

Full Length Research Paper

Delving into the political role of the media: An analysis of South Africa's mail and guardian and the online reception of its electioneering message

Siyasanga M. Tyali

Department of Communication Science, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, South Africa.

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Research trends illustrate that media institutions have a role in influencing the citizenry through their political communication objectives. This research paper grapples with the idea of the press as a political actor in South Africa. This has been done through the analysis of online comments responding to the Mail & Guardian's editorial message/communiqué on its political position during the country's 2014 provincial and national elections. The research article aims to draw conclusions on how the newspaper's political message was received by the reading public. The article relied on the agenda-setting theory in making sense of the role of the media as well as to understand how the agenda setting role is received media message recipients. The article relied on qualitative research methods and used a thematic analysis approach with the intention of making sense of the research data. It concludes that with reference to political role of the media, media recipients of the Mail & Guardian's editorial message have conflicting and prior ideas of the role that should be played by this media institution in political related commentary.

Key words: Politics, electioneering, reactions, editorial, media.

INTRODUCTION

Commentary on the media often suggests its normative role should be that of fair, balanced and objective institutions (Bird, 2010; Ace project, 1998). That is because mainstream media institutions are understood to be the most common and balanced source of information. However, there is growing research which suggests that it is not always the case that common media ideals such as impartiality are upheld by those in mainstream media practice. This research suggests that it is when media platforms are allowed to play the role of political actor that

certain ideals of the press are ignored (cf. Peer et al., 2003). However, in South Africa, the South African Press Council (2013) argues that print media is allowed to make comments and criticize any matters that are of public interest, provided that such comments or criticisms are fair and honestly made. This Council further argues that media comments should be presented in such a way that they appear to be 'comments' and that the media be honest in the expression of their views. The focus of this article is based on online commentators' reactions to a

E-mail: tyalism@unisa.ac.za.

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national newspaper's editorial on the 2014 provincial and national elections of South Africa. This newspaper's editorial message/political comments on the South African elections can arguably be interpreted by society as playing a political role in the election process and thereby ultimately influencing the electorate on how to choose those who govern the country.

McNair (2011: 43) argues that the media and those who work in such an influential industry are in fact political actors. Not only do these institutions play the role of transmitting messages of political parties to the public, but the media also sifts, interprets and transforms these messages through its various processes of new reporting (ibid). Some commentary on the current conduct of the South African mainstream media has also suggested that some platforms are openly taking the oppositional political stance (Williams, 2015). This is evident from the way in which some within the South African media industry have taken an 'unofficial political opposition' stance in relation to the governing African National Congress (ANC). With regard to the conduct and role of a country's media during elections, Jacobs (1999: 148) maintains that whilst the link between news media influence and voter preference has not been proven conclusively, it is accepted that the media has a significant influence on the choices of voters. It is for these reasons that this research aims to understand the online reception of South Africa's *Mail and Guardian* message and how this reception allows research to understand political role perceptions of the media during the 2014 elections of South Africa.

A NOTE ON THE EDITORIAL: A MEDIA INSTITUTIONS 2014 ELECTIONS MESSAGE

Mainstream media reports have indicated that some South African politicians complained that throughout the 2014 elections campaign, much of the South African media had consistently campaigned against the governing political party of the country (SAPA, 2014; News 24, 2014). Since these complaints came from the governing party structures, they widen the divide between the ANC and media institutions of South Africa. With already strained relations between the two on matters relating to the on-going debates about the Media Appeals Tribunal and the Protection of State Information Bill (Rumney, 2010), it may be concluded that the politicians' reactions to the media statements during the country's national and provincial elections may have exacerbated the tension that continues to exist between the ANC and the media institutions of country. To capture some media conduct during those elections, this research article has relied on the editorial commentary that was published by the *Mail and Guardian* (2014), and how the online reading public reacted to the message of the editorial. On 2 May 2014, the *Mail and Guardian*, published an online editorial as a public directive on political endorsements during

the 2014 national and provincial elections.

In its entirety, the editorial message contained the newspaper's position on democracy in general, elections and South Africa's governing political party – the ANC. The editorial message stated that the *Mail & Guardian* had previously supported the governing national party in 1994, 1999 and 2004. The context of the newspaper's historical position on the ANC illustrates that in the newspaper's opinion, none of the political parties that were vying to govern the country in those periods (1994, 1999 and 2004) offered meaningful alternatives. This is because some of those alternative political parties were still grappling with their questionable past and association to the apartheid government structures. This point being highlighted, the newspaper subsequently stated that in 2014, its position had changed and as a result it had decided to endorse the voting public – 'you the voter' (Mail and Guardian, 2014).

The editorial message therefore argued that its 2014 stance was for the voting public to dilute the votes that had traditionally been given to the ANC. In the *Mail and Guardian's* opinion, the diluting of the governing party's power was seen as a means of narrowing this power through the process of advocating the swelling of the opposition seats. The newspaper's conclusion was that this act would force the party to govern through a coalition process, leading to its governing power being severely diminished. The overall conclusion is that the *Mail and Guardian* was in fact arguing against the ANC without overtly offering an alternative political party for the voter. In addition to this, though this specific editorial did not give a directive to vote for a particular party, the overall assumption is that the paper wanted the votes of the ruling party to be diluted in order to empower the opposition parties.

DELVING INTO POLITICS: THE MEDIA ROLE

There is wide agreement that the media has an important role in the political landscape of a country. In fact, the role of the media in such a process is even encouraged. Bama (2007) notes that there is a real need to educate journalists, governments, development partners and the general public in both the Global North and the Global South on the central role that communications and media can and should play in political affairs, including political change. This is one of the deliberative functions of the media – by shaping the political discourse in the public space (Gastil, 2008). The media often make statements about politics in their own right, in the form of commentaries, editorials and interview questions (McNair, 2011: 43). Additionally, they fulfil an agenda-setting function by magnifying certain issues and may also contribute to the shaping of some political process of a country. Citizens are often unable to grasp or assimilate anything like the totality of events in the real world, and thus they rely on the media to search, shape and sift

through current affairs reality. The media therefore becomes an agenda setter in its capacity as a provider of information, highlighting some issues and neglecting others, for reasons which are beyond the capacity of politicians to influence (ibid: 47).

What is often contentious and challenging is the role and extent that the media can play in supporting political parties and the impact of this support in the credibility of the media. Nwokefor and Okunoye (2013) argue that in recent years, the Nigerian media has become completely prejudiced in favour of one political party or candidate even when its coverage generally tends to show overtly lack of favouritism. Nigeria is not a unique case; in fact it can be argued that the act of the media aligning itself with certain political parties during elections is 'universal'. McNair (2011: 52) notes that in the British press of the 1990s, the majority of newspapers had supported the Conservative Party, whilst a handful supported the Labour Party, with a fraction choosing not to declare their political preference. However, in instances of editorials being anti-certain political parties, then the press in such circumstances is often seen by many as instruments of ideological indoctrination (ibid: 52).

The researcher therefore acknowledges the long-held practice of the media editorial taking certain political positions during the electoral processes of some countries. However as illustrated earlier, the purpose of this research article is to assess the reactions and attitudes that have been generated by such editorials in South Africa. To achieve this, a case study is used of online comments elicited from and through the *Mail and Guardian's* editorial on the 2014 elections in South Africa. The assessment of reactions by online participants helps us to make sense of their understanding of the media as a political actor. Though the focus of this article is only on the online section of the *Mail and Guardian*, it should be noted that the newspaper's editorial entry generated comments and interest across the media spectrum, including different social media platforms. This article, however, focused only on the online commentary platform on the *Mail and Guardian*. The rationale for this exclusive focus is the logical convenience with which patterns of engagement around the editorial could be followed. Caldwell (2013: 501) explains that online forums provide people with an opportunity to post their opinions as well as interact with others who are active on these platforms. This activity provides a source of public opinion where all access is considered equal (ibid). It is therefore resolved that the online comments on the editorial provided enough of a resource to form a conclusive argument about the attitudes of those who engaged with the message of the media that was clearly provided as a political act.

MEDIA AND THE ELECTIONEERING PROCESS

A research study by the Human Sciences Research

Council (HSRC) (2014) indicates that almost four-fifths of the national adult public in South Africa (79%) agree that it is a duty of all citizens to vote. Of concern from this HSRC study are the findings which indicate that almost half of all South Africans surveyed (46%) did not believe that their vote would make a difference to the electoral outcomes. Considering the media's power in shifting attitudes, here give a brief discussion on the role of the media during elections. Foster (2010) argues that given that the vast majority of political information flows through the media before it reaches the electorate, it follows that partial and inaccurate reporting on the media's part could distort political outcomes. Monitoring the conduct of the media during elections in South Africa is important. South Africa, just like the rest of the world, is no exception regarding the growing importance of the media in political life. The media remains an important site of struggle in the country's politics, especially during election campaigns (Davis, 2004). This, along with the constant accusations and counter-accusations of the media's agenda role, makes the industry an important area of focus during elections. Jacobs (1999) notes that the first democratic elections in 1994 exposed the bias of the South African media and how far they removed them from the majority of ordinary South Africans in their news coverage and editorial stances. For example, in the 1994 elections the majority of mainstream newspapers endorsed the Democratic Party (DP), which could only garner two per cent of the elections at the time (ibid).

Over time, the strained relations between the South African governing party and the media have not helped matters. As a result of these fraught and somewhat difficult relations, serious accusations have been levelled against the media. A recent example of this is the ANC's head of elections and senior party official during the 2014 elections who was quoted as having stated that the South African media campaigned against the governing party. A senior and respected Cabinet minister, Malusi Gigaba, was quoted in a media briefing as follows: "We [ANC] know you [media] never loved us, we don't have a problem with that" (Munusamy, 2014). This comment clearly illustrates the animosity between the ANC and the media of South Africa. It should, however, be noted that even the official opposition political party of the country has also made serious damning allegations against the media. Former leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA) – Helen Zille – in the past has criticised a newspaper promotion that was planned to be linked to the celebration of the ANC's centenary celebrations. Zille complained that a planned promotion by Independent Newspapers advertising would give a 'glowing' endorsement to the ANC (Greenslade, 2011). This, together with the occasional accusations and counter-accusations by the media of being aligned with certain political parties and of having ulterior motives in the business of producing newspapers (Mde and Brown, 2014; De Wet, 2013; McKune, 2013), makes the media

industry a necessary area of constant monitoring, especially during the elections period. It should also be noted that though the South African media has endorsed political parties in the past (Davis, 2004), recent technological advancements allow researchers to monitor immediate engagements with such endorsements and to therefore assess the tone that emerges from such endorsements.

MEDIA AS A DELIBERATE AGENDA SETTER

Agenda-setting theory provides convincing arguments on how the media can politically influence the public to concentrate on certain messages and directives. Shaw (1979) argues that researchers on agenda-setting insist that the media is very persuasive in its unique way. He notes that the media is influential in focusing our attention on specific events, issues and persons, and ultimately tries to determine the importance that we attach to public matters (cf. Fourie, 2001). An example of this in South Africa could be how the public's attention was focused on the "Nkandlagate" scandal as well as the on-going court case of Paralympian Oscar Pistorius regarding the murder of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. In recent years, however, one of the biggest areas of focus for the South African media has been the provincial and national elections. Through these elections, the media often shapes our views of the political parties by magnifying certain developments within the political sphere and subverting other developments. McCombs and Shaw (1993) indicate that the agenda-setting theoretical perspective has had continued and remarkable growth in terms of vitality. The role of the media in setting an agenda has been debated by a number of researchers. However, Freeland (2012) reminds us again that the theory suggests that the media sets the public agenda by telling us what to think about. In the context of this research article, the value of the theory lies in the agenda that was set by the *Mail and Guardian* in its political act of calling for voter dilution. In the 2014 elections, the agenda of the newspaper was to use its public influence to diminish the voter base of the ANC. The reactions to the newspaper editorial and its agenda-setting role therefore help draw conclusions on how the media is perceived as both an agenda setter and as a political actor.

BRIEF NOTE ON THE RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative methods were used in the process of making sense of the research data. Therefore the focus was not on statistics and numbers of the editorial readers, but rather on trying to understand reactions and views of the public who had access to the editorial message of this South African newspaper. Nieuwenhuis and Smit (2012)

explain that qualitative research has to do with trying to understand the 'why' or 'how' instead of just measuring. This research article analysed all the online comments that appeared and were captured below the editorial of the *Mail and Guardian*. These comments were captured from the website, cleaned, coded and sorted into different themes. The research data were grouped into themes on the similarities of the comments. The themes arising from the comments resulted in the following thematic subgroups: pessimistic/democratic helpless commentary, pragmatic online commentators, and concerns about the editorial. Reception analysis was applied to understand how the editorial message was received. Lindlof (1995) writes that the basic procedure in a reception study consists of analysing people who have seen or read a media text about their thoughts, perceptions, inferences and feelings. Patterns of interpretation are then compared against certain characteristics of the text. The analysis, according to Lindlof (1995), might also propose how the message receivers accepted, reconstructed or resisted the message.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: THEMES EMERGING FROM ONLINE COMMENTS

The analysed online comments displayed patterns of a discourse that ranged from reactions of dismissing the *Mail and Guardian's* message, to those who wrote to seek clarity on a number of issues and those whose discourse pattern was classified as "other". This last category displayed comments that were incoherent, devoid of sense and lacked relevance to the thought patterns emanating from the editorial of the *Mail & Guardian*. In total, 39 comments were analysed. The logic of data saturation is that in qualitative research, the concern should focus only on looking at the research data which sheds light on the research topic. Some of the captured comments were complementary or repeated what had been said by another comment. A limited number of these were sampled to reinforce the arguments of this article. It should be acknowledged that variables such as age, race and gender of the people who commented on the editorial could not be determined. The spaces of the online commentary platforms are designed in such a manner that users can manipulate their identity. Therefore the author decided not to make variables such as age, gender or race a central element of this research article. It should also be noted that the online comments section on a newspaper website is used by a select 'class' of people who have access to the internet, are able to register as commentators and have the patience to debate issues that arise from the comments. These weaknesses of the research are therefore acknowledged. However, the nature of the online commentary section has in recent times become a space where people can anonymously offer their honest

opinions. It therefore serves as an important repository of views and attitudes about certain topics in the public sphere. In this case, the space served as a platform where analysis of reactions to the media as a political actor could be conducted. The themes emanating from the online comments are discussed thus.

PESSIMISTIC/DEMOCRATIC COMMENTARY

The pattern in this theme displayed public reaction that was pessimistic about their ability to contribute effectively towards change in the South African election outcomes. A total of nine comments solicited from the *Mail and Guardian's* editorial message revealed key patterns of being pessimistic about the prospect of change in which political party governed the country. They therefore displayed a keen sense of being helpless about the ability to institute electoral change in the country. Included in these comments were views that were critical of the ANC but offered no alternative or displayed no views about their ability to institute change. For instance, one comment indicated the following:

In party politics, every vote is one for a puppet who is going to rob you anyway.

Discussion participant #1

Online comment/Editorial reaction

In this instance, the comment reveals an attitude of a potential voter about the value of party elections and how the online participant felt that politicians 'rob' the electorate. In this instance, reference is made to all politicians and therefore the conclusion is that the commentator does not necessarily see the prospect of diluting the vote or changing from one political party to the next as a solution. In a sense, the commentator concludes that all politicians are the same. In addition to this, the commentary uses the word 'puppet' as a reference to politicians. In most instances, puppets are often used to carry the message of the people who control them. Therefore this view indicates that politicians are not in charge of governing, but rather that there are other people in power. This view is supported by the following comment:

Who do the parliamentarians account to? The party bosses. In reality South Africa is run from Luthuli House. Who voted for Gwede? A few ANC members. And he wields enormous influence and power in South African politics. How is that fair and correct? Proportional representation ensures that my representative is accountable to me, like my ward councillor, even if I didn't vote for him.

Discussion participant #2

Online comment/Editorial reaction

The conclusion regarding the views of the electorate – at least those who participated online – is that they felt disenfranchised and alienated from the decisions of the political parties and politicians who eventually become parliamentarians in the case of national and provincial elections. In the above comment, the argument offered illustrates that should you not be a member of a particular political party (or not aligned with a certain political party), the government resulting from such a political party process does not necessarily hold itself accountable to you. This can be further supported by the comments by South Africa's President in 2015 who indicated that in his view "the ANC is more important than the country"¹. Such reactions to the editorial therefore illustrate that the feeling among some electorates was that government was made from the headquarters of the ANC. This is contrary to the assumption of a government being accountable to all those it governs in a country.

Speaking out when the horse has bolted? Ordinary people have been saying this for years, and do not need to guiltily qualify it by reminding us how they used to vote ANC. By the way, the M&G does not want them out - they only want to dilute the party's power. Still friendlies (sic) with the bully?

Discussion participant #3

Online comment/Editorial reaction

Regarding the state of contemporary South Africa, some on the online discussion platform felt that the *Mail & Guardian* was partly responsible for this state of affairs. For instance, the comment above conveys a clear sense of frustration with the newspaper (M & G). Using words such as the "horse has bolted", this reaction attests to the level of helplessness that some editorial readers expressed in the online section of the newspaper. In addition to this, the comment indicates that the person is sceptical of the real agenda of the *Mail and Guardian*. He/she argues that the newspaper's agenda is to keep the ANC in government and this is proved by the paper's call for the diluting of the votes instead of outvoting the political party. The reality is the ANCs were always wrong. The problems which needed to be taken care of in 94 were not going to be addressed by the likes of the ANC. They have always placed party first and country last. Cadre deployment alone has eroded every facet of

¹ The comments by the President were made in his address to the 2016 provincial congress of the ANC where the provincial leadership of the political party was selected. Due to the national interest of this congress, the comments by the President were broadcast live to the national and international community.

South Africa - and in many respects the country has gone backwards. Growth and prosperity cannot be maximized under the current status quo. Voters need to understand this.

Discussion participant #4

Online comment/Editorial reaction

The argument in the above comment again raises the conundrum of some of the online commentators. It indicates that the lines between the governing political party and the structures of government had been blurred. The comment refers to “cadre deployment” to government positions as one example of how the governing party had taken the ANC backward. The reaction therefore squarely places the blame of what it deems the “failure of the ANC” on how the political party in some instances relied on party loyalists instead of fully trained and fit-for-the-job human capital to fulfil its governance roles. The rest of the recorded comments on this theme criticize the ANC. Therefore the overall conclusion is that the online comments displayed a pattern of being highly frustrated with the governing party of South Africa. Despite this frustration, however, the online comment participants did not indicate how they could change the status quo of governance in the country. Therefore for this specific theme, it is concluded that the online editorial of the *Mail & Guardian* facilitated the role of soliciting criticism of the ANC, and a clear display of helplessness and pessimism about the governance status quo were the central issues of concern among those who reacted to the editorial message.

PRAGMATIC ONLINE DISCUSSANTS

This theme revealed somewhat of a range of pragmatic steps regarding the message as advocated by the newspaper editorial. In this theme, the pattern that was displayed by online respondents towards the editorial message concerned alternative practical strategies for voters on how to respond to the *Mail and Guardian's* call for the dilution of the governing party. In one instance, it was stated that:

The challenge is not to vote for dozens of small parties, but to find a party capable of providing an alternative government.

Discussion participant #5

Online comment/Editorial reaction

In line with the call to dilute the votes going to the ANC,

the comments from this online participant indicate that the ultimate objective was not only to randomly vote for the multitude of “small” political parties in South Africa. Rather, the participant challenges the voting public to look for a “capable” political party. A conclusion drawn from this comment is that the participant questions the value of using the editorial message to call for an “alternative government” in the country. The participant, however, fails to explain his/her conception of an “alternative government”. At this stage in the numbers game, one needs to cut down the ANC's ability to trample over the citizens. Once citizens see that there is enough voting power to develop momentum, then it will be possible to build an alternative govt, as is in WC.

Discussion participant #6

Online comment/Editorial reaction

The trend of calling for an “alternative government” is continued by another respondent. Unlike the previous comment, this comment gives us a view of what the respondent means by “alternative government”. The Western Cape (WC) Province is raised as an example of an alternative. It is worth mentioning that the Western Cape Province of the country is governed by South Africa's official political opposition – the DA. This comment therefore indicates that the commentator is looking to set the trend of cutting the ANC's governing power and eventually look towards an alternative political party.

I agree. No party must be given absolute power. Even the DA must not be given such power. They will end up like the ANC.

Discussion participant #7

Online comment/Editorial reaction

The commentator in this instance raises an interesting point about being indefinitely aligned with a single political party. He/she states that the DA should not be given the power that the electorate has previously afforded to the ANC. The danger, according to this person, is that when a party is given absolute power, they end up being just “like the ANC”. However, the predicament for the comment analyst is that the commentator does not indicate what “like the ANC” means.

Well said...it is not the Party we are against, simply the arrogance: the seeming lack of respect for the electorate, the rule of law, accountability and due consequence.

Discussion participant #8**Online comment/Editorial reaction**

This comment gives us a glimpse of how some view the ANC. In this comment, the argument is that the governing political party lacks respect “for the electorate, the rule of law, accountability and due consequence”. The commentator concedes, however, that had the ANC been devoid of the characteristics (including arrogance) he/she has identified, then he/she would treat it like any other political party. The commentator ultimately notes that “we” are against the governing party as a result of the characteristics he/she has identified. Perhaps it is important to note that the “we” in the comment was not shared by all the commentators (as proven in the following section). The rest of the comments in this theme were complementary to the preceding quotes. For example, one commentator stated that:

Only complete dilution of the ANC is good enough. We simply do not need these thieves and we never have.

Discussion participant #9**Online comment/Editorial reaction**

The overall impression from this theme is that the commentators agreed with the *Mail & Guardian*, either aligned themselves with the dilution of the votes or demanding a complete change in government.

CONCERNS ABOUT THE EDITORIAL

In South Africa there is a view that the media industry should be non-partisan, objective and serve only its watchdog role. In this section, the theme alludes to serious questions about the role of the *Mail and Guardian* and how it should conduct itself during the electoral process. Concerns were raised about the timing of the message, the tone of the message and the overall intention of the editorial. Some comments were even suspicious of the past political alignment between the *Mail & Guardian* and the governing party:

M & G is lying. The paper never endorsed the ANC in the past. Shame on you Mail and Guardian. The M and G will lose like their partner DA on the 7 May. I know the comment will be deleted.

Discussion participant #10**Online comment/Editorial reaction**

The *Mail and Guardian*'s stance about its support of the

governing political in the past is brought into question by this respondent. The commentator does not engage with the editorial; rather he/she sees the editorial and the newspaper as a “partner” of the opposition party of South Africa. It seems that the newspaper's political act of calling for the dilution of the votes cast doubt on its ability to serve as a credible, fair, neutral and objective media platform. However, just like some other online comments that were not contextualised; no further explanation of the meaning of “partner” is offered by the commentator. Subsequent engagements with the editorial message illustrate how some comments question the value of the editorial message:

This is as foolish as an investor telling me to not to buy Apple shares, but Nokia, Samsung and Blackberry purely to dilute Apple's power. Or rather not to buy Google shares but Microsoft, Amazon and IBM to dilute Google's hold on the internet. Put your money where your mouth is M&G. You claim that you directly named and backed ANC in the past, then why not specifically say DA, EFF, COPE or Agang? We all know that in this century, DA will NEVER be a threat beyond a highly unlikely 25%, so the only scope to genuinely push ANC would have to come from the other 3. Since EFF clearly leading, is unbearable to your CIA paymasters, you'd rather be as ambiguous in your language as the DA whose feelings you clearly don't want to hurt.

Discussion participant #11**Online comment/Editorial reaction**

It is intriguing to note that the *Mail and Guardian* stated in its editorial that in the past, it had openly supported the ANC. However, this time around, the editorial and the political stance of the paper endorsed the “voter”. This stark contrast from the original practice of the newspaper led to questions by other participants. Though it had a right to reply to the comments and questions raised, the *Mail and Guardian* did not participate in the discussion that was taking place on its website as generated by its political stance. As the editorial team in the M & G do you honestly believe that a provincial vote for a party other than the ANC in Gauteng will assist in seeing change in the national ANC?

Discussion participant #12**Online comment/Editorial reaction**

The editorial team of the *Mail and Guardian* was further inundated with comments that were either critical of its editorial message, those that were seeking clarity on its call for the dilution of the votes, or those that simply engaged in the discussion around the editorial and its

political alignment or lack thereof. Conclusions from this theme illustrate that the media industry in the country is still seen as a conveyor belt for neutral messages. These views have implications for how the media will conduct itself in the political processes of South Africa.

DISCUSSION: WIDER IMPACT OF THE EDITORIAL MESSAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The recurring discussions of the Media Appeals Tribunal, issues of media transformation and the Protection of State Information Bill point to a fraught and difficult relationship between the South African media industry and the governing party of the country. This compels researchers to continuously monitor media conduct. On-going research on how the media industry conducts itself in matters of national interest and how this conduct is judged by media consumers therefore helps make sense of how the industry is judged by others. The online commentary section of the published content of the media industry has become a critical space where media message recipients can engage with the media content. It also points to on-going developments in the media in that consumers can engage with one another on the topics that have been raised by media reports, columns, general messages and other editorials. Managed progressively, the online comments sections therefore have the potential to elicit knowledge on how the media consumer reacts to the agenda-setting function of the media industry. Caldwell (2013) recently argued that online news forums provide people with an opportunity to post their opinions, interact with others who are active there and provide a source of public opinion. As mentioned by Shaw (1979: 97), "the media, by describing and detailing what is out there, present people with a list of what to think about and talk about". As discussed above, the three broad themes that emerged in the reactions to the editorial message of the *Mail and Guardian* were a sense of being either helpless in doing anything about the state of voting patterns of South Africa or being pessimistic about the prospect of changing the governing party, being pragmatic towards the call by the newspaper, and how people viewed the message as well as the role of the newspaper as a political actor. Through the agenda-setting function of the newspaper, people were able to engage with the editorial message, leading to serious discussions and questions about the role of the newspaper as well as its consistency in the political process. Such reactions have important consequences in the role of the media as a political actor and how it frames and positions itself in future elections of the country.

CONCLUSION

The search for public platforms that allow message

recipients to engage with the message and with one another continues in South Africa. Online comment sections are starting to represent a space of debate by online commentators (Mboti, 2013; Caldwell, 2013). As the South African media constantly seeks to affirm its legitimate role in the public sphere, it is important to constantly monitor the reactions from the media consumers towards some of the media's additional roles. As argued by the Press Council of South Africa (2013), the media is entitled to its views and has a right to give an honest expression of opinion. In a society that largely understands the role of the media to be that of providing objective and neutral news, it was the objective of this research article to record reactions on matters that go beyond this understood and prevalent role of the media. Though we are warned that the quality of discourse in online commentary platforms can be considered as below standard of a reasonably deliberate citizen (Caldwell, 2013), it is the conclusion of this article that the analysis of the reactions to the editorial message of the *Mail and Guardian* have provided an understanding of the media and how some in the reading public perceive its role as a political actor.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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