosophical positions such as inductivism, deductivism, objectivity, reliability, validity and generalisability (See Bryman 1988, etc.). Quantitative research methods are conceived within this tradition.

Quantitative study is an inquiry into a social or human problem, based on testing a theory composed on variables, measured with numbers, and analysed with statistical procedures, in order to determine whether the predictive generalizations of the theory hold true (Creswell 1994:2). The approaches to data collection within quantitative research include social survey, experiments, structured observation, content analysis

(Bryman 1988:11-12).

Phenomenology or interpretivism, on the other hand, rejects the positivist position that fails to see problems in the application of scientific method to the study of society. It argues instead that the subject of the social sciences, which are the people and social reality, is fundamentally different from the subject matter of the natural sciences, thus any attempt to understand social reality must be grounded in people's experience of that social reality (Bryman 1988:52). Qualitative research is thus understood as a process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell 1994:2). The methods of data collection associated with qualitative research include participant observation, unstructured interviews, life history methods and facilitated group discussion (Bryman 1988:45-50).

Fundamentally, qualitative research seeks to understand the world by describing rather than just 'measuring' (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 270; Iorio 2004). Distinguishing the qualitative research approach from quantitative, Cassell and Symon (1994:7) list the defining characteristics of qualitative research as follows:

"a focus on interpretation rather than quantification; an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting research; an orientation towards process rather than outcome; a concern with context—regarding behaviour and situation as inextricably linked in forming experience; and finally, an explicit recognition of the impact of the research process on the research situation". This study draws strongly on this tradition of research.

4.2 Justification for qualitative research

The goal of this research is to understand the "insider perspectives" of a particular social group (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 271); and as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) put it, "to make sense of, or interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Therefore, the study is located within qualitative research paradigm. It is argued that "the nature of the object under study determines what research methods one may use"

(Danermark et al 2002:11 cited in Schröder et al 2003: 45). Stated differently, the choice of how to investigate a given topic is intimately connected with epistemological and ontological issues relating to the very nature of that topic (Stanley in Silverman 2010:332) And in the case of reception research, Jensen (1988:4) observes that, “it is the qualitative empirical methods of data gathering which are most often associated with reception analysis”. As such, the choice for a qualitative research approach in this study is informed by this summation.

Qualitative research is also preferred for this study because of it allows for greater flexibility in pursuing various avenues of enquiry with research subjects. According to Bryman (1988; 9-10), researcher is provided with wider latitude to follow different directions depending on the subject’s response to question. This flexibility is required for exploring the subjective interpretations of the election discourse in *Grocott’s* by the people of Hooggenoeg community.

4.3 Generalizability, *validity and reliability*

“Generalizability” is a standard aim in quantitative research (Silverman 2010:139). It is the degree to which the findings can be generalized from the study sample to the entire population (Polit & Hungler, 1991:645). This is not the goal of qualitative research because data is often derived from one or more cases and it is unlikely that these cases will have been selected on random basis (Silverman 2010:139). As Adelman, Jenkins, and Kemmis (1980) have argued, however, the knowledge generated by qualitative research is significant in its own right. While the aggregation of single studies allows theory building through tentative hypotheses derived from single findings, the generalizations produced are no less legitimate when it is about a single finding (Adelman et al 1980). Instead of generalisations, Guba and Lincoln (1982) argued for a concept of “fittingness”. Here, the emphasis is on analysing the degree to which the studied matches other situation (Shofield 2002: 178).

“Validity” is another problematic identified in qualitative study (Silverman 2010:275). Positivist scholars often argue that the qualitative approach is not objective

because it relies too heavily on the interpersonal involvement of the researcher and arbitrary interpretive judgement (Salner 1989: 47). The assumption underlying the search for objectivity is that there is a world of empirical reality out there (Kirk and Miller 1986:11). Charmaz (2006:178-80) notes that the validity can be achieved in qualitative research by simply inspecting and comparing all the data fragments that arise in a single case, or by what Ten (1998) describes “comprehensive data treatment”. In Kvale’s (1989:81) view: “To validate is to question, in particular to continually ask what is being investigated and why, and also to ask about the when, where, and who of an action”. Besides, validity within qualitative research paradigm refers to the ability to critically reflect the nature of the social reality by making “defensible knowledge claim” (Salner 1989: 68). In reception study, a basis for some claim to validity can be achieved by engaging in “extended talk” with the informants (Schröder et al (2003: 147).

Reliability also is essentially a tool of positivist epistemology (Watling, cited in winter 2000: 7). Joppe (2000:1) describes it as “the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study.” In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba 1985) argue that terms such as Credibility, Neutrality or Confirmability, Consistency or Dependability and Applicability or Transferability are more useful. This can be achieved by engaging in “inquiry audit” (p.317). This requires verification and validation of data (Campbell, 1996).

4.4 Epistemology of reception analysis

The so-called ‘reception approach’ to media research draws on the theoretical position that “mass communication constitutes a construction rather than a representation of reality” (Jensen 1988). This notion foregrounds the media’s role in the production of meanings and values. The approach is predicated on the assumption that reception is a relatively ‘open’ activity of making sense which enables audiences to negotiate the hegemonic worldview privileged in media discourse (Hall 1980). Drawing on their own lived- experience, the recipient of media message could establish links between media discourses and everyday discourse around politics and other matters and use the

interpretation as resources to engage in political action (Jensen 1988). In this perspective, media content is not just an account of reality but ‘resources’ for daily living and for situating oneself in relation to a range of social and political issues (Jensen 1988). Therefore, understanding how the residents of Hooggenoeg community interpret the discourse of election is relevant to understanding how they view the role of the media in democracy at grassroots level.

4.5 Methods

This thesis applies three methods of qualitative research. They are qualitative content analysis, individual interviews and focus group interview methods. Qualitative content research method was used to examine the dominant themes in the election discourse in the *Grocotts* paper. Interviews were used to explore the understanding of the editors and journalists at *Grocott's* about how they perceived their role, and their understanding of the concept of democracy. Also, the method was used to access information that could not be pursued during focus group discussion. Finally, focus group interviews were used to explore the meanings that audiences made of what *Grocott's* Mail was doing. The three research methods each have peculiarities that are explained in the section below.

4.6 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used mostly to understand the discourse of the election coverage in *Grocott's*. Generally, content analysis is associated with quantitative studies (Titscher et al. 2000: 55). The method is commonly applied in research for “counting the numbers” (Titscher et al. 2000 57-61). Deacon et al (1999) have however stated that content analysis is not and should not be carried out simply for the purpose of what can be counted in media content. It is not by counting and measuring that "patterns" or "wholes" in texts can be demonstrated but by showing the different possibilities of interpretation of "multiple connotations" (Gläser & Laudel 2004:192). The method instead “allows the reader to probe into and discover content in a different way from the

ordinary way of reading a book or watching a television programme” (Neuman 1997:273).

Qualitative content analysis thus helped the researcher identify the “preferred meaning” of election coverage as ‘encoded’ in *Grocott’s*. The first-hand knowledge acquired through this effort guided the researcher to formulate relevant questions for the focus group discussion and personal interviews conducted. The aim here is to compare media discourse with audience discourse in order to determine the relationship between the ‘intended’ meaning in the text and the meaning actualised by the audience (Jensen and Rosengren 1990: 214). Though media texts invites the audience to see a certain form of reality constructed by the text producer (Fairclough 1995:03), as discussed above, the meaning is not fixed (Hall 1980). Audiences themselves are “co-producers of meaning” (Jensen 1988), as explored in Chapter 2. Qualitative content analysis is therefore an approach that examines the relationship between the text and its likely audience (Neuman 1997: 273).

In a reception study, however, it is strongly suggested that researchers abstain from overly-detailed preliminary textual analysis (Schrøder et al 2003: 126). It is useful to carry out a close reading of relatively small amount of textual matter, “enough to be able to pursue the cultural research that motivates the project” (Mabweazara). It is in this light that the analysis of the *Grocott’s* election coverage was done through a ‘light reading’ of all the relevant articles, rather than a concerted close reading of all the texts.

Two key sets of data were gathered for this study. The first set was the editorial contents of *Grocott’s* on the topic of elections published between March 1 and May 18 2011. The second set of data assembled was the transcripts of the recorded conversation of participants in the five focus groups discussion as well as the transcripts of individual interviews with various members of the *Grocott’s* editorial staff.

4.7 Sampling

Though the news on municipal election started appearing in *Grocott's* from October 2010, election news, which consists of news articles, editorials, photographs and illustrations, did not start featuring prominently and consistently in the *Grocott's* until March 1, 2011. From then onwards, election news was either put on the front cover, or on the 'editorial page' or between the first ten pages of the newspaper. This is the reason why the sampling frame spans between 1st March and 17th May, 2011, the election eve. *Grocott's* is published on Tuesdays and Fridays. Twenty-two editions of *Grocott's* were published within the period were selected for this study. These include a special election edition published on May 10, and the edition that featured the town hall debate organised by *Grocott's* at Extension 9 Hall in Joza Township. The 'debate' edition was published on the eve of the election. These two editions received more analytical attention because they deal more directly and intensely with election-related issues than any other edition.

There were 121 election related stories, published in 21 editions, and a special election edition.

The 'light reading' analysis of these editorial contents (i.e. news, op-ed, interviews, letter-to-the-editor, photographs and others with the exception advertisement) broke coverage into two dominant themes of the election 'discourse': How *Grocott's* speaks to readership about the election; and how the newspaper views and speaks about its role during the election? Morley (1992:83) stresses the need to be concerned with the modes in which text address the readers and with how these mode of address construct readers relations to the content of the text, requiring them to take different position in relation to texts. In analysing the relationship between *Grocott's* and its readership, the study draws on Morley's two modes of analyses to examine, a) the internal structures and the mechanism of the text, which privilege certain reading, and block others, b) and the cultural background of the reader which has to be studied sociologically. This therefore requires that other methods of data gathering are employed in order to explore the

complexity of communication around election. This is the reason why this study conducted personal interviews and focus group discussion as complementary methods of investigation.

4.8 Interviews

For issues that require learning about the experience of others, interviewing is without doubt the most important method of social enquiry (Wess 1994). Having critically examined the editorial contents of the *Grocott's* edition selected for this study, the researcher considered it necessary to interview the *Grocott's* editor, general manager and journalists, seeking further answers to some of the research questions.

The two senior staff members at *Grocott's* were asked to speak on how they viewed the role played by *Grocott's* during the election and the reason why the newspaper was made to play the role. Though the validity of verbal report or of introspection method has been challenged in the psychological literature, Jahoda et al (1951:153) argues that through their utterances, interviewees reveal a part of their worldview which influences their actions. Being a productive way of learning about the social world of the interviewees (Kvale 1996:12), interviewing method is used to seek editors' points of view on key concepts such as "democracy", "citizenship" and "election" often flagged in the newspaper's election reports. Their views and how *Grocott's* articulate these concepts in election reports were compared with the meaning actualised by the readers. Although interviewing is an un-standardised instrument because researcher cannot guarantee the symmetry of the data gathered it is a powerful way of obtaining information (Goode and Hatt 1981:185). This study especially finds it necessary to access information on how the people of Hooggenoeg; one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Grahamstown, interpret media discourse on election (Schoon 2011).

Individual interviews were also used as a supplement the focus group method. It was used to further mine the opinions of some members of focus group panels (held with audiences) who appeared to have more to say. This was done in order to further "dredge up" the meaning of their experiences from their unconscious, which group

dynamics could probably have rendered hidden (Weiss 1994, kvale 1996). Weiss (1994) observes that qualitative interview method is “useful for understanding the complexities of respondents’ experiences”.

4.9 Focus group interviews

Conducting focus groups as a research method is defined by two core elements: a moderator, who sets the stage with prepared questions or interview guide; and a method which is oriented towards eliciting participants’ feelings, attitude and perceptions about a selected topic (Vaughan et al 1996). The researcher used the method to examine the informants’ shared understanding of everyday life (Krueger 1988; Kitzinger 1994), using the discourse on municipal election as a guide. The method was a useful way of discovering how the people of Hooggenoeg think and talk about election, seeing the world as they do, and finding out not only what they think, but also why they hold the view that they hold about the election (Krueger 1988, Morgan and Krueger 1993). The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one-to-one interview (Kitzinger 1995). Participants were selected because they were in the position to contribute valuable knowledge to the research theme. According to Lunt and Livingstone (1996:160), 6 to 10 participants work best for focus group because interaction among group is a crucial feature as they are meant to reveal the reality of the target group and provide a view of how members of the target group think and talk. In this study, members for focus group discussions varied from six to twelve. Six focus group discussions were conducted at different times, but the first panel discussion was organized as a ‘pilot’ session. The researcher invited a colleague to observe the session and critique the process in order to minimize any defects in methodology and facilitation process. Through the pilot meeting, it was discovered that though an average member of Hooggenoeg community can speak English, a few informants preferred to express themselves in Xhosa or Afrikaans. Therefore, two interpreters were invited to join the subsequent panels. After speaking in either Xhosa or

Afrikaans, the interpreters relayed what was being said in English. The speaker was later asked to confirm whether the interpretation captured his or her thought. Where the speaker felt that his or her meaning was distorted, such speakers were allowed to rephrase certain statements. Occasionally, the speaker himself/herself reverted to English for clarity.

As suggested by Jensen, (1988:4) selected news headlines and news stories from *Grocott's* election coverage published three months prior to the election were shown to participants during the discussion as a way of prompting discussion and exploring relevant issues. Informants were encouraged to engage in conversation about elections, everyday life, and how election news was, if at all, used as a political resource. It should be noted, however, that “reception analysis does not assume that the audiences simply tell it like it is.... audience interviews constitute another text to be decoded analytically” by the researcher (Jensen 1998). The study thus relates the analysis of the citizen discourses to that of the media discourses on election.

4.10 Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling was used in selecting those who participated in the focus group discussion. Although six to ten participants were proposed to be members of the focus group, on two occasions, about twelve people turned up for each meeting. This happened because each participant was implored to invite at least one other person to the next group meeting, knowing that some participants may not succeed in inviting someone. It turned out that while few former participants did not invite anyone, others invited more than one person. This is the reason why the number of participants per focus group varies from six to twelve.

By the end of the research period, forty two participants, aged between eighteen and fifty five years, participated in the focus group interviews. Ten were men and thirty-two were women.

Although, 12 editions of *Grocott's* were selected for content analysis, only two editions were shown to the participants at the focus group discussion. These were the

special election edition and the ‘debate’ edition published on May 10, 2011 and May 17, 2011 respectively.

4.11 Data analysis procedures

Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded electronically and were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed copy was later edited in order to make sense of the conversation. Thematic coding was adopted in analysing the text. This is referred to as “a loosely inductive categorisation of interview...extract with reference to various concepts, headings or themes. The process comprises of contrasting and abstracting of the constitutive elements of meaning” (Jensen 1982:247).

The transcripts were analysed drawing on various theoretical perspectives highlighted in chapter two and three. This analysis foregrounds the material condition of the people of Hooggenoeg, their context of news consumption, as well as the role of *Grocott’s* as a community newspaper in Grahamstown. This analysis is located within the broader frame of socio-political and cultural system in South Africa.

Overall the research process proceeded relatively well, despite some participants missing sessions, and some logistical confusion at points. In spite of the linguistic complexities, most of the sessions were conducted with full translation when needed, and mutual comprehension. High ethical standards of research were aspired to, and, overall, it appeared that most participants were comfortable and even empowered somewhat by their participation.

CHAPTER 5

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSES OF FINDINGS

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives outlined in the previous chapters, this chapter presents and analyses the data gathered from the three different research methods: the qualitative contents analysis, the individual interviews and the focus group discussions. The chapter begins with a brief thematic analysis of the contents of *Grocott's* published between March 1, 2011 and May 27, 2011.

5.1 Thematic content analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify the “preferred meanings” (Hall 1980) of election encoded in election news by *Grocott's* with a view to (later) compare the meanings encoded in the news discourse and the meanings appropriated by the residents of Hooggenoeg (Neuman 1997:273). Following Schröder's advice, it is worth reiterating that qualitative content analysis method was deployed minimally only to access certain preliminary information ahead of field work as well as to compliment other research methods chosen for this study. Thus, relatively few texts are analysed so as to allow greater focus on the reception process, which constitutes the primary objective of this research project.

121 election-related editorial items comprising of news, news features, opinion articles, editorial articles, letters –to-the editor, photographs and cartoons were published in 21 editions of the paper including the special ‘Election Guide’ edition (Each of these were analysed, except cartoon which did not offered much for analysis). The analysis of these editorial contents was divided into two themes that dominated the election coverage. One is the framing of election discourse in the news coverage; the other is the *Grocott's* understanding of their role during elections and how that role is represented in their reports. Morley (1992:83) stresses the need to be concerned with the modes in which text addresses the readers and with how these modes of address construct readers' relations to the content of the text, thus requiring them to take different position in relation to texts.

To begin with, *Grocott's* is not significantly different from other newsprints in South Africa. A bi-weekly English publication, *Grocott's* covers ranges of issues other newspapers also cover. This includes politics, business, art and entertainment, sport, education, weather reports, and others. Being a community newspaper, however, *Grocott's* scope is limited to the coverage of Grahamstown community. In general, the paper places emphasis on the municipal politics, local business, crime, and the educational institutions in Grahamstown, including Rhodes University, and coverage of sports. The key difference between *Grocott's* and others newspapers in South Africa is that the paper also operates as training centre for students of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University. Thus, significant number of the newspaper's workforce is drawn from the Journalism School's staff and students³.

5.2 Grocott's Construction of election: language use, narrative structure and news sources

In March 2011, the newspaper declared its editorial intention to “follow the ups and downs of the various campaigns” (March 25, 2011:18) by covering election events, and providing its “readership with equitable coverage of all relevant party campaigns” (March 29, 2011: 4). Implicit in these statements is the intention to foreground news reports on political activities and processes, instead of focusing reports on service delivery and the failure of democratic institutions to actualise the gains of democracy. This promise later manifested in the publication of news stories on the party lists of candidates, the intra – party wrangling, party campaigns, and other election related matters.

Examples of such headlines include, among others: “And for the ANC...” “Mind

³ According to *Grocott's* editor, Steven Lang, the fact that many of these students come from different parts of the world has some influence on the news production. For example, the editor asserts: “being student who are still undergoing training, their confidence needs to be bolstered before they can go into the township to get people's interview”(Interview with Steve Lang 2012). There is also the challenge of language barriers. Though, significant number of Grahamstown residents can communicate in English, many still prefer to communicate in their local language – Xhosa or Afrikaans – which many students do not speak.

announces its election candidates”, “ANC members toyi-toyi against list” (April 1, 2011: 9), “Students add new twist to elections”, “Ward 10 meet their ANC candidate”; Azapo announces local candidates”; “Record number of candidates for poll”, “DA candidates campaign in townships”, “Hani carries campaign message home”, “Mind to host pre-election debate”, “Parties with Unusual names” (April 15, 2011: 6-11; 13 May 2011: 12), “Members act against ANC” (March 25, 211:3), ANC party list out- but party keeps mum” (March 28, 2011:6). This pattern of news coverage reinforces the argument of public journalism scholars that press generally focus on the trivial events and are easily manipulated by campaigns during elections (Friedland 2000).

In total, the coverage consisted of news items (32 pieces), editorial articles (9 pieces), vox pop (6 pages), opinion articles (12 pieces), photographs (37 photos), cartoons (3), letters-to-the-editor (11) and ‘advertorials’ (14). The period covered by this study spans between March 1 and May 17, 2011(The municipal election was held on May 18, 2011).

Apart from the newspaper’s focus on party activities, events and conflicts, the coverage of elections in *Grocott’s* also underscores voting as the major issue in elections. In one of the *Grocott’s* editorial, Deputy President, Kgalema Motlanthe was quoted reminding South Africans of their duty to vote (March 4, 2011:8). Similarly, in a news headline, “Voting a democratic duty, says prince”, the newspaper reported the speech of a Xhosa prince who charged the people to vote. Other news headlines stressing the relevance of voting above citizens ‘active engagement with political process include the following: “Call up for youth to sign up to vote,” “Absolutely the last chance to register,” “Apply for special vote now” (April 1, 2011:7). In any of these calls to vote, “citizen’s agenda” (Meritt 1998) were not openly linked to election coverage, a news frame that suggests a particular understanding of democracy and politics that may not serve the public interest.

In analysing text, Morley (1992) advises that attention be paid to language and the internal structures and the mechanism of the text, which privilege certain reading, and block others. This advice invites researchers to view news as a construction. The type of

news articles published during the election, the narrative structure of the news, and the choice of words suggest a particular framing that privileged politicking above public service. According to Lippmann (1922), the press offers audiences a particular worldview from which they form ‘pictures in their heads.’

Evidence of Grocott’s vote-centric election reports (i.e. a particular focus on the act of voting) is further shown through the questions put to the public in the “Street Talk”, a weekly vox pop interview targeted at the Grahamstown citizens. The questions were often framed to find out whether the people would vote or not, or which party they might vote for, if they were to vote. Similar questions were also posed to the under-age youths who were not even eligible to vote. In UPSTART, a newspaper supplement prepared for the young readers, the reporter asked various students “Who is going to win election?” (May 2011).

Close observation of *Grocott’s* contents also reveals that the framing that runs through the contents of election coverage presented elections as a “contest”, “power struggle”, or “battle for position”. The choice of words used in the election reports depicts the election as confrontation. Here are few examples: “Mind-ANC election war begins” (April 29, 2011:11), “Cope to contest election” (April 8, 2011:5) “Court victory for ANC list” (April 1, 2011:2), etcetera. Writing from public journalism point of view, Rosen (1993, 2001) observes that in standard coverage of elections, where journalist’s “goal is always to appear nonpartisan and above the fray, the master narrative has for a long time been “winning”— who’s going to win, who seems to be winning, what the candidates are doing to win?”

The examination of the editorial content also reveals that, large political parties such as ANC and DA attracted many more news headlines than other smaller parties in *Grocott’s*. A new party such as MIND (which was formed only in Grahamstown, specifically to participate the local government elections) was not included in the election discourse until the party adopted warfare language by announcing its aim to “rock the boat of election” (March 11 2011). *Grocott’s* started featuring MIND more regularly in its news coverage when the party signified its interest to contest in the elections and

defeat ANC, the dominant political party. Then news headlines about MIND include: “MIND does about –turn on election decision (March 11, 2011), “MIND to host pre-election debate” (April 15, 2011), “MIND –ANC election war begins” (April 29, 2011).

Grocott's response to MIND's decision to participate in the election fits into the Rosen's observation that candidates (or parties) that cannot win are safely ignored by the press until they threaten to affect the outcome, or do something dramatic to impact on the election (1993). Then they become part of the story because their position fits the newspaper discourse of election, which harps mostly on “winning” (1993). Rosen then concludes that “winning” or “conflict” or ‘war’, i.e. the key theme of contestation, becomes the master narrative in election news coverage (1993).

It is worth noting also that the news framing in *Grocott's* invites the audience to see elections as the most key and critical component of democracy. Election narratives were presented as if the principle of democracy is constituted mainly or only in voting exercise. Evidence of ‘essentialising’ elections *as* democracy is found in the *Grocott's* editorial titled “Gift for votes lowers the tone” where the election event is represented as the key democratic achievement. A statement in the editorial reads: “These election preparations, together with a probable flurry of meetings and rallies, make up the foundation of democracy” (*Grocott's*, April 5, 2011:4). In yet another headline, “Election hullabaloo”, the newspaper writes that “democracy is alive and foot-stompingly well” in South Africa (*Grocott's* April 5, 2011:4). Along these lines, many news stories were framed to essentialise voting as the key, or main, or at times, even the *only* ingredient of democracy.

To this end, Warren (2002:173) warns that democratic institutions should “serve not only to distribute power in the form of votes, but also to secure the connection between the power to make decision and equal participation in collective judgment”. The subtext of the *Grocott's* reports on the elections is clarified in Spark's (2001) summation. He wrote:

“The press is all too easily swept up in the superficial and strategic aspects of political campaigns, focusing on spin, trivia polls and pundits, rather than common problems, proposed solutions, the records of candidates, and honest insight into

who they really are. This short sighted reactionary focus plays into the hands of cynics, diminishes the value of public discussion and ultimately turns off huge swaths of citizens, who view the process in which they have no real say after which nothing will change”(2001:116).

Another key observation can be made from even a ‘light reading’ of the news reports in *Grocott’s*: most news sources and most ‘voice’ is given to the political elite, and not to ordinary people. This is somewhat to be expected, since the general focus of the news was more on politics and political events rather than on people’s problems, voices heard in the news discourse are the voices of the political class such as the party candidates, elected officials, party leaders, party officials, and government officials. Voices of the ordinary citizens who are not members of any political party were subordinated in the election discourse. Even where a few individuals are given the opportunity to voice their opinions, their answers are pre-conditioned by leading questions such as “will you vote?” Or “which party will you vote for?” (March 11, 2011; March 1, 2011: 8; April 21, 2011: 3 etcetera). Thus, the responses given by the citizens are circumscribed within the narrow definition of democracy that the questions are framed in.

5.3 Grocott’s framing of its role during the election

Analysis of the Grocott’s editions published within the period under study show that the newspaper saw its role mainly as to provide information that will help readers make an “informed decision” about both who to vote for, as well as information about how to vote (*Grocott’s* May 5 2011). These goals were pursued through many election-related stories published between March and May 2011. The stories generated thus mostly included news on voter registrations, party lists, and political campaigns at ward level, ward committee meetings, intra-party disagreements, inter-party debates, citizens’ views about election, and other social/political events.

A week before the election, *Grocott's* also published and circulated 10,000 free copies of an election-themed 'special edition' instead of charging the usual R5 cover price. In this edition, a section (*Inkqubo yokuvota*) which also provided mostly information on how to cast vote, was published in isiXhosa, the language of the black community in Grahamstown, in order to make the free edition more accessible to the different segments of the Grahamstown public (May 10, 2011:24). This is in spite of the fact that *Grocott's* is essentially an English newspaper. In editorials, the newspaper described these efforts as its "contribution to the democratic process" (*Grocott's* May 10 2011). The newspaper stated further that, "[It] would be disappointing to find out that someone did not vote because they could not afford to find out about the procedure, or that a person voted incorrectly because the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was vague in its voter education" (*Grocott's* May 10, 2011).

In the edition published a week prior to the election, *Grocott's* reiterated that its editorial commitment to the election matters was premised on the need to equip "the community with the knowledge to vote for the best possible local government— one that could improve Makana for everyone" (May 13, 2011:12). In the edition published on the election eve, the paper summed up in democratic term its role in the last three months since the election coverage began: "*Grocott's Mail* has made useful contributions to promoting the democratic process" (May 17 2011:4). The editorial concludes that: "This newspaper fully supports the values and ideals of democracy and we urge you all to go out tomorrow and make your mark" (May 17 2011:4). All these efforts demonstrate how the perception of the *Grocott's* journalists favours election as all-important ingredient of democracy.

In addition to just covering events and the processes and machinations of the parties, *Grocott's* also took the unusual step of organising a 'town hall' meeting to give all parties an opportunity to debate each other. This event turned out to be the only multi-party local debate organised during these elections.

The newspaper's approach in this regard can be usefully understood with reference to the "facilitative role" of the media, one of the four key 'normative' roles of modern

news media theorized by Christians et al (2009: 159). Within this role, the practice of journalism is seen as a key part of democratic practice that deliberately seeks to “stimulate(s) citizen deliberation and build(s) public understanding of issues (Lambeth et al 1998:17; Tanni 2007). Going further than merely reporting other people’s events, and hosting their own event, in this election context, made *Grocott’s* more of an ‘actor’ in the rough and tumble of actual political process compared to the paper’s usual role in the town. In the coverage, there was not much self-reflection about this, nor much comment as to why there were no other such ‘town hall’ or public debates between parties i.e. why there is this ‘gap’ in electioneering in Grahamstown, and perhaps elsewhere. The relative lack of civil and rationale ‘debate’ and engagement between parties before these elections was largely un-commented upon.

5.4 Analysis of the interviews conducted with editors and journalists of Grocott’s

Like the editorial coverage, in interviews with key members of the *Grocott’s* editorial and managerial staff, a voting-centric ‘essentialism’ was also apparent. In general, the respondents above emphasized the importance of voting in election and that the voting right of the people is sacrosanct in democracy. Mphuso Ponono, a *Grocott’s* journalist, argues “elections or voting is very important for people. In that way, they get a sense of being involved in the whole democratic process. The majority of South Africans believe that voting gives them power because it means that they can make change happen if they are dissatisfied. I think majorities of people do have a feeling of power when it comes to voting. Voting is very important because it gets people involved” (Interview with Ponono, 2011).

The paper’s editor was even more emphatic about this perspective: “the election means who is going to be running this town? Who is going to be running this area? It is about how this town is run because we live here. So, everyone wants to have a voice. And I think exercising your vote is the most important thing in democracy. So I am a big believer in exercising your vote. It is very important.” (Interview with Steven Lang,

2011)

Of course these journalists know that voting or electoral procedure is not the only constituent of democracy. But, in the heat of the coverage, the other important elements of democracy, more related as explored in chapter 3 to the on-going right of citizens to participate in decision-making process before and after election (Warren 2002:173), are often downplayed. In the *Grocott's* election reports, the citizens' right to participating in ongoing governance neither formed the "master narrative" of the news discourse nor was it emphasized in any of the election coverage.

Yet, to suggest that the *Grocott's* journalists are consciously biased is a problematic assumption, considering Schudson's observation that journalists' thinking is itself influenced by ideological criteria Journalists themselves are subject of ideology (1989). The news, according to Schudson, possesses the character of maintaining the status quo – the portrait of the world that projects views of the dominant groups in society (2000:26). Warren (2002:173) extends the argument, noting that, voting by itself provides no link between the decision-making process and what citizens want, for "democratic institutions serve not only to distribute power in the form of votes, but also to secure the connection between the power to make decision and equal participation in collective judgment".

There is nothing inherently wrong about 'voting essentialism' especially if it is corrected and contextualised by other coverage that highlights the need for the space for ongoing (and not 'once off') accountability, and on-going participation by the populace. Otherwise the danger is that the culture of democracy is reduced to the mere act of voting – and this can be, and, as is explored below, was, debilitating and disempowering for many voters who already had an acute sense that voting, in and of itself, would change little.

5.5 Hooggenoeg residents as audience of *Grocott's* and their context of consumption

Grocott's belong to the category of South African newspapers described as “local press” by Fourie (2001:71-76). The paper’s content comprises of local news and discusses community issues that affect the people of Grahamstown. *Grocott's* news message is thus addressed to entire citizen of Grahamstown including Hooggenoeg residents. And the ‘addressed’ is considered as audience (Ede & Lunsford 1984: 156), that is, the individuals to whom a message is addressed.

Notwithstanding this, one of the first observations that became clear when discussing election coverage in the focus groups is, the residents of Hooggenoeg perceive *Grocott's* as a ‘White newspaper’ whose editorial interest focuses more on the white community. According to participant 8, “Their (*Grocott's*) reporters go to the white community to interview people. You don’t see them here because as far as they are concerned, the people here don’t exist.” Yet in the same breath, the speaker likened *Grocott's* to ANC (the party predominantly populated by the black South Africans) which “looks after only the important people, and ignores the rest of the people”.

Though the Coloured are not as challenged as the Black in the use of English language as the focus group discussion reveals, some of the participants criticized *Grocott's* choice of English as language of communication. “There could have been local language version of *Grocott's* for those who lack the ability to read and understand English newspaper. If *Grocott's* people cannot produce another paper in local language, they can at least alternate the publication between isiXhosa and English,” Participant 20 said. (*Grocott's* is published every Tuesday and Friday of the week).

It is a fact that some sections of the population are excluded from participating in the public sphere created by *Grocott's* because of the language imperative. Language can be another form of exclusion, among other forms, which may prevent marginalised groups from participating in the public sphere. A number of critics such as Fraser (1996), Urla (1995) and Dahlgren (1997) have explained this process as the researcher has shown

in Chapter 2.

In contrast, another participant (11) finds fault with *Grocott's* reportage on the basis that the paper functions to undermine the leadership of the ANC. "Grocott's, like other South African newspapers, usually report on the negative side of the government".

Mr. Hendrick who claimed to be among the first residents of Hooggenoeg said he buys *Grocott's* occasionally. "I buy it when I see any news of interest such as when the municipality is planning to do a project in the community, or when there is a major debate on community matters. And my children sometimes read it after I must have finished reading the copy. With R5 per copy, very few people here can afford to buy *Grocott's* regularly."

Others also highlight the issue of cost as a barrier to greater uptake of the paper in the area. "Often time, I share a copy of *Grocott's* with my colleagues at office. I rarely buy it, but I do find the news very interesting. Though, few Hooggenoeg residents can afford to buy *Grocott's* at R5, many share a copy with those who cannot afford to buy one, after all, the information about what happens in the municipal council affects all of us as a people of Grahamstown even if *Grocott's* does not always write about the people in Hooggenoeg." The *Grocott's* management also is not unaware of the financial incapability of many people in the community, including the residents of Hooggenoeg, thus the offer of the free Election Guide during the municipal election. And many participants in the focus group discussion confirmed they read the Election Guide.

Following Ede and Lunsford's (1984:156) submission, that the audience are "the actual or real life people who read a discourse", or Long and Wall's (2009:220) description of audience as "anonymous and disparate collective of individuals addressed by mass media, either as a group or as individuals", Hooggenoeg residents constitute parts of *Grocott's* audience either by reading *Grocott's* or by being part of the addressed. To this end, the newspaper is not only an informational resource, but it also helps Hooggenoeg residents reinforce their sense of identity within Grahamstown as a social space. From the focus group discussions, it became clear that reading a copy of *Grocott's*, however irregular, played some small role in creating a sense of community in the

readers. This was particularly the point, for Grocotts, of creating and distributing the free 'Election special'.

5.6 Hooggenoeg residents' identity and the influence of socio-political structure in Grahamstown

This section discusses the identity of the people living in Hooggenoeg and the influence of the socio-political structure of Makana municipality on the residents, seeking to understand how identity and the context of media consumption (socio-economic, historical, political and cultural) shape meanings about politics and their everyday lives (Fiske 1987: 62; Ang 1990:60; Ruddock 2001:119 and Thompson 1995:23). Identity is used in this study as a specific subject position that foregrounds how an individual person locates himself or herself in the social space with the purpose of acting within it and upon it.

As discussed in Chapter One, the identity of the people of Hooggenoeg is significantly shaped by economic status. As low-income earners, the residents see themselves unambiguously as part of the subordinated or subaltern group or groups in Grahamstown. A participant said: "Hooggenoeg residents are largely farm labourers. There are others who make a living by cleaning white people's houses. I was lucky to work in Pick 'n Pay (a local retailer). I wasn't paid more than R3000 per month. This is a very poor area, so whatever one gets is little money and it gets spent inside the house."

Others also emphasised the hardship of their lives, and their low incomes. "I work as a driver. And I don't make more than R1500 per month. I have children, and I do not have the support of my wife because she is not working. Although, we are divorced but the children live with me, I have to eat, pay rent and other expenses; the children will have to eat too, go to school. How can I spend R1500 to take care of our needs for a month?"

For many residents their poverty and their race coincide in complex ways to ensure the authorities neglect of them. A participant relates: "As is well known, there are more coloured people here than there are black. And they usually say Coloured people are

more irresponsible than black people So, I think that's why this area is always the last on the list of areas marked for developmental projects. To the councillors we are just people who want, want and want. We are people who are complaining and who always want things. That is how the government looks at us. But there is still so much to be built here.”

From the discussion it was clear that large numbers of Hooggenoeg residents depend on the monthly grant from the government. They have an ambiguous relationship with government at all levels needing, on the one side, its largesse, but on the other, feeling looked-over and neglected. At the time of this research, a group of youths from Hooggenoeg had just protested at the municipal council for giving out jobs involving road maintenance in the Hooggenoeg area to the youths from other community.

It is noteworthy also that the identity of the people is defined not only by “extreme class distinction” (Adam 1995), but also by the system of racial inequality characterizing South Africa society, as the comment above revealed. The “coloured” people believe that they are victimized under the apartheid regime and the black government.

Marcelle Boysen, the councillor for Ward 3 under which Hooggenoeg community falls said, “under apartheid regime, we were too black to be white, and under the ANC government, we are too white to be black. We are indeed the true victims of racial system in South Africa. The coloured people suffer greatest indignity in this country.”

A focus group participant captured the consequences of this succinctly: “Even though we can now vote, our vote gets us nowhere.”

In spite of this sentiment, there are no borders in Hooggenoeg, people are constantly influx and are interacting with each other in folksy way that make them appear a unified group. The researchers observed a high number of houses where both the coloured and the black are found relating as neighbours. And social functions, especially funeral ceremony in Hooggenoeg, appear very mixed with both coloured and black South African attending, sharing their experience of grief for the dead and feasting together. These social ceremonies appear to provide rallying points for the residents to forge a greater sense of community.

5.7 Hooggenoeg residents as interpretative community

Being a settlement for the people of mixed race (Xhosa and the Coloured people), Hooggenoeg is different from other communities in Grahamstown that are more uni-ethnic, inhabited by the people of a particular ethnic or racial background. The sharing of a geographical space by the two previously fairly distinct ethnic communities helps forge a unique “interpretive community” (Fish 1979), not defined by a singular language or cultural background as it is the case in most South African communities, but by the commonality of their experience within a particular geographical location. The defining factors of an interpretive community, according to Jensen, are the social space, the cultural traditions, conventions, and meanings that unite the people within that space (Jensen).

Hooggenoeg, although is often referred to by Grahamstonians as a ‘Coloured area’, was conceptualised by the municipality in 1995 as Grahamstown’s first ‘non-racial’ suburb where only Coloureds and Black Africans would live together (Schoon 2011). Though people’s identities are closely tied to the language they speak, the language of communication in Hooggenoeg shifts constantly from Afrikaans to isiXhosa and to English depending on the speaking subject involved in conversation. The socialization, the inter-marriage and the social space shared by the residents of Hooggenoeg contribute to the fluidity of their unique identity.

As mentioned earlier, the experience of the people in that community is also defined by poverty, unemployment, alcohol abuse and crime. The poor welfare condition in the area make the people views the municipal government as “insensitive” and the media as “collaborator”. The tendency to attribute the suffering in the community to government failure is high among the people of Hooggenoeg. As a participant said, “If you look at surroundings like Extension 9 and other black communities, they are much better than our houses. Vukani (a neighbouring black community) got better RDPs than what we got. Here if it is raining you sit in the rain and soak wet because you can’t afford to put ceiling on your own, you must first fix the roof and then fix the ceiling. That is

expensive. And politicians who are supposed to do that are never seen after election. Here we are getting dry promises. And nobody wants to come to our aid including the media” (Participant 18).

The residents of Hooggenoeg share some common experiences, defined, at least in part, by their class and by the reason of sharing a common geographical space. Before the elections and the *Grocott's* coverage of it, the people have a particular understanding of what election means. In their estimation, it is another period when politicians will repeat promises – only to be broken later. This position is in consonance with Fish's (1980) argument that “meaning experience” *precedes* encounters with the text (Fish 1980), and that the meaning of any text could only be actualised within the bounds of an “interpretative communities” which, this study argues, the residents of Hooggenoeg constituted (Fish 1979).

5.8 Meanings obtained from the textual content of Grocott's and their appropriation to the readers' everyday lived realities.

Content analysis reveals that the trajectory of election reports published in *Grocott's* during 2011 municipal election in Makana area was in three phases: voters' registration, parties' campaign and voting education. This section attempts to explain how the people of Hooggenoeg makes sense of these election stories, and the role these election stories play in shaping the Hooggenoeg residents' participation in the local public sphere as well as their perception of the local power class and the press that report on local politics. But only the editions on Election Special and the edition that covered the town hall debate held by *Grocott's* newspaper were shown to the focus group members before discussion. Recognising the complexity of reception process, the analysis draws on Schrøder's multi-dimensional model of media reception with six dimensions: Motivation, Comprehension, Discrimination, Position, Evaluation and Implementation.

5.8.1. Motivation:

Given that there were clearly low expectations of the election, the residents of Hooggenoeg could not be said to be interested or 'motivated' to learn more about the elections from the press coverage (or perhaps from other media?). So what possibly could have caused audience encounter with the text? A participant responded thus: "At every election time, the people are going to come to you saying, they would change this, they would change that. But they are lying; they don't do anything. They won't do anything, we know. Still I read to see what candidate A or B is promising to change. And you know there are too many leaders here – so we don't know which is which. We don't see them; we only see them in the newspaper where they make their empty promises." Put differently, election story per se is not what motivates the audience to read *Grocott's* because people already know that such story comprises of empty promises of politicians. Rather, it is the curiosity to know who is standing for what office that motivates the people to read. "Sometimes, people are just curious to see a familiar face in the paper so that they can talk about it," said Participant 22. This "surveillance" keeps the cycle of gossiping in the community going (Schoon 2011: 19). It is one of the multiple ways that the residents of Hooggenoeg sustain interactions with wider Grahamstown community. This habit justifies the argument of the Uses and Gratification theorist, that the media consumer is motivated by the utilitarian value of the media.

Of course, 'interest' and 'motivation' are not just stoked by press coverage. In elections, candidates also do door-to-door visits and hold community meetings. These meetings could spur some people to find out more about the candidate if there is a report about such candidate in the news, as discussion revealed. When asked if they knew who their councillor was, Participant 7 said: "I know it is Mercelle Boysen, though I never met her during campaign for election, I understand she was here (Hooggenoeg) a couple of times. But I later saw her photographs in *Grocott's* alongside that of other candidates. The previous councillor, we didn't know because we hardly heard anything about him. In the past, the leaders were never here".

Other participants commented on what motivated them to read *Grocott's* election coverage: “if you want to know what happen in the municipal council without leaving Hooggenoeg area, *Grocott's* is the best place to go. They talk a lot about the municipal government in their news, but very little about the people that are suffering here,” (Participant 22). Many discussants believe it is not only important to know what is going on in local politics, but also to know about whatever help and support they can access. Participant 17 relates, “There are many things happening in the municipal council that nobody will tell you about except if you yourself go there or read about it in the *Grocott's*. Your closest neighbour or friend may not even tell you except you know about it yourself. Look at the issue of food parcel, I only knew about it yesterday. They asked unemployed people to come with their ID to the municipal council to collect food parcels, but I did not hear about it. I only went there this morning and they said I came late. But my neighbour read about it earlier in *Grocott's* and did not tell me. Even for jobs, when one is available nobody will tell you here. *Grocott's* is the only paper that talks about thing like that. So, I read the paper to see if there is any information about jobs or any other opportunities from municipal government” (Participant 17).

The variety of statements made by the focus group participants point to the fact that what motivate a particular reader to engage with a text is complex. Schrøder argues that analysis of reception process should start from the point of “motivation”, that is, what triggers a reader’s interest, for “If people are not somehow motivated to read a media text they encounter, the reception process is arrested right there” (Schrøder 2000:244). What connects readers to text could be “‘reminiscence’ (something in the message reminding the reader of people or experiences), ‘innovation’ (the experience of gaining new insights provided by the text), ‘identification (feeling some kind of attachment to a character in the text), ‘community’ (feeling a sense of belonging in the textual universe), etc (Schrøder 2000:245). Yet while audience may indeed be “motivated” to read for a particular reason, there is also indication that some readers are not necessarily driven by an identifiable interest; sometimes audience read a media text perfunctorily, that is, they read newspapers as a matter of acquired habit. Thus the “links

of relevance between the readers' personal universe and the universe perceived to be presented by the text" may not be consciously established before the reader engages in the media text.

But, for many of the participants in the focus group, there appears to have been both a general motivation to get hold of a copy of *Grocott's* at least on occasion, and some heightened motivation to do so during this election period.

5.8.2 *Comprehension*

The second element of Schrøder's model speaks to the informational meanings that consumer of given texts 'receives'. It goes beyond their 'understanding' the content, to making empirical sense of it (and perhaps, as an analytical 'moment' before much 'meaning' is made). Participants in the focus group were asked to comment on a number editorial contents published in the Special Election Guide and on the edition of the paper that featured the town hall debate. From the comments, it was clear that residents had very high levels of comprehension about what the coverage was 'about'. But what is interesting is that even working out empirical meaning or first level comprehension is (almost) immediately fused with making meanings, i.e. with other elements of Schrøder's schema. A participant was asked to look at a story and large photo of two women arguing at the Town Hall meeting organised by *Grocott's*. The photograph caption reads: "Can we COPE? Two members of the audience at last Thursday's election debate show mixed emotions at the *Grocott's Mail* hosted event" (*Grocott's* May 2011). When asked what she understood from this coverage:

Participant 28 said: "the picture in my understanding shows angry black women".

Interviewer: why do you think they are angry?

Participant 28: "they are probably angry because of ANC. The party has turned every South African to an angry person. ANC has been in government for many years now. And they said they are going to be in government for many years to come. But they are not solving people's problems...Well, only the black people seem to be getting something from the government. They are getting houses while we are sleeping in the

cold”.

Participant 26 seized on the photo to almost immediately ‘add’ to mere ‘comprehension’ asking the focus group “Did anybody here attend that town hall meeting? (Everyone answered “no”). You see, Hooggenoeg people don’t get invitation to such meetings. *Grocott’s* even took such a meeting to the black people in the township. But they will never think of organizing town hall meeting for the “coloured” people of Hooggenoeg” (Participant 26). While this shows how slippery a concept ‘comprehension’ is, it might also show something else: the gap between the intended meaning of the editors/reporters and the receivers of the message. Of all the participants, only a single one -- participant 25 - expressed a meaning that resonated with that of the *Grocott’s* editor. According to the editor, the photograph was used to capture in print the unmanageable nature of the debate. “Under the current circumstances, we are not having a debate,” Steve Lang was quoted saying after the debate. Therefore the photo was used “to let the people know about the effort made by *Grocott’s* to promote the culture of deliberative democracy in Grahamstown and to expose the unruly behaviour of party members, especially COPE members,” said Steve Lang.

In analysing the audience readings of this photograph, Hall’s encoding/decoding model appears problematic because, when the actualized meaning coincides with the encoded meaning in the photograph, we could still not regard the meaning as the outcome of “dominant-hegemonic” reading (Hall 1973 [1980]: 136). Even when the actualized meaning is asymmetrical to the inscribed meaning, it is problematic to consider it an oppositional reading. Drawing on Schröder’s critique of Hall, the variances between the meanings encoded and the meaning actualized is rather a case of “polysemy”, and not of oppositional reading. He argues that “polysemy” and oppositional reading are two analytically distinct processes. For an oppositional reading is “an active, aware reading against the rhetorical grain of the text (Corner 1980: 80 cited in Schröder 2000). By this explanation, it means that the readers must have been aware of the meaning intended by the editor before he or she actualizes a protest reading. This is not the case here. Polysemy, on the other hand, “is a multiplicity of signification that happens all the

time, usually without the individual's conscious awareness, simply because of the inherent diversity of social semiosis" (Schrøder 2000:244). This concept allows readers to actualise the meaning they want. (Schrøder 2000: 239) The conclusion that could be drawn from the responses therefore is that interpretation of media text could be polysemous even among the people within an interpretive community.

To illustrate this point further, here are some participants' responses to questions about the editorial contents published in the special Election Guide. In the edition, *Grocott's* published a number of news and editorials to educate the citizens on how to vote. It also provides information about the candidates competing to be mayor or councillor in the Makana Municipality and their party manifestoes.

To make the edition accessible, *Grocott's* distributed the election special free of charge. This has not happened before in living memory. As opposed to just a few focus group participants who claim to read *Grocott's* with any regularity, about 80 per cent of the participants in the focus group discussion claimed they have read the free special edition. Giving participants a copy to peruse before the discussion session began also jogged their memories. Some brief extracts from the overall discussions give an overview of the reactions to this this edition:

"Our councillor is speaking in the *Grocott's* that she will do this and that, but she doesn't come here to meet with the people to which she was making promise. Two times we invited her to Hooggenoeg; two times she refused to come. She lied about those things she mentioned in the *Grocott's* that she would do. She has not done it and she won't do them" (Participant 3).

"Why can't *Grocott's* come to Hooggenoeg, one year after she made the promise to see whether she has done those things, or she is doing any of them presently. Our children in Hooggenoeg still don't have playground or schools. They have to trek to long distance to play. And they are not safe. No parents will allow their child go far from Hooggenoeg. Here a girl gets raped or robbed almost every week" (Participant 15).

"At every election time, the people are going to come to you, saying, they will change this, they will change that. Vote is the most important thing for them; but not for

us. So we are being fooled here” (Participant 10).

“My mother has been voting since I was a child; my sister too. Everyone was voting when I was growing up, but I haven’t seen any difference. But I also voted in the last election, hoping there maybe changes. I cannot say whether Grocott’s helps me vote or not. I think I voted because I was hoping there would be change.”

These comments contrast the participant’s palpable sense of hopelessness about the voting exercise against the *Grocott’s* optimism of engendering democratic culture through their version of voters’ education. The common thread in the comments is that the participants see service delivery as the only incentive to voting. Justifying Levin’s (1989:19) position that democracy “should improve human quality of life,” the participants believe that when they vote, they automatically should be able to enjoy welfare services to be provided by the municipality. And if the expected benefits are not available to the people, then voting is irrelevant. This argument suggests, therefore, that the media messages tailored towards voters’ education would be ineffective if the people’s lived experience convinces them that voting does not guarantee service delivery, and the much better quality life envisioned by democracy.

Here, Schrøder’s (2003) argument that situational and social contexts of reading affect the meaning actualised in the end is further reinforced. “Comprehension should therefore be understood as a decoding continuum from complete divergence to complete correspondence to either the encoders’ intended meanings or the readings produced by other recipients.” (Schrøder 2000: 246)

5.8.3 Discrimination

Does any aspect of the election report stand out for the participants?

This question is difficult for the participants to answer effectively because the question requires that the text reader possess some linguistic competences, or requires, as Schrøder puts it, (2000:247) “that audiences may adopt an aesthetically critical stance towards the text.”

In their study of *Iindaba Ziyafika*, Steenveld & Strelitz (2010:13) note that English

as language resource is scarce in many communities in Grahamstown where the education system ill-prepares members for engaging with media text in a really ‘critical’ way.

Grocott’s though is “hyper-local” in term of its editorial content and focus on the issues affecting Grahamstown community, the use of English as a medium of communication is a limitation for many, and justifies the claim of some Grahamstown residents that it is a ‘White only’ newspaper. The paper assumes that all its target audience are reasonably competent in both English and isiXhosa. But it has been shown in earlier chapters that Hooggenoeg is a community of the black and the coloured whose mastery of English language is limited. Though coloureds are often fluent in English more than the black, but their linguistic competence of English is not as sound as that of the white.

During group discussions, there were concerns from audiences about the use of English language. Many would have wanted that there is another fashion of *Grocott’s* published in isiXhosa or Afrikaans. A participant, Mr. Hendrick said: “When I bring home *Grocott’s*, my children like to read it, but my wife doesn’t touch it because she cannot read and write in English.” Given the apparent low levels of civic education and even basic literacy among the participants, it is therefore difficult to examine ‘the dimension of aesthetic discrimination’ by the participants (Schrøder 2000:247-248). But at least on one dimension, participants did critique *Grocott’s* reportage of the election on the grounds that it only documents promises, and not past performances of the competing candidates. “Instead of asking these people what they will do or what their party will do when they were voted into power, they should have asked them where are those things some of them promised earlier?” (Participant 23) Another added enthusiastically “I expect the media to write on what these people (political office holders) are actually doing because most of them are getting paid for doing nothing. What the local people want from the press is to be watching these politicians every time. To inspect them to see if they are really doing what they promise they will do. But what is *Grocott’s* writing about during election...empty promises of the politicians” (Participant 13).

Rosen's (2011) submission that journalists' work is no longer as "useful" as it needs to be, capture the view of these participants. He argues that journalists' rather work to attack the readers' sense of "solidarity with strangers who share the same political space" (Rosen 2011). They do this by privileging a master narrative in election coverage that serves the interest of the governing class more than the interest of followership.

Notwithstanding, participants admits that *Grocott's* also reports on issues that promote the interest of the ordinary people such as the news story that exposed the incompetence of the elected officers that failed to use the budget allocated to the municipality. Examples of such stories include "Makana had R53.7m and didn't spend it" (Tuesday, 19 April 2011), "ballooning budget" (Friday, 8 April 2011), "and crude toilet bucket system in Grahamstown" (Tuesday 12 April, 2011), among others.

Despite language and educational issues, the participants in the focus groups were able to discriminate some elements of contradiction in *Grocott's* coverage and, in many ways, showed an ability to discern nuance and critique of the paper's overall approach?

5.8.4 Position

What is of interest here is the "subjective reading" of the media text by the audience (Schrøder 2000). This is different from the "objective reading" which will be treated immediately after the analysis of this dimension (i.e. evaluation) of the reception process. As against "objective reading" which looks at how the researcher interprets audience reading of the media text on the continuum of ideological positions from 'hegemonic' to 'oppositional', "subjective reading" examines reader's "continuum of attitudinal responses, from acceptance to rejection of the perceived textual position and the various textual elements perceived to make up that position" (Schrøder 2000:249-250).

In general, participants in the focus group acknowledge the fact that *Grocott's* attempt to educate the citizens on the voting process is in order. They recognise that the role played by *Grocott's* could indeed improve voters' education.

Said one participant, "Look, what *Grocott's* did was good because there are some

people here in Hooggenoeg who may want to vote but still need some information, no matter how little, before they can vote. I do not think I need to be told how to vote anyway, but reading about the profile of these candidates does help” (Participant 20).

This endorsement by readers confirms that the goal set by *Grocott's* for publishing Election Guide, and circulating it free of charge is not lost on the readers. However, Schrøder (2000: 249) warns that, “‘acceptance’ does not mean the adoption of a so-called ‘preferred’ hegemonic position supposedly inscribed in the text, but the reader’s agreement with what he/she perceives to be the message of the text.” Therefore, the readers could have accepted the reason why *Grocott's* embarked on voters’ education and devoted time to election coverage, but may not be swayed by that reason when taking electoral decision. Some participants in fact disclosed that they did not vote during the election despite the fact that they read the Election Guide. A youth participant put it this way: “I did not vote and I will never vote because, my mother has been voting, my grandmother has been voting and my sisters, but there is never a change in our condition of living. Voting is a waste of time and energy. I don’t think I will ever want to vote.” This position rejects the assumption underlining *Grocott's* agenda that election is important. It shows that in the final instance, reader’s decisions are usually influenced by their lived experience.

Furthermore, despite the “facilitative role” played by *Grocott's*, few comments noted earlier shows that *Grocott's* role in the election was less than salutary. Majority of the participants believe that *Grocott's* reportage on the election favours the political class more than it favours voters. According to them, the voices of the politicians and municipality bureaucrats were heard more in the news discourse than the voices of the electorate. In this regard, *Grocott's* approach to news sourcing is not different from the mainstream media. In spite of *Grocott's* commitment to the production of community news, the “voice” of the marginalized groups such as the residents of Hooggenoeg is kept silent in *Grocott's*. Critics of journalism ideology argue that, journalists’ use of official and elite sources serve to legitimate already established discourses and rendering new and contradicting views as illogical or not worth getting space for reportage (Hackett

1984:284). Thus, journalism is reduced to interaction between reporters and government officials, politicians and diplomats (Schudson 200:184)

Second, the master narrative in the election discourse was “voting” rather than “public service.” These representations manifest how ideology constrains *Grocott’s* journalists.

Participant 20 underscores the disconnection between *Grocott’s* coverage of election and people’s expectation this way:

“The people here are interested in housing, we want jobs, and we want schools for our children. We want playground for children. You cannot let your daughter go to the next community there to play; she will get raped before she returns. We want service delivery. Yet the candidates are only interested in votes. *Grocott’s* must talk about service delivery, not about election and empty promises.”

Grocott’s inclination to encourage voting, and not to constantly demand for the fulfilment of the past promises by politicians serves the interest of politicians against the people whose interest in politics is shaped by the access to service delivery.

The media “fix the premises of election discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy” by privileging the local elites as news source, and not the ordinary rural folks (Herman and Chomsky 2008:2). Thus, the “public sphere” – which the contemporary media such as *Grocott’s* and others represent – is “refeudalised” (Habermas 1989). Here the illusions of the public sphere are maintained only to legitimate the ruling ideas of the leaders. The media cease to function as a genuine forum for rational debate and discussion, but as a means through which the power class secure consensus leading to the decline of the political public sphere (Habermas 1989).

Gieber (1964:173) though gives a reminder that journalists are themselves subject of ideology, and are, therefore, not in total control of news production. This view eliminates the conspiracy theory that may indict the media. Notwithstanding, Herman and Chomsky (2008) note that the ideology of the media is not always effective. The public in fact has increasingly learnt to distrust appearances in the media and to look at media discourse “as a mere instrument of interest and obfuscation” (Carey 1993:16).. Thus, the

media could attempt to stimulate public interest in voting, but they lack the power to stop people's disengagement from politics (Carey 1993).

5.8.5 Evaluation and Implementation

Over all, the pattern of discussion that emerged in the focus group discussion and the content analysis of *Grocott's* published during the election period threw up two contrasting discourses: the discourse of citizenship versus the discourse of victimhood. *Grocott's* election reports aim to construct the people as citizens who have the right to vote, and who must exercise that right to get a better living standard. In contrast, the people see themselves as victims of system that only offered promises, and not services. This is the contradiction that the election coverage by the *Grocott's* brought up for most participants.

The position taken by the majority of the participants in the focus group reinforces the awareness that reject media centrality. Media, as this view shows, may not be central to the change in society, as the 'effect theory' is wont to claim. McCombs & Shaw (1972) put the sentiment this way: "the media could not tell audience what to think, but could tell them "what to think about."

Since this study is conceived to remain not at discursive level, it is important to also ask what, if anything can be discerned about the participants converting their readings to practice. This dimension of audience reception process is not captured by Hall's/Morley encoding/decoding model. Citing other media researchers, Schrøder notes that if a conversion from reading to practice does not take place, especially for counter-hegemonic reading, such reading must be regarded as "politically impotent" (Schrøder 2000).

With regards to the residents of Hooggenoeg, many claim they have not voted in a long time, and may never do so again. This is in spite of the Grocott's extensive campaign to mobilize people to vote. Participant 28 said: "Voting is a waste of time. I will rather stay at home and rest." Participant 16 and participant 5 noted an age gap: "Voting, like going to church, is for the old people in Hooggenoeg. I do not think any

youth thinks it's cool to vote," Participant 16 said. And Participant 15 added, "Early in the morning, you see old people standing in the queue waiting to vote, but they (ward councillors) don't do anything for them, they are not offering a slice of bread and a glass of cool drink to give to those old mamas. The old mamas are standing there until they faint and the ward councillors are only concerned that they are voted for. That is why I will never vote in my life. I have never done it before, but my mother used to ask me to go and vote with her because they are still giving me support money."

Drawing on comments such as these, and looking at them from the perspective of Hall's/Morley's model, the reading could somewhat be regarded as counter-hegemonic (Hall 1980).

Those who, after their reading of Grocott's election campaign, said they did not vote and would not vote could be described as the group whose reading *is* converted to practice, and therefore, theirs is an actualised and politically potent reading. And it is easy to assume that their resistance was aimed at bringing about specific social changes. Just as Condit suggests, that 'the totalising concept of resistance should give way to the recognition and analysis of historically particular acts in order to bring about specific social changes' (1989: 119).

Locating the stance of these participants on ideological positions in the social formation, it is evident that media audience have agency that intervenes significantly in reception process. Regardless of how powerful and focused media message could be, audience make their own meaning, which in the last instance may or may not influence their political decision. Further, this sort of reading validates the idea of polysemy which Fisk celebrates because the reading empowers the residents of Hooggenoeg, people that can be considered as subordinate social groups, "to at least maintain their sense of difference when exposed to hegemonic meanings" (Fisk 1989: 72 cited in Schrøder 2000:250)

Yet those who, disagreed with the text of the election coverage in *Grocott's*, but still voted in the election, are not, any less, producing non-politically potent reading, if we think of everyday behaviour as inherently political, (Schrøder 2000). Schrøder's

points out:

“Our everyday conversations are political not just when we are talking politics before an election, but also when we are talking to family members, friends, colleagues, about everyday social issues and choices we have to make, from the local to the global. If we do not watch or read ‘the news’ and other media, we cannot participate in such conversations, be they trivial or substantial. (2000:252),

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the meanings made by the residents of Hooggenoeg community who read election news in *Grocott's*, a bi-weekly newspaper published in Grahamstown. The study also sought to understand the role played by *Grocott's* during the election with a view to seeing whether it indeed facilitated or enhanced anything like a democratic culture among the residents of Hooggenoeg.

The study used a qualitative research methodology comprising qualitative content analysis, personal and focus group interviews as research tools. These methods allowed the researcher to understand the content structure of the election news in *Grocott's* and the audience's verbalised experience of this content and the meanings that extracted and enacted from it.

Examination of the editorial contents show that *Grocott's* coverage of the election was exceptionally 'vote-centric', that is, greater attention was given to voting activity, almost rarefying it beyond its connections to the on-going process of democracy. In contrast, the issue of citizen welfare and historical performance of the local council was somewhat downplayed in election discourse. In addition to that, the voices privileged in the election discourse were the voices of the political class. The voice of more ordinary, non-political elite people was mostly subordinated.

Considering the initiatives introduced during the election, which included the circulation of a free edition of *Grocott's* and the facilitation of a town hall meeting among others, *Grocott's* perceived its role to be "facilitative". But analysis of the editorial contents suggests that *Grocott's* reporting was something less than 'facilitating' at least in terms of what residents identified as issues of substance for them. The study reveals that problems of unemployment, low wages, poverty, crimes, homelessness and related stories, which although often reported by *Grocott's* in non-election periods, was not sufficiently foregrounded in the election discourse. Similarly, the case of municipality inefficiency was also seemingly downplayed.

Through focus group discussions, it is clear that that the major concern of the people was not really about *how* to vote – a key theme of *Grocott's* coverage – but rather how to access service delivery more effectively and efficiently.

The application of Schrøder's multi-dimensional model of mass media reception in this study held the promise of taking the study beyond the mere discursive level of reading. Hall's encoding/decoding model, Schrøder (2000) argues, is incapable of capturing audience reading beyond this level. Since the study sought to find out if the readers anticipate taking any action (with regards to their voting decisions) as a consequence of their readings, Schrøder's model became more suitable. But these links proved hard to make, as the key action that seemed to have followed, and which was not modified much by *Grocott's*, was to *not* vote. Such 'passive action' is action nonetheless, but the influence of the media on encouraging, reinforcing, or introducing (for some) such ideas of action could not be clearly deduced.

Through both the audience data and the content data, the research discovers that meanings do not neatly correspond or diverge from the preferred reading, as encoding/decoding model of Hall is wont to suggest. Meaning-making process is rather complex and nuanced, which requires multiple analytical entries to investigate. Schrøder's model, as this study shows, has systematically attempted to fill the gap left by Hall's model by providing greater rigour in the analysis of audience reception process.

Furthermore, the study suggests that facilitative role of the media is not constituted only in providing free copies of newspaper to the audience and organize one-off debate during election as *Grocott's* did in the last municipal election. Rather, their role needs to revolve around how to encourage citizens – even deprived and alienated citizens – to see themselves as having some stake in the community affairs. The election coverage does not appear to have had a significant impact on positive agency for change, and rather may have reinforced a more passive 'disengagement' that was latent; it appears, for many of the participants in any case. The overall low voter turnout (across South Africa, but particular in the Eastern Cape), of relatively low initial rates of voter registration, is a reflection of this.

Finally, *Grocott's* should not only conceive democracy in the sense of participating in elections, but also should 'occasionally' or 'regularly' do such public awareness initiatives beyond election where citizens are broadly taught about how they can approach public figures and contribute in the running of the municipality. The paper could do some mid-term evaluations (as is indeed stated by some respondents) regularly and bring councillors and members of the community just to gauge their leaders' performance even well after elections. This way, *Grocott's* could thus conceive democracy in a more broad and useful sense.

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