

INAUGURAL LECTURE
RE-IMAGINING THE ORDINARY: ON PERCEPTION, POWER AND THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article is a derivative of an inaugural lecture and the argument that formed the basis of the lecture. The focus was on the concept of perception and the idea of power as per media institutions. The author divides the paper into three separate yet related sections: 1) his background and his introduction to the field of media practice and media research, 2) the focus of his research and how it speaks to the questions of perception, media and power and lastly, 3) the author draws some conclusions on the way forward about the focus area. The central theory of the paper is that media institutions, at best, encompass or exhibit “social power.” They have the ability to play individuals, social relations between groups or institutions.

Key words: media, perception, power, culture and radio

SEEDS OF SCHOLARLY INTEREST

I have themed my talk tonight around the issue of “Re-imagining the ordinary: On perception, power and the media¹”. My interest in media and cultural studies is driven by several life circumstances that have shaped my life, including my childhood fondness of media content that I engaged with then. Who can forget the famous isiXhosa radio plays that we grew up with as a staple diet of our imaginations? These are the initial stages of our lives where we came face to face with the theatre of the mind, and a theatre of the oppressed, too. The famous television plays, that interestingly used my hometown, Alice, in the Eastern Cape as filming locations including *AbaKwazidenge*, *Ityala Lamawele*, *Unyana Wontu* (which was partly shot in Alice) and *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (a television product, famously adapted from AC Jordans *Wrath of the Ancestors/ Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*). Naturally, I gravitated towards the study of media content and media institutions because they were all around me growing up. Alice, my hometown, was home to some of Africa’s oldest media institutions including *IsiGidimi SamaXhosa*, the famous *Imvo Zabantsundu* (printed in Alice) and many other publications that were printed from the Lovedale Press. Newspapers were scented with fresh ink we could smell because they were printed right there in our hometown. Some of this country’s early black journalists were either trained or wrote for some of the publications that emerged from Alice as a media production locus. And so, in a way, we were the original: “read all about it, read all about it²” and Alice was a vibrant media production centre. A far cry from what it is today.

These early media institutions were established by what Ntongela Masilela, called the “cultural and political pathfinders” in search of modernity. Elsewhere I have written about the Lovedale Press, a truly remarkable institution that was once described as “truly historic and unique place of value” by former President and Chancellor of UNISA, Mr Mbeki. And so, I remember my introduction to the world of media practice and media studies with so much historical fondness.

¹ Njabulo Ndebele’s Rediscovery of the Ordinary

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https://books.google.co.za/books/about/Read_All_About_It.html?id=JBSAAGAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&hl=en&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

I am also a student and keen observer of current and historical developments in the field of media and cultural production. I have tried to study the role and power of the media institutions in our history (both as a country and a continent). For instance, as recently as in 1994, Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), a radio station that was broadcasting from the 8th of July to 31 July 1994 played the singular role of transmitting hateful content before and during the Rwandan genocide. Whilst my work has NOT argued that the genocide happened because of radio transmissions, what I can affirm is that radio transmission was one of the many enablers of the genocide in that country.

In South Africa, the apartheid government was acutely aware of the power of information and the power of the media in swaying both local, national and international opinions about this country. Elsewhere, James Sanders (2000) argues and I quote “the remarkable story of South Africa’s information network, set up by Dr Eschel Rhoodie, the Goebbels of the Pretoria government, shows how easily a well-financed propaganda offensive could buy both a favourable comment and reporting in the western world”. In his well-researched book titled *Selling Apartheid: South Africa’s Global Propaganda War*, Robin Nixon neatly demonstrates how the apartheid government used of millions of dollars to hire public relations companies, lobbyists in American and other Western capitals, filmmakers and journalists to create a positive image of South Africa globally. Taking this, and many other examples, the history of our country is littered with many case studies that demonstrate how the regressive government during the apartheid era manipulated the power of the media for sinister reasons.

Media institutions were established in the homelands of South Africa. Millions of US dollars were spent by the apartheid government purchasing newspaper companies in North America and Western Europe to spruce and polish the image of the country.

And so, as a student of media studies, my interest in perception, power and the media is part of a long tradition within the discipline. It follows after the works of giants like Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay, Shaun Johnson, Keyan Tomaselli, Ntongela Masilela, Simphiwe Sesanti and the many others who have long grappled with the idea of media institutions and the way in which power plays out or is perceived in these platforms. Holland based academic, Teun van Dijk (1995) has argued that “media power is generally symbolic and persuasive, in the sense that the media primarily have the potential to control ... the minds of readers or viewers but not directly their actions.” The recurrent theme that I have realised in my assessment of media institutions is that at best, media platforms encompass or exhibit “social power.” They have an ability to play “social relations between groups or institution.” During the preparations for transition to the post-apartheid era, Nelson Mandela famously addressed the country on 13 April 1993 using the SABC platform. This was at the time when anti-apartheid activist, Chris Hani was assassinated by Janus Walusz in Boksburg. Mandela not only understood the reach of the SABC, but he understood the social power of mass media in addressing a country potentially on the verge of a civil war. The use of a media platform for such purposes demonstrates perceived or social power of the media.

And so then, the most important question is to understand the nature or form of such social power in so much as the body of work that I have produced in the last few years.

ONGOING WORK: ON POWER, PERCEPTIONS AND THE MEDIA

Previously, I have argued that global trends indicate that the media is often directly involved in influencing the citizenry through its political communication role. This pertains to their role as political actors. In some established ‘liberal’ democracies, the media actively campaigns for some political parties whilst denouncing others (Tyali, 2017). This is where one sees the media actively making pronounced statements about political positions during elections and so forth. To make sense of such conclusions locally, I have investigated the concept of a press institution as a political actor in South Africa. I looked at newspapers such as the *Mail & Guardian* and how they overtly influence national and provincial elections by questioning the governance effectiveness of some political parties within the country. Upon a closer scrutiny of the role of the *Mail & Guardian*’s political role making, the body of work has demonstrated that much less is understood by the public about the role of media institutions in a liberal democratic society. In fact, my research demonstrates that in reference to other nuanced roles of the media, the case of the *Mail & Guardian* research indicates that in South Africa, little is understood about the functions of the media beyond its role as a conveyor belt of communicating information in a neutral and objective manner. I am also careful to indicate that the intersection of power, politics and the media has been a subject of much research for some other media scholars as well. In South Africa, the role and growing importance of the media is becoming more socially apparent as the country’s democracy and political arena recalibrates towards new dynamics starting in 2024 and moving on. Some key government institutions are falling apart and the role of the media as the fourth estate is widely acknowledged.

Some of the research that we have done in the last few years has also suggested shifts in the way politicians relate and deploy the media during the electioneering processes. There is a marked growth of elaborate print political advertisements, broadcast and outdoor political adverts that are available for public consumption during the electioneering season. Recently, South Africa has also not been short of negative political advertising. These have been more prevalent during the country's fifth provincial and national elections. Thus, we have looked at the trends through which politicians have embraced mass media for political point scoring and used it for negative political statements by politicians against other politicians. In our analysis of the trends around the media and the intersection of party politics, our studies (Tyali & Mukhudwana, 2021) have also seen a rise of political advertising and this marked negative political advertising in South Africa. Such developments have historically been the preserve of the US and British politics. Such developments in South Africa point to the perception of media power by politicians in changing the attitudes of the electorate.

Some media and cultural studies scholarship illustrates that individuals often act upon their perceptions of media influence, and this is regardless of whether or not these perceptions are accurate or even justified (Cohen, Tsfat & Shearer, 2008). It is also worth recalling that "the myth of media impact is influential" (Kate, 1986) and it is a powerfully held view by media consumers. In the last three decades, public health communication through media platforms was theorised as playing an important role in turning the tide against the spread of infectious diseases, including the spread of HIV. HIV/AIDS communication initiatives in South Africa have been implemented largely using mass communication strategies. These large media campaigns with multimillion rand budgets have previously been touted as antidotes against the spread of HIV. Latest data about the perceptions (by a range of stakeholders including academics and governments) of public health communication is of course discernible in the use of public health campaigns against the threats of Covid-19 infections. Whilst the historical success of these campaigns continues to be a subject of much scholarly debate, the intervention of my scholarship calls for civic voices inclusion in the campaigns that ostensibly aimed to save lives.

Whilst we understand that communication assumes an important role in the strategies of HIV/AIDS prevention, care, support and treatment, my research has theorised beneficiary community inclusions in these campaigns. This work has demonstrated that "beneficiary" community's participation in health communication is a just approach to community empowerment. This take on health communication intervention questions a top-down approach to health communication and rather emphasises a bottom-up approach that is inclusive and focused on hearing civic voices. We have argued that the openness of media institutions as notional public spheres that allow public discourse on, and participation in, health communication by "beneficiary" communities is crucial for any public health campaign/intervention that seeks to save lives. In other words, a supportive environment in terms of HIV/AIDS, TB awareness, malaria public health interventions or even Covid-19 requires national and community-wide discussions. And yes, even discussions on relationships and risk behaviour. Such scholarly intervention again demonstrates the idea of power and the media (Tyali and Tomaselli, 2014).

In the last twelve years, my areas of interest span several yet interrelated areas in so much as perceptions and media power is concerned. I have looked at the power of the media in addressing social ills, and particularly the question of health promotion as undertaken by broadcasting platforms (Tyali and Tomaselli, 2014; Tyali, 2021). For instance, most of us recall *Intersexions*, a television programme that used to broadcast on the public broadcaster, the SABC, and how it brought the "sexy" back in so much as showcasing the many ways in which people are connected via risky sexual networks. Rather than remaining stuck in the "media effects" discourse, my research has used *Intersexions* as a lens within which we can study and observe societies engagements and societies reactions to mass media campaigns.

The aim of such research is to investigate how viewers of such television programmes (television programmes which attempts to combine large-scale entertainment with education) engage with and understand health communication message that feature in such mass media campaigns. The research, therefore, set out to derive explanations of how social media (for instance) could be used to foster engagements between health communicators and 'beneficiaries' of health messages. In many ways, the research was occupied with breaking down the communicator-communication recipient (communicatee) relation. The greatest injustice in communication in South Africa is concerned with the ways in which communicators have distanced target groups of public health content from messages that are life-supporting and life-enhancing. This has contributed to public health communication failures of many campaigns. My theory accedes that health communication, including the content of HIV/AIDS communication should be aligned to the recipients of those messages.

Over the years, I have also been intrigued by the relationship that media institutions have with black and African communities that emerge from apartheid-colonialism in South Africa. In other words, the central preoccupation has been the way in which coloniality finds expression in media institutions (whether historical media institutions or print and broadcasting platforms currently operating in South Africa). Starting from the conviction that the media has a historical role in shaping and communicating cultures as well as identities of the colonised and ‘formerly’ colonised, this body of work argues that media institutions are vital arenas that can be used to understand the continuities and discontinuities of colonial cultures in South Africa. This body of work draws on decolonial discourses, including the theory of Afrocentricity, the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, the coloniality of being and the decolonial turn. The adoption of these theories in my research, therefore, also demonstrates a conscious delinking of this body of work from the traditional theories of media studies that have habitually underpinned the South African canon.

For the country’s self-understanding pre and post 1994, it is important that we study and understand the media and cultural studies through an inter/transdisciplinary lens. Thus, my research and writing also applies that trans-disciplinary approach when conducting research on African based media institutions. In pursuit of such trans-disciplinary approach, my research has ‘appropriated’ scholarly contributions from various disciplines such as decolonial studies, history, African studies, sociology, ethnic studies, media as well as cultural studies. This thinking illustrates that when in pursuit of decolonial knowledge, knowledge that is meant to delink from epistemic injustices, then academic disciplines and their respective canons need to be transcended. Such a view has also been advanced by Gordon (2011) who argues that trans-disciplinary approaches are conducted to avoid disciplinary decadence.

Contrary to some contemporary take on media institutions, my body of work has confirmed that it is possible to be a broadcast platform in South Africa and embrace characteristics that illustrate Africanity. The observed characteristics in my research includes the turn of broadcast media institutions towards African public sphere practices, their embracing of *Ubuntu*, their role in the decoloniality of African memory and their approaches towards ethnicity and Africanity within the airwaves. Such themes emanating from my research also illustrate how media institutions can operate as pockets of resistance against colonial, neo-colonial and imperialistic media cultures. In addition to these thematic areas, the findings of such research also demonstrates that when media policy documents are contextually adopted, much more can be done in pursuit of decoloniality.

As I indicated above, I am a student of history and at the moment most intrigued by one of South Africa’s most under explored media projects. We would recall that leading up to 1963, mainstream political activity against the apartheid state of South Africa had been totally suppressed by apartheid authorities (Gevisser, 2007; Mandela, 1994). The banning of such political activity meant that anti-apartheid political parties such as the ANC, Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) had to conduct their political activities ‘underground.’ Furthermore, the banning of such political activity meant that the leaders of these political parties were not allowed to give any politically related public speeches in South Africa. While the public banning of any political party address in South Africa is a widely known historical fact, what is less well known is that on 26 June 1963, the following words on a then little-known experimental and clandestine (Downer, 1993) broadcaster were broadcast to the South African public:

I speak to you from somewhere in South Africa. I have not left the country. I do not plan to leave. Many of our leaders of the ANC have gone underground. This is to keep the organisation in action, to preserve the leadership, to keep the freedom fight going. Never has the country and our people needed leadership as they do now. In this hour of crisis³.

This broadcast message was announced by Walter Sisulu and on Radio Freedom airwaves. He was accompanied by Ahmed Kathrada (Davis, 2009; 2011). This broadcast would mark and commence a three-decade long use of broadcast media by the ANC to talk to its exiled as well as its South African-based constituencies during the apartheid era of the country. Furthermore, the broadcasting and control of media messages by the ANC signalled a prolonged period of being in charge of its own narrative, thus making the airwaves a useful propaganda and counter-propaganda tool against apartheid South Africa (Lekgoathi, 2009).

³ The rest of the maiden speech by Walter Sisulu on clandestine Radio Freedom can be accessed on the following: <http://www.anc.org.za/content/broadcast-clandestine-anc-radio-wm-sisulu>

The apartheid regime of course quickly moved to clamp down this radio station in its early days of broadcasting in South Africa. There are reasons that the Nats felt threatened by Radio Freedom as a media platform. They were aware of the power of the media in shaping narratives and speaking to political constituencies. My research project around Radio Freedom is ongoing and whilst a body of work is emerging from this media history project, I am sure that further data shall emerge through archival research.

My ongoing research into the platform reveals that Radio Freedom would signal the start of a new strategy by the ANC – using broadcast media to stay in contact with the public at a time when political party activity had become illegal in South Africa. The broadcasting institution became a necessary instrument against the apartheid state of South Africa. No widespread research and academic literature is available to understand the history, strategies and role of the ANC's Department of Information and Publicity (DIP) in general and the role of Radio Freedom in particularly executing the political communication activities of the ANC. This is the niche that my ongoing research wants to fill.

The broadcast by Radio Freedom generally fell into the category of “clandestine broadcasting” [which] is a method used by revolutionary and anti-establishment groups. By definition, these types of broadcasting are illegal, political, and can be misleading. They broadcast from stations without licences or registration with the International Frequency Registration Board (IFRB)” Downer (1993:98). Radio Freedom squarely fell within this tradition. In the context of South Africa, “the ANC's Radio Freedom is only part of the story of clandestine radio in this country. South Africa has a long, largely untold, experience of illegal political broadcasting” (Riddle, 1994:17).

The growing body of work around this platform has focused on Radio Freedom as a counter-propaganda platform and Radio Freedom as a political communication platform within the context of South Africa's history. With regards to apartheid counter propaganda and the role of struggle organisations in countering the apartheid propaganda, it has been noted that:

Excerpt for the ANC's Radio Freedom broadcasting from exile; the democratic movement ignored broadcasting as a site of struggle. Radio Freedom was the underground radio station of the ANC. Founded in 1963, it broadcast into South Africa daily on a shortwave from neighbouring African states, particularly Zambia and Mozambique. As part of the ANC's cultural wing; Amandla, Radio Freedom provided the only alternative to the strongly censored SABC, merging political content and news with popular music of many banned artist.

The strategy of using Radio Freedom and Amandla for the purpose of counter propaganda and advancing the anti-apartheid struggle emerged from the strategies of the ANC. The ANC (1985) argued “counter-propaganda will have to be based, not merely on a monitoring of the propaganda of the regime, but, more importantly, on an ongoing assessment of political strategy. The promoting of particular images or propositions are dictated by tactical requirements. To be effective, counter propaganda will have to focus not simply on these projections, which may be transitory, but will need to deal at a more fundamental level with the regimes of basic objectives.” What the ANC demonstrated therefore is that it was keenly aware of the need to challenge the apartheid propaganda and it is in this context that its cultural wing prioritised the use of clandestine platform (Downer, 1993) such as Radio Freedom in the need of experimenting with counter-propaganda.

During South Africa's 25 year democratic celebrations in 2019, the Ministry of Sports, Arts and Culture announced that the equipment of the ANC's legendary clandestine and political communication broadcaster, Radio Freedom, had been successfully repatriated back to South Africa⁴. For a radio station that had initially operated from South Africa, and then Tanzania, Zambia, Angola, Ethiopia and Madagascar; this announcement marked a homecoming of a broadcaster and political communication platform that was conceived as a response to the apartheid government that aimed to frustrate all political activity in apartheid, South Africa. “Established during the apartheid [era], Radio Freedom provided waves of mass of resistance to the regime with broadcasts from different radio stations...” (South African Government News Agency, 2018:1)⁵. Within the context of the repatriation ceremony that was held at the Freedom Park Heritage Museum by the ministry of Sport, Arts and Culture in the year 2018, Radio Freedom's repatriated material was returning to a democratic South Africa which was a far cry from the apartheid era.

⁴ The equipment of the radio station is currently housed at the Freedom Park Heritage Museum.

⁵ Further report about the repatriation of Radio Freedom equipment can be accessed on this link <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/radio-freedom-equipment-finds-home-freedom-park>

The repatriation of the radio station equipment also took place at a moment when South Africa's post-apartheid project was being scrutinised in light of settler-colonial legacies that are ingrained in post-apartheid South Africa. Thus, to understand the continuing struggle of forging ahead with the strategy of eradicating colonial legacies and coloniality (cf. Tuck and Yang, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2004; Maldonado-Torres, 2007), and the role of the media in this struggle, this inaugural lecture revisited the historical media archive as per the role that was played by the ANC's Radio Freedom in the continuing struggle to advance political communication and eradicate settler-colonialism injustices and legacies.

While there is much literature on various forms of mediums that were used for political communication during South Africa's anti-apartheid moment, there is only a handful of literature in understanding the complex role played by the ANC's Radio Freedom (Tyali, 2020).

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON POWER, PERCEPTIONS AND THE MEDIA & FUTURE RESEARCH

At face value my academic archive appears to be eclectic. After all, I am an academic who has studied newspapers, political advertisements, social media platforms, radio broadcasts, media history archives, television and film material. At the centre of this eclectic but equally organised area of work is the question of perceptions, media and power. That is the central theme running through the theme of the work that I have produced in the last few years. I do intend to continue with the research around these themes, including research on Radio in South Africa. The plan is to research and produce a body of work on the ANC's Radio Freedom. The body of work makes sense of Radio Freedom's historical role as the ANC's propaganda and political communication arm in South Africa. The project traces the history of the radio station, its use by the ANC and its role during the struggle against apartheid South Africa. The body of work is also a platform to expand the subject of political communication, radio and propaganda more deeply. For this research project, I have collected data and this data constitutes archival material (radio scripts, letters, strategy documents and reports) of Radio Freedom. The research data was collected from historical archives that are currently based at the National Heritage and Cultural Studies centre (NAHECS) at the University of Fort Hare in Alice. The centre is the custodian of anti-apartheid archives that were donated for preservation, research and scholarship purposes by various anti-apartheid political associations of South Africa, including the ANC, PAC, AZAPO and the Black Consciousness Movement (BC), among others. In addition to the archival research that I have done at NAHECS, I intend to collect more information on Radio Freedom at the Mayibuye Centre. The Mayibuye Centre of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) houses an additional archive containing audio recordings of Radio Freedom. The audio material supplements the research data that I have already collected at NAHECS.

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