CHAPTER SIX
6 PROCESSES OF NEWS SELECTION AND GATEKEEPING AT NEWS AGENCIES

The chapter reflects on the news agencies’ work in news production and selection and the likely issues, causes, and effects of and responses to a changing global media environment seen through the experiences of the participants. While previous chapters established the importance of various levels of news agencies and the exchange agreements among them in global news flow, this chapter addresses the following research question: are news agencies, particularly those serving print-based media such as newspapers, becoming redundant in a ‘globalizing’ world? It also addresses: “What is news?” and “Who decides what news should be selected?” The chapter further elaborates on the news exchange relationships among agencies and explains how agencies operate within a global news network. It explains the transforming news environment and investigates the resulting impact on the work of journalists at news agencies.

In previous studies, the global news agencies were criticised for their overwhelming selection and tendency to focus on “bad” news stories from the developing world nations (Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, 2000; Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992; Harris, 1981; Read, 1992; see also Carruthers, 2004; De Beer & Steyn, 1997; Sreberny & Stevenson, 1999). Comparisons in these studies reveal that news reports always present the developing social contexts in a more negative light than the more developed social contexts. This influences the opinions of audiences about these social contexts. There are two aspects to this issue of reporting bad news. The first concerns the selection process of news and the construction of news by journalists with regard to the use of news values and news sense that guide a journalist towards interest in a particular event.

The second aspect concerns the social psychology of audiences in their preoccupation with sensational news that often encompasses disasters, horror, and conflicts (Crigler,
The socialisation of audiences in expecting news about disasters and conflict is a focus of audience research. In part, it explains the conditioning process of audiences in the repetition of media messages and in its consumption on a daily basis (cf. Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Tabloid news, a genre of sensational media messages, is thought to affect the consumption patterns of audiences because this is news that sells (Kumar, 2004; Leys 1999).

Overall, the chapter states that changes at news agencies, including changes affecting their news selection practices, will influence the news that is disseminated to the public. Investigating selection practices is relevant to the structure and organisation of news agencies. The chapter considers how a transforming news environment influences social structure, particularly the social-psychological impact of news on audiences in creating “global consciousness” (Hoogvelt, 2001, pp. 122-3; see also chapter 2). The illustration below represents this dialectical\(^1\) relationship between the social structure/world order, the news environment, and news agencies.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 6-1 Interfacing of news agencies with a transforming news environment and social order: emerging global consciousness

Figure 6-1 represents a dialectical relationship between the social world order, described and characterised as ‘globalisation,’ and the transforming news environment. This relationship, in turn, influences the organisations of news agencies.

\(^1\) According to Hoogvelt (2001:11), the dialectic principle “refers to the search for contradictions in social life as the mainspring of social change.”
production (i.e., news agencies). Contingency relationships, therefore, characterise the transforming news environment in relation to the activities of news agencies based on a globalised world. To illustrate, as communications technologies in society become more advanced, they influence the news environment by, for instance, instantaneously relaying information (i.e., increasing speed and compressing distance). They enhance the ability of people, all over the globe (in societies with these technologies), to access information more quickly, more easily, and from many different sources. Instantaneous travel, speed, and the shortening of distances at which information is relayed is changing the face of communication and therefore influencing the social world order. This, in turn, affects the social institutions, including (among others) the news industry and organisations that produce news. It also enhances knowledge of one’s social world and relationships, that is, creates global consciousness.

In the news industry, the profession of journalism evolves with the intervention and application of new information and communications technologies. Investigative journalism, a form of journalistic practice that relies on in-depth reporting and investigation, relies on taking time to report an issue. Traditional mainstream journalism, including news agency activity, has almost completely abandoned or lost this form of journalistic practice. News agencies, which need to compete for news, must now rely on speed and the shortest time it takes to post a news story on their wires to be picked up by their subscribers. The speed of reporting also requires brevity in news reports in order to allow agencies to be competitive in this news environment described in chapter 5 as commercialised and as an environment in which news has become commoditised. Digital and satellite communication technologies, including online media, present a challenge to the once traditional news agencies to adapt to and adopt these technologies.

In previous chapters, it is observed that as much as news is a commodity, it also influences ideas and shapes opinions and, in the libertarian framework, is meant to
fulfil the traditional fourth estate role of “investigative journalism” (cf. Berkowitz, 1997; Golding & Elliott, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Wa Afrika, 2005). However, because of the speed at which news agencies must operate in producing daily “spot-news,” the investigative role, which requires time and resources (Wa Afrika), has become obsolete in the routine work at news agencies. A particular event or story may appear several times during so-called “follow-up reporting” at these news agencies, but this does not mean that they are spending “investigative time” and doing in-depth reporting. Investigative journalism requires, as one of its defining features, an in-depth and critical reporting style on socio-political and development issues, for example (Addison, 1994; Kumar, 2004; Wa Afrika, 2005).

A global public sphere is embedded in the world social order. It results from, among other things, dialogue in society and in the construction of news in the activities of news agencies. As Jacobson and Jang (2002, p. 344) state, “[w]hat has recently been referred to as the public sphere is a process specifically of communication among citizens in civil society about matters of public concern” (own italics). The news media, in particular, are effective in stimulating communication in civil society among citizens, as well as in communicating to civil society in the news that is disseminated. News agencies, then, play an indirect role in the process of stimulating public debate and engaging the public spheres in societies.

In the global public sphere, ordinary citizens in the 21st century have become more active in producing their own news and information partly because of globalisation. This trend is results from the disillusionment of publics with mainstream coverage of social and political issues, according to Atton and Hamilton (2008, pp. 1-2), Bennett (2003, pp. 10-12) and Rantanen (2004, p. 301). It is also partly because, in this new information technology driven environment, they can. Interactive technologies such

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2 The Inter Press Service, which is identified in this and in previous studies (see Giffard 1998, Hachten 1996:167) as an alternative news agency operating on a global scale, is an exception to the commercially-run global news agencies. IPS covers in-depth stories and investigates social and political issues for their news reports.
as cell phones and the Internet facilitate this trend of increasing civic participation in communication and information flows. The study therefore introduces the phenomenon of “global consciousness” and defines it as “the symbolic space in the development of the global public sphere.”

According to Jacobson and Jang (2002, pp. 333-334), beyond global wars, in times of peace, there exists the potential for an emerging “global civil society.” This they liken to the concept of public sphere (defined above, Jacobson & Jang, 2002, p. 344). Global consciousness, therefore, is theorised in this study to be the result of a transforming news environment brought about by many factors. Hoogvelt’s (2001, p. 123) description of and introduction to the concept, global consciousness, is applicable. She states, “Global consciousness is manifested in the way peoples all over the world, in a discourse unified through mass communication, speak of military-political issues in terms of ‘world order’, or economic issues, as in ‘international recession’. We speak of ‘world peace’ and ‘human rights’, while issues of pollution and purification are talked about in terms of ‘saving the planet’” (own italics). Hoogvelt (p. 123) brings to the phenomenon a pragmatic way of applying linguistic expression to observing global consciousness.

With these foci as the structure of the chapter, other aspects of how news is “constructed reality” (Bennett, 2003, pp. viii-ix) and the application of news values, objectivity, and the development of news sense in the work of journalists is discussed (cf. ‘classical’ study: Golding & Elliott, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; see also Berkowitz, 1997; Schudson, 2000).

6.1 The changing global news environment and its influence on the activities at news agencies in the emergence of the global public sphere

Several relevant studies state that the essential nature of news and the process by which events are selected and defined as news (based upon news values) has lost much of its critical and “hard focus” (Bennett, 2003, pp. 12-13; Frith, 2000, pp. 201-
News organisations, on the one hand, increasingly come under pressure of a commercialised news industry (Bennett, 2003, p. 5, pp. 10-15; De Beer, 1996, pp. 91-94; Fourie, 2001, pp. 452-459; see also Croteau & Hoynes, 2001, p. 35, pp. 48-49). In Africa, following the independence of nations, African national news agencies remain predominantly under government control since many of these nation-states are unable to break with old patterns of colonial authoritarianism in the control over institutional structures (Bourgault, 1995, pp. 21-40, pp. 153-179; Curran & Park, 2000, pp. 157-177, pp. 283-290; Karikari, 2007). According to these studies (above), external influences affect the quality and nature of news.

On the other hand, Maynard (2000, pp. 12-14, pp. 17-19, pp. 32-33) suggests that mass consumption patterns of news and information, essentially the domain of audience reception studies, are also undergoing changes in audiences’ preferences of news. Maynard does not focus her analysis on whether audiences are conditioned in their changing preferences of the information that they receive or whether these changes are the outcome of circumstances of an active audience (i.e., whether they choose what information they want). Maynard instead refers to a number of factors that emanate from forces within society that effect changes in news and information consumption. She emphasizes, in particular, advances and changes in technology such as digitisation, which is having adverse effects on news due to economic pressures in the media industry that dictate news be branded (e.g., NBC-news, ABC-news, Sky-news), marketed, and distributed widely for consumption and profit (Maynard).

News is fundamentally the outcome of the activities of journalists who transform events and occurrences into a marketable product. As discussed in previous chapters, news is a product, and it is conducive to the global economic system and market relations because global economic and political relations (in the 21st century) are mainly "information-driven" (Castells, 1996, 2000; Poster, 1996). News enables
decisions to be made and opinions to take shape based on the knowledgeable construction of social reality (Bennett, 2003; Berkowitz, 1997; Hardt & Brennen, 1995). News is information that is central to informing public knowledge because it is based on reporting evidences and facts, which can direct the behaviour of policy-makers and politicians and influence the voting behaviour of citizens. However, the ‘bad’ effect of news production is “propaganda,” where information is used to mislead and distort social reality.

The hard focus of news generally seeks to reveal the truth about events (Bennett, 2003, p. 12) in a similar manner that knowledge is the pursuit of truth. By focussing on how news agencies produce the news based on their selection practices—which include editing, filtering, and gatekeeping functions (see below)—an association is made between journalism and market forces in the production process. News selection and production enable the (re-)construction of social reality, but a reality that is dominated by external social forces and internal organisational pressures. Global market capitalism is the overarching dominant external force (Hoogvelt, 2001, p. 15) as are authoritarian governments that exercise control over public institutions (chapter 5).

These constraints do not mean, however, that audiences are without subjective choices in terms of the news that they consume (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000, pp. 21-28). Alternative sources of news such as blogging sites (Nel, 2001, p. 9) and the Internet are pervasive in the “subjective control” by audiences. However, it is a limited sector of audiences, among the elite, that make alternative choices in news consumption. Most news consumers predominantly rely on mainstream sources of news as provided by their retail media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000, pp. 47-48, pp. 50-51; Curran & Leys, 2000). News is information relevant to all sectors of society—the political, economic, and cultural sectors—and it is relevant even in the process of social and national integration (Anderson, 1983, p. 17, pp. 28-36). News flows are conducive to constructing a global social reality in which a global public sphere emerges (cf.
Jacobson & Jang, 2002; Sparks, 1998). The global public sphere is also a description in the process of globalisation as represented by the phrases “compression of the world,” and “time-space distantiation” (Giddens, 1990). Under constraints of market extremism and statist control of information (chapter 5), the global public sphere becomes distorted (cf. Habermas, 1989; Jansen, 1993).

A recent trend in the new millennium, of “blogging” (Nel, 2001, p. 9) and another trend referred to as “alternative journalism” (Atton, 2003; Atton & Hamilton, 2008) and “public journalism” (Addison, 1994; Rodriguez, 2001) are especially on the increase in highly developed societies as the Internet makes greater inroads in information production and distribution. The mainstream retail media and non-media, such as government departments, produce their own news and information and make these available through their own distribution networks. For instance, government departments release press statements to the general media and their own official communiqués in order for this to reach the public realm of civil society.

The unevenness amongst societies resulting from globalisation (Amin, 1997; Curran & Leys, 2000; Held & McGrew, 2002; Stiglitz, 2002; see also Zeleza, 2003) is reproduced at all levels in the social structure (Giddens, 2003, pp. 60-65; Hoogvelt, 2001, pp. 120-138; cf. Rantanen, 2005, pp. 10-15). These include the levels of information flows and technological innovations in socio-economic exchanges and in cultural and political relations (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, pp. 1-14; Golding & Harris, 1997; Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1997). This unevenness translates into an information-driven world in which some groups have access to information and others do not, a world in which information is central, but controlled by some and not by others, a world in which information is about some and not about others (cf. Castells, 1997; Chang, 1998; Chang et al., 2000).

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3 In South Africa for instance, the Government Communication and Information Systems (GCIS) is one such department that releases official press statements to the media and other public departments.
The adaptation strategies of news agencies, discussed in chapters 4 and 5, explain how agencies have been able to survive in an increasingly competitive and unequal global news environment (cf. Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2000; Rantanen, 2004). Some previous studies, however, point out that news agencies facilitate the inequalities of the globalisation process (Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, pp. 1-17) and that they then are instrumental in preserving or even encouraging asymmetries in information flows (Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Chang, 1998; Rantanen, 2004; Sreberny & Stevenson, 1999).

This study, however, observes that news agencies, faced with pressures and social transformations, adapt, change, and/or evolve and so does the news product that they produce. That this adaptation leads to a changing product is especially evident at the Reuters news agency. In its business strategy or business model, the Reuters organisation has adapted to globally competitive market conditions. Reuters has become one of the leading financial and economic news specialists in the world (chapters 4 and 5; see also Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998). Reuters packages its news mainly for a specialised clientele, and this also includes covering general news that the mainstream media want. This “dual” business model shows Reuters’ ability to adapt to the global socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions. Its news product serves two very compatible and complementary functions and a wider audience/subscribing base than the other news agencies.

In the local SA context, the national news agency, SAPA, has also evolved from once being the imperialist “property” of the British Empire. SAPA shows evolutionary growth from centralised ownership by Reuters (1920s), to a cooperative of the South African newspapers (1938), and then a commercially run cooperative (mid-1970s). SAPA has had to refashion itself from being largely a cooperative news agency of the SA newspapers to an independent commercial agency in the domestic context. A similar history and evolutionary pattern can be seen in the AP operations as well (see chapter 4; Boyd-Barrett, 2000, p. 11, p. 16) largely generating its own news content,
and a similar situation is occurring in the experience of the DPA news agency (see chapters 4 and 5). It makes sense that changes at the operational level within these news organisations will influence their news product in the future. An aspect in the operations at news agencies is their reliance on “news sense” in order to produce the news. The next section develops this idea.

6.1.1 Defining “news sense” in the selection of news and the application of news values

Apart from employing their own journalists or correspondents, news agencies rely on “tip-offs” from other media (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, and non-media sources). They will send out their own journalists to report on these stories, giving them a specific focus. News agencies are also in the business of circulating headlines and “alerts” to retail media, and so the process of news production and news selection at agencies is in constant motion and circulation. In describing this constant motion (circulation) in news exchange, several authors have referred to the news production process as “routine” (Bennett, 2003, pp. 162-164) that describes the day-to-day practices in newsrooms as “repetitive” and hardly as spontaneous or unstructured as outsiders (i.e., non-media persons) perceive them to be (Berkowitz, 1997; Elliott, 1979; Golding & Tuchman, 1978; cf. Schudson, 2000). When one speaks of the ‘routine-ness’ of news journalism, one alludes to the elements involved in news production and selection—that is, developing news sense and employing news values.

News agencies do not supply news directly to the public, but supply the retail and commercial media, which then supply the public with news. News agencies do however select news items that they think their clients (i.e., the retail media, amongst others) would want, and this influences what audiences will receive. Previous studies (Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992; Kayser, 1953; Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985; UNESCO/IPI, 1972) concluded that imbalances existed in the content of news flowing across nations. These studies quantitatively compared the news content in
various media formats (newspapers and television news), across different nations, over a set period (usually one to two weeks in alternative months of a particular year/s). The importance of these studies in relation to the findings of this study lies in the changing practices at news agencies and therefore also in the nature of news. These changing practices refer to the actual processes of news selection and news production.

According to Shrivastava (1991, p. 3), “importance” and “interest” are often recognised as news values, but instead they actually describe the sum total of news values or the “intrinsic characteristics that distinguish news from non-news” (cf. Golding & Elliott, 1979). Shrivastava (p. 3) explains that applying news values in the selection of news events leads to the developing of “news sense” (own italics). Some of the participants in this study described news sense as an almost innate and intuitive process that manifests over time with the individual journalist’s or news correspondent’s experiences and in the occupation and field of journalism. News sense is an intuition, a knowing regarding which events are newsworthy. In other words, journalists internalise the “values” that come to shape their perception about events and how to report them.

In other words, news sense is an attribute of the experienced journalist who is able to identify an event as newsworthy and to report it in a way that garners interest. In their careers, journalists develop news sense or the sense of what events are newsworthy, as they become sensitized over time to what the client base and, ultimately, audiences want (Golding & Elliott, 1979). They may also follow a brief of their managerial editing team. The role of journalists in identifying which events are newsworthy is not as inexplicable and mysterious as it is often made out to be (by media people themselves) (Bennett, 2003, pp. 162-163; see also Hall et al., 1978).

According to Golding and Elliott’s (1979) classical ethnographic study, the editors give journalists a brief (guidelines) regarding the sorts of events to report and follow-
up on. In this, editors, sub-editors, and bureau chiefs are senior journalists who have
developed a news sense and they manage the newsroom in terms of knowing firstly
what the brief is from their subscribers and secondly who their clients are and what
news preferences would be (cf. Golding & Elliott; also Schudson, 2000). In relation
to this, news events are ascribed to certain news categories, which include general
news, politics, economic and financial news, domestic and foreign news, sport news,
and so on.

Arguably, categorisation also influences the selection process as it conditions
(through repetitive routine) the work of journalists and conditions the news markets
to the type of news topics to expect. For instance, a newspaper carries a specific
layout with news of the day (i.e. general and breaking stories) on the front page;
commentaries, editorials, and letters to the editor on the inside, middle, and end
pages; and sports news on the back pages or in a supplement section. This format is
generally observed across diverse countries (cf. Fourie, 2001), which also presents
the ubiquitous spreading of Western, Anglo-American journalism in mainstream
journalism. Television and radio news also follow a set format similar to newspapers,
as their news is also presented (broadcasted) under several “categories” of news and
usually in a pre-set order.

News journalists do not go out and ask people what news they want because this will
be short of “shaping” the news (see Golding & Elliott, 1979; cf. Hall et al., 1978;
Tuchman, 1978). Journalists instead claim that newsgathering is a spontaneous
activity, not shaped by their own or others’ expectations of news. They would prefer
one believe that news is spontaneous and naturally occurring. For the media critic,
this is where the difficulty in defining news sense comes in because news to the critic
is not a naturally occurring or a spontaneous activity. News is an event that is
identified, selected, and presented as such by the activities of the journalists who
make the news (Berkowitz, 1997; Marris & Thornham, 1996; Schudson, 2000). They
conclude, therefore, news production is not spontaneous, with rare exceptions such as
the “breaking news event”—that is, an event that meets several of the criteria of news values and creates immediate reaction to it (Hardt & Brennen, 1995; Weaver, 2005).

The importance of selecting events for news is in deciding which event is more important than other events. For news agencies, and in newsrooms of newspapers and television and radio stations alike, the selection process involves applying certain news values, which ultimately serve the needs of the subscribing members and client market (Golding & Elliott, 1979). In discussing the impact of the selection process of news, Walter Lippman (1922) developed the adage that “the media may not tell audiences what to think, but they do influence audiences in what to think about.” The selection of news consists of editors and journalists applying certain values in selecting events, but also in understanding their “briefs” in what the client (and what the audiences) want.

Selection plays an important part in persuading audiences what to think about, which can influence audiences’ reaction, or non-reaction, to the news. To use a simplistic example, if the audience receives constant news stories on crime, their attention is going to be focused on crime in the news and in society. Audiences’ reaction to news falls within the domain of audience research and reception studies. This is particularly popular in psychology studies of the mass media (Crigler, 1999; Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). However, it is relevant to mention here because of the impact and power of news in influencing public opinion (Couldry & Curran, 2003).

Market forces may also influence news sense, for instance, which influences what the audience will consume as “news.” Schudson (2000) and others (Thussu, 1998) argue that the audience becomes the sought after “commodity” for advertisers rather than the news and the function of news in that they allure audiences to the processes of the market, to become consumers of market products, not just of news. This is true of newspapers, but also television and radio advertising in which advertisers will pay for
time slots between news reports when they are aware of getting listeners’, viewers’, or readers’ attention.

In the history of news agencies and fundamental to their operations, the production and selection of events for distribution has commonly been the role of editors who ensure that a journalistic news sense and a journalistic standard are adhered to in news production. In this role, editors have been dubbed the “gatekeepers” of information. Schudson (2000) states that the word “gatekeeping” was applied in formal studies, particularly in the 1950s, to refer to how news organisations produce the news. He relates two studies of significance to illustrate the evolving concept of gatekeeping:

White (1950) studied the selection process of a small American newspaper for one week observing how its wire editor selected and rejected news copy [that is, news stories conveyed over the wire from news agencies or other news producers], which would also be fed and distributed to other newsrooms and newspapers. White found that the wire editor’s [the person who sits and receives in-coming news stories at a news desk] selection and rejection of potential news stories was overwhelmingly subjective and arbitrary, based on the editor’s personal likes and dislikes, political preferences, and that these affected his news judgement in the selection of news items. White (1950) concluded that the gatekeeping process of news selection and rejection was therefore a highly subjective exercise.

However, a later study by Walter Gieber (1964), which is taken to refute White’s (1950) study, applied a larger sample of news wire editors to observe the selection process of news. Gieber found that all of the wire editors at various news organisations selected news items in almost the exact way, relying on certain news values. He accounted for this as partly these editors conforming to a rote task and in doing so that they were typically “concerned with the goals of production, bureaucratic routine and interpersonal relations within the newsroom.” (pp. 176-177)

The above two studies indicate the relationship between the selection process and the “gatekeeping” function of editors. It also relates the emerging trend in the 20th century of a conformity to certain journalistic practices and of the development of (an evolving) news sense. It illustrates how news values impact on the work of journalists in what they write about and in how they report (or frame) an event as news. More importantly, Gieber’s (1964) study reveals that conforming to a news sense (i.e., the
values adhered to in selecting events for news) is central in maintaining a particular universal standard in the processes of news production and selection.

This conformity was observed across the spectrum of newsrooms at the various news agencies, and it revealed a certain code of professionalism or a news-ethic in the journalism at these agencies. In the previous chapter, different forms of journalism are discussed based on the broader values of a society, for example, “liberal journalism,” “state controlled journalism,” and “alternative or development journalism.”

Adopting a specific set of news values may also explain why media critics speak about the “homogenisation” of news, where similar events are consistently reported by different news agencies or are being reported in the same manner. The sections that follow address the issue of news selection at the various news organisations and the news values involved in that process. It then moves on to the related issue under investigation in this study, the relationships between news agencies and whether one can still speak of the imbalances in global news flows because of how these relationships are defined.

6.1.2 Selection and production practices at SAPA

News at SAPA is broken up into various “categories.” There are ten of these news categories that help staff (i.e., editors and journalists) select and sort what news stories are to be “filed” on the wires and in which category. Each category has a code with which the newsroom staffers are familiar (see Appendix 4). These codes are organised as part of the daily newsroom diary.

What we call local-domestic news is category “A...” We have international news as category “I”; we have category “R” for horse racing news. Financial news is category “F.” Sports news is category “S,” [which includes] just basic sports text news, sports results (in

4 ‘Filing’ or to file a news story is a technical term for sending that news story over the computerised terminal or on the ‘news wire’. A ‘wire’ is a term referring to the computer terminal which newsrooms now operate on compared to the previous telex machines.
other words, the scoreboards, and the half-time scores, and so on). [Category] “P” is for parliamentary news. It’s a misnomer. It’s not really parliamentary news. It’s what we used to call “privileged news,” that anything that is said inside the parliamentary chambers is privileged. In the apartheid years, it was particularly important for the likes of Helen Suzman and company. We could report what they said regardless of any consequences. So if it was “P,” you knew it was privileged news. It came from inside parliament. Feature stories are category “B.” Entertainment is category “E.” We have another category for Africa that we call “C,” which can be a duplication of some of the news in the general news of the day. Then we have one or two, what we call, blank categories. . . . It’s just categorisation of the product. We actually don’t sit down every day and say, “Alright, what kind of theme are we going for today?” (SAPA Editor, 2005)

The diary is a document that guides the operations of the agency in its production and selection of the news of the day. It is described as a dynamic document because while it acts as a compact organiser of the day’s news, it is flexible to changes and is not predetermined (SAPA Editor, 2005). The diary is a document that confirms and validates events that have occurred and that will be reported on or that must be followed up on. The main diary allows the sub-editors to organise their individual diaries depending on the kind of news coming in that is to be focused on for the day. There is a sports editor, a political and general news editor, and a sub-editor dealing with international news at SAPA. The chief editor or the main editor oversees the overall news process, selection, production, and editing.

Daily morning, mid-morning, and afternoon meetings are scheduled in the newsroom and on an ad hoc basis. The editor and sub-editors discuss the news diary, which contains a listing of the news stories for the day, or events to follow up on as leads. The diaries are discussed at the meetings and the important news stories for the day are prioritised. The goal is to reach a balance and a spread of news that the news clients indirectly determine. SAPA Editor (2005) refers to the selection process at SAPA as an “inexact science,” meaning that there are no hard rules to follow and the individual journalist relies on his/her experience and news sense (see below). News stories at the top of the list of events in the diaries are subject to change at any one time—for instance, if there is a “breaking story” or an event that takes immediate priority in reporting. Priority events are determined according to the news values, and
the more of these values an event exhibits, the more likely it will receive attention in selection (see below).

The diary is, in the correct use of the word, a dynamic document. It never sits still. It’s always being adapted and updated, having items chucked out of it, having items put in. So the diary is a snapshot of what our work for the day is at any one time. In our diary, we will try to prioritise it so that we have a spread of news for our local SAPA coverage of South Africa primarily. Remember that sort of clumsy metaphor . . . something of a [snow] cap of news. (SAPA Editor)

SAPA does not publish news (for public consumption). It supplies a broad spectrum of news to subscribers and members. The news that the public receive in newspapers or in television and radio broadcasts is the selection done by the editors at retail media outlets of the news with which SAPA (and other news sources) has supplied them. It makes reasonable sense then to say that SAPA performs a gatekeeper role of news that the domestic retail media receive because SAPA selects and sends out news copy it receives from various news wires and from the domestic SA media and other non-media sources (such as press statements). The retail media will then further filter that news through selection before it reaches the public. The process then is that SAPA buys a spread of news from the various global news agencies, which is news from all over the world. The local South African media that subscribe to SAPA receive the news that SAPA puts out on its domestic news terminal. News at SAPA is processed on a daily, twenty-four-hour cycle.

SAPA Editor (2005) admits that in the news production process, they do “filter” the bulk of the news that they receive over the news wires from the global news agencies. Not all the news can be sent to SAPA local subscribers because there is just too much incoming news. The rationale of filtering out excess news is to avoid a situation of “news fatigue” (SAPA Editor). He maintains, however, that SAPA still produces “a fair spread of international news which covers all of those main running stories around the world” (SAPA Editor). The filtering of news was explained as follows:
I really believe that many media consumers out there, without really being aware of it, suffer from information fatigue and they actually shut down a lot of their receptors, which is why you have got this massive market for niche magazines coming out. I think there is really a few of us left that are interested in the dynamics of [world politics]. All of those kinds of things, you know, many people are just not interested in that; it’s far too complex. (SAPA Editor)

SAPA sends out approximately two hundred to three hundred news stories of news copy to their subscribing members, which include the global news agencies. This is the full news wire of SAPA, which will include a cross-section of news stories in the various categories of news: “diaries, advisories, tip offs, upcoming events, finance stories, and so on” (SAPA Editor, 2005). Of this, the global news agencies will do their own selection usually of a few, or even one or two, stories to go out on their terminals. That selection ends up on the incoming network of retail media (mainly newspapers) subscribers. This filtering of news illustrates the “gatekeeping function” that news agencies play in terms of sifting, sorting, and selecting news before it goes out to subscribers. The significance of this lies in the criticism levelled against news organisations in determining the news agenda (De Beer & Steyn, 1997; see also De Beer, 1996 for case study examples).

Newspapers that have found a niche market also have a good idea of what their main market of consumers want and expect from them. Business Day is an example of a newspaper that knows who their key market is and what this market expects and wants. By contrast, the Daily Sun, which carries some interest and factual stories, is mainly a tabloid style newspaper. It attracts a different kind of market or consumer base than Business Day. Bennett (2003, p. 12) defines tabloid journalism as “soft news stories [that] have no general social significance beyond the intrinsic drama or sensational images that stir emotional reactions in audiences.” Consumer markets also play a role in defining and differentiating between “hard news” (i.e., news that reflects some investigative journalism) and “soft news” (i.e., journalism with intrinsic sensationalist and tabloid value).
SAPA Editor (2005) describes the news selection process as an “intangible” process that relates to one’s “news sense.” According to him, in selecting news stories on a daily basis, different processes are at work. The process differs when selecting international news compared to the generation and selection of daily domestic news on which the local SA newspapers rely (SAPA Editor). International news selection at SAPA has undergone various logistical changes because of changes at the organisation itself (SAPA Editor), but the actual practice of selection remains much the same. Changes have affected operations, and they are the result of declining human and economic resources over the years at SAPA. Various “cost-cutting exercises” have had to be put in place, and this has altered how the production process of news copy occurs and has further influenced the selection process. SAPA Editor explains:

As part of the cost-cutting process over the years . . . we had a whole team of people receiving international news. We did a lot more work on the international content. We would cut and splice two different news agencies’ stories into one. We would update these . . . a lot of work. Over the years, we’ve cost-cut that process into one individual who is on shift. That person is on shift at what we call the foreign terminal, and they are specifically briefed. They know what the story is. They know what our criteria are for what our customers want, not what we think they should have. What I think [customers want] doesn’t really count. It’s what we know they want, and that guy [on the foreign terminal] has got a pretty good sense learned by monitoring what the papers use, what is used on television, on radio. It’s [the news] all on screen now. He gets the incoming streams from AP, AFP, DPA at the moment, and he copy-tastes. [That is, he reads all incoming copy and makes his selection].

The selection process involves monitoring news that is already in the public eye—that is, news that has been distributed by the retail media. Newspapers, broadcast radio, and television news are screened on a daily basis. Another important aspect influencing the selection process of news is what the clients of SAPA want. What is produced and the perception of what the client or customer wants are symbiotic processes, each influencing the other to produce the kind of news that has come to be expected—generally speaking, news of an unusual nature. This expectation of what kind of news audiences want also relates to the further issue of why “bad news” is “good news” – because it sells (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982). Good news does not attract audiences as much as bad news does (Weaver,
2005). The issue of “bad news” versus “good news” is presented in discussing the criticism of global news agencies’ portrayal of the developing world nations (below).

According to SAPA Editor (2005), their brief in the production of news follows certain criteria of being accurate, credible, and quick, but he acknowledges that news can never be neutral. In other words, there is always some ideological position that is elevated or put forward. Read (1999), who writes authoritatively on the Reuters news agency and its history, states that news agencies present a view of the world from a dominant framework. Read (p. 1) states that even the Reuters news agency, which had “[f]or over a hundred years [been] a national and imperial institution, [and a] news agency of the British Empire,” had to reinvent itself, although a British view of the world can still be seen.

Individuals, who staff news agencies, are not devoid of the cultural, historical, and social backgrounds that influence their perceptions. However, in adopting a set of professional principles and news values and in adhering to a journalistic code, individual journalists must overlook their biases and personal preferences in fulfilling their function. The SAPA Editor (2005) concedes, “A journalist will go into the field with all their subjective experiences, but . . . at the end of the day, they have to detach themselves from these personal points of view and experiences in order to do their job properly.”

The fact remains however that the subjective views of a reporter can indeed materialise in news reporting and in the selection of news (cf. Golding & Elliott, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Facts may still be present in a news report, but the individual reporter can make an emotive or value judgement in how they might describe the mood at an event, in how they interpret the event and by putting it in their own words.
Your subjectivity comes in, in your selection of your diary news, [in asking the question] “What do we cover today?” But we can still report as fairly and in as balanced a manner as we can along with the basic rules of [one must] carry both sides of the story. (SAPA Editor)

The issue of journalists and editors avoiding subjective reporting and selection in their news choices involves, in other words, the issue of objectivity. Objectivity, as a news value, has often been loosely “counter-argued” by media people when critics say that news can never be objective because there are too many positions that one can report from in any one story and selection brings with it the journalist’s (and editor’s) subjectivities. Objectivity and balance are two related news values.

In defence of objectivity, Lichtenberg (2000, pp. 238-240) states that media critics cannot argue that there can be no objectivity in news simply because by making a case against “objectivity,” one already assumes that objectivity is possible and that if it is possible, critics are not clear on what that is. It is a circular argument. In relation to the value of “balance” and “impartiality,” however, reporting or selecting news “objectively” begins to make sense when the news reporter or editors are aware of their own subjective views but adopt as impartial and as balanced a position as is possible. SAPA Editor (2005) described the international news selection process at SAPA as “a human, flesh and blood process” that involves “no cast-iron set of rules.” However, he also expressed the opinion that journalists rely on an in-built or intuitive “news sense” that they acquire with experience on the job. Over time, news selection practices become entrenched and an objective set of values can be developed.

The changes in the SAPA organisation, as far as having to cut back on staff and other costs, reflect the changes in the news product. For instance, more time, effort, and expense were devoted to the foreign news production process at SAPA. Several reporters would work together on the foreign news-desk to obtain various (incoming) sources and different positions on a news story. When that task was reduced to one reporter merely selecting events on the incoming wires of the foreign news agencies, that person could no longer spend time expanding an international news story and
giving the varied inputs on it. Instead, the reporter at the foreign news-desk at SAPA now selects the quickest incoming item from the foreign news wire and then sends that out in the form that it is in.

The SAPA Editor (2005) gives the following illustration: when the attacks on the Trade Centre Towers in New York in 2001 made international headline news, the first news agency to put out the story was used as the source for that news.

We would use any news agency, which came in first with an update on it. We don’t do anything [any changes to the story] other than top and tail that news. We add the SAPA tag to it, top and tail check the headline, the address codes, various technical aspects to it, and we issue it. So it comes in and goes out. The major selection process is what we throw out. (SAPA Editor)

SAPA selects news on its domestic terminal or domestic wire, which is the local South African news coming in mainly from the SA retail media, differently from the news selection at its foreign news-desk. According to SAPA Editor (2005), the domestic news selection process is more “complicated” than that at their foreign news desk. He provided the following vignette:

The local thing is more complex because there is so much that [one] should be doing, and [one] has only got so many resources. You try and juggle things. Let me explain it by [using a metaphor] that the news of the day is a mountain like Kilimanjaro; it’s a mountain of news. There is a lot of news at the bottom of it, which is not really important news, and the most important news of the day is at the top [of the mountain]. . . . Now SAPA comes along with its little packet of resources, its experience, and hopefully its good news sense and its value judgements and prejudices, everything hopefully refined into a fairly professional package, and that’s the little snow-cap on top of the mountain. That’s what we can cover in any one day. Now that mountain of news shrinks and grows. Christmas day, that mountain is right down there. Everybody has taken the day off. But on other days of the year, it remains a big mountain, but our snow-cap remains very much the same size. So, on one day, we can cover maybe one percent of that mountain of news. On another day, our cap comes down to fifty percent, let’s say.

Now in the snow-cap news that we can get to, we have to say, “Right, we’re a national news agency of national interest, so we do not get sidetracked by parochial stuff. . . .” To get the right mix of news for our customers at the end of the day, we have to, hopefully, apply whatever skills we have to say, “This is news; this isn’t.” We will cover that, we will divert a lot of our resources to make sure that we cover that, and we will ignore other stuff. What we try to do is a spread. That’s that inexact science of, “Okay, is this what our broad body of subscribers want?” Remember, we don’t give any customised feeds; they all get the same
product from us whether it’s of interest to them or not. Something that’s of interest, we think, to the Johannesburg customers will be received [also] by the Cape Town [customers]. We assume they will look at it and say, “That’s not of any interest to us.” They [retail media, television, newspapers and radio] have their own little caps of news as well. (SAPA Editor)

The above vignette demonstrates the selection process of domestic news at SAPA before that news is packaged and sent over their computer terminals to the various subscribing media outlets. The snow-cap mountain of news represents all the domestic news that SAPA gets in over the wires from their member news sources. The comparison of news at the bottom of the mountain, which is less important, with the news at the top of the mountain, which is the main (or more important) news, represents the ordering of information according to what their core clients (customers) expect. The news at the top of the mountain is also placed there because of the news sense and news values of the organisation that are based on the judgement of the organisation’s editorial management team.

The implications of cost reductions in the operations at SAPA means that firstly, the news agency can no longer afford to go in-depth in its coverage of an event, whether local or international. Secondly, this change, seen as a “rationalization process” in maintaining and running the news agency, also means that a fundamental change takes place in the content and most probably in the quality of news. The need to get news out quickly, but accurately and without the added luxury of cross-checking other news agency sources, means less time spent on the story and less input from different sources.

Thirdly, news production and distribution also involve the added dimension of a competitive drive for news and news sources. This means that the agency that can deliver news the quickest will be the agency used more often. The nature of competition is discussed at length in chapter 5, but it makes sense that competition has a compounding effect on the news product in terms of quality and (some have argued) quantity. Tabloid news in newspapers, for instance, is a concern for media critics since its main aim is to generate revenues by attracting audiences. The revenue
comes mainly, however, from advertisers who place their products in these media. According to Leys, “People will pay a lot of money for entertainment technology. . . . The mass media culture has thus contributed significantly to the disappearance of [public] meetings . . . [of] the shared, engaged, and interactive discourse that meetings made possible. . . . [T]he media are at the service of capital accumulation and not at the service of democracy” (1999, p. 318).

News agencies, as a rule, do not produce tabloid news involving sensational information and headlines, even though some headlines, such as the events of “9/11” or the tsunami disaster in South Asia and Sri Lanka in 2004, naturally draw interest. While tabloid news is not always factual and is referred to as “fluff” (i.e., “vague and often unimportant copy, poor, non-factual writing” (Nel, 2001, p. 105), as a rule, news reporting at agencies is limited to brief, factual (and non-sensationalist) reporting. News agencies, furthermore, do not (yet) provide their news wires directly to the ordinary/general public. They are non-profit organisations and do not aim to attract the attention of large audiences because they are writing for a very specific clientele. News agencies’ news items firstly need to be brief, using limited words and space. They need to be factual at all times and, as far as possible, packaged in a news wire format (which is basically described in the values above). This does not imply that sensationalist news is not “factual,” but that the “aim” in reporting such news differs according to the audiences such news is aimed at. Sensationalist news is attention grabbing, aimed at attracting “large” audiences.

The news that agencies receive from various external sources, including newspapers, is the selection that they have to work with and work on as “leads.” Some media critics have argued that rationalizing (i.e., standardizing) the news production process has led to the homogenisation of news rather than to encouraging diversity in news content (Rantanen, 2005, pp. 74-92; Thussu, 2000, pp. 179-180; Thussu, 2003, p. 127). Global news agencies report on the same or similar news stories and exchange this with other non-global, national agencies (and non-media). This partly explains
why there are no news-exchange agreements among the global news agencies in this study, because they are in fact competitors or rivals for the same geographical news in the same social contexts (chapter 5). They also have to compete with non-news agency operations of retail and independent media in these same contexts.

The fact that the entire process of selecting domestic news for SA retail media market is an “inexact science” reflects the potential for subjective selection. The argument that news is based on objective observation also does not hold because news is the outcome of the personal choice of a reporter on any one particular day. The selection process also involves the subjective choice of a sub-editor and reporter in the newsroom despite the so-called brief that reporters or sub-editors receive and despite the so-called news sense that develops over time with experience on the job. It is a commonly held belief amongst news people that a news sense is developed for selecting events and reporting them as news based on so-called news values.

SAPA Editor (2005) maintains that news agencies can play a vital role in protecting democracies, or the efficient political functioning of a country, if the media is relatively free [from commercial market interference or government political spin]. According to SAPA Editor, “if a democracy does not have a basic news agency structure that is a central point for receiving news from as many sources as possible, then redistributing that news as widely and to as many clients as possible, [there will be no] “quality” [to] that democracy.” In other words, having an independent news agency in a democracy, adds to the quality of that democracy by supporting “diversity” of information. Bennett, for example, states that “something as important as public information [is] left to be defined by a poorly understood and often turbulent combination of business profit imperatives, political spin techniques, and consumer tastes” (2003, p. 10). The freedom of information is a value developed in the “liberal” tradition on the role of the media in democratic contexts (Curran, 2000b). However, it extends to issues that even a liberalist position has ignored (i.e., freedom also from excessive market interference).
Look at how Interfax emerged in Moscow during old Gorbachev’s perestroika years and so on. Suddenly, there was this source of relatively credible news coming out of Russia. Before [then], everything was sanitised by TASS (laughs) . . . The fact that our copy [SAPA copy] is used [by global agencies] means that we’re getting it right some of the time. In the bad old days [of apartheid], Eugene Terre’Blanche and the AWB [Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging, a right-wing political group] and the ANC [African National Congress, a left-wing political movement during apartheid] all used to regularly contact SAPA as a respected neutral point for delivering their news. That says something. (SAPA Editor)

The “opening up” of or “freeing” of the media in Russia represented by the term “glasnost,” is often cited as the key contributor to perestroika (economic reconstruction and reform) of the previous socialist Republic (McNair, 2000). Reference to the USSR state-controlled and censored media environment can be paralleled to the apartheid state’s control of the South African media even though, ironically, the apartheid state passed laws prohibiting the so labelled, left-wing, anti-apartheid movements as “socialist” and “communist” (e.g., the “Prohibition of Communism Act” and the “Suppression of Communism Act”) (Hepple, 1960).

Various critics consider the presence of a news agency, as a central distribution point for information to flow in and out of a social context, as constructive to democracy and nation-building (Curran & Park, 2000; Gudykunst & Mody, 2002; Leys, 1999; Rantanen, 2004, 2005). On the other hand, SAPA is the main domestic and national news agency operating in SA. However, several smaller news agencies and news sources (or organisations providing spot-news) have mushroomed provincially and regionally in SA. Other smaller (that is, non-national) commercial sources of news in South Africa include, but are not limited to, the following examples: Africa Eye News service, based in Nelspruit, and the CAJ news (Centre for African Journalists), based in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. These are mentioned even though they do not have the structures and operations to compete with SAPA, but they tend to offer more regionally focused news to subscribers, which include mainstream newspapers and media in SA. This adds to the diversity of information flowing in the domestic context.
In summary, SAPA had separate news selection practices for domestic and international news. Domestic news selection has followed a routine or set process guided by the important daily newsroom “diary.” One respondent referred to [domestic] news production at SAPA as “conveyor-belt journalism,” meaning that a set process or routine is followed, daily (Norton, 2005). Apart from “breaking news” stories that break the routine selection practice, the main clients of SAPA (SA retail media) influence the domestic news selection. International news selection, on the other hand, previously relied on a team of journalists surveying the online wires of global agencies and selecting, copy-editing, and splicing news reports. However, due to the need to cut costs at news agencies, SAPA now has a limited international news desk at which one staff member performs the task of selecting international news. That role is subject to ‘shifts’ – i.e. various times in the day (or week) when that one journalist will sit at that desk and monitor news coming in over the wires. Despite the ‘conveyor-belt’ selection process and the down-sizing of staff at SAPA, the domestic news agency fulfils an important part in the flow of information in the domestic (and international) context in that it is still the main central point of news distribution from most retail media sources in SA. Furthermore, free information flows are constructive to democratic social formation.

6.1.3 Reuters’ news selection practices emphasizing the centrality of their client markets

Reuters’ news selection is largely determined by their core client markets that are described as financial institutions, banking houses, stock exchanges, and business enterprises (Reuters’ Bureau Chief, 2006). Reuters’ Bureau Chief illustrates what news is produced at Reuters and how the selection process is related to that. The Reuters’ Bureau Chief explains that because Reuters has clients who trade in agricultural produce and farm produce like corn and graze [crops] from SA, commodity traders will require information that can assist them in knowing about
conditions in the country that can affect their trade and investments. Agricultural produce is a part of the international trading commodities (Reuters’ Bureau Chief).

Reuters’ journalists carefully observe what is happening in SA that might affect the production of graze for their trading clients, according to the Bureau Chief (2006). Reuters wants to see, for instance, whether SA will have a shortage of corn in the coming year or not. A shortage of corn would affect world supplies and therefore the prices that people will pay (Reuters’ Bureau Chief, 2006). Hence, Reuters’ agency even reports on the weather conditions and so on, as all the issues—social, environmental, and political—that Reuters’ produces for its core market, are interrelated. The principle of selecting information that is useable by all Reuters’ clients will apply, whether they trade in gold or any other commodity (Reuters’ Bureau Chief).

Reuters would report on an event, such as a strike by the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu), for its clients, in any one of the commodities areas, such as in the gold or mining industries. The more information clients have, the better the investment decisions that they can take. Reuters’ Bureau Chief provides another illustration:

>We’re looking at [what is] going to affect South Africa’s economy in terms of gold production, platinum production, diamond production, and so on because SA is a major producer of many of these products in the world, and where there is a shortage or anything that affects the supply of [these products], it affects all the global prices of these commodities. Our Indian suppliers who buy these products from SA are looking at it quite carefully. Australian investors who have invested money in some of these mines are looking at it very carefully. So the Reuters terminal, which is sitting there [points to computer terminal], becomes very important to them. (2006)

Selection of news at Reuters is specifically geared towards the activities and needs of its clients all over the world. In an extended biographical and historical case study of the Reuters news agency, Read (1999) points out that a sound business strategy by the founder, Julius Reuter, has resulted in the news agency remaining in existence for
over one and a half centuries. According to Read, “[p]eople want news, and they will pay for it. News informs, news warns, news motivates, [and] Julius Reuter made his fortune by recognizing this power [of news]” (p. 1). Read points out furthermore that in the past forty years, the Reuters news agency has been able to transform itself in a changing environment “linked to the revolution in communications technology” (p. 1). He states, “Computerized economic information and data—prices, trade figures, reports, and the like—are supplied on screen to business people working within a global economy. Reuters has helped to create that economy” (pp. 1-2).

The Reuters news agency has, through a keen business strategy, built a global reputation as being a reliable source of news and has established success in its news gathering (production) and distribution network (Read, 1999). According to Reuters’ Bureau Chief (2006), this success stems from the purpose at Reuters to meet the demands of its client markets. Likewise, its news selection and production has been tailored, in a sense, to meet this demand. Two important issues arise in this historical overview of the Reuters news agency’s success.

Firstly, throughout its history, the agency has been closely associated with the global market economy in which information (from the Reuters and other global and national news agencies) serves primarily to facilitate that economic system. Secondly, the selection process at Reuters is firmly rooted in the needs of the economic system of capitalist production. Information circulating in this system then serves private needs, the needs of investors, business people, and all other aspects associated with private property and profit accumulation. This underscores the pressures placed on news industries, in general, to conform to the needs of a global economy and the structures and relations that maintain it. This situation gives support to the arguments of a commercialised news industry, the creation of a consumer-based global news market, and the impact on the chances for an inclusive global public sphere.

5 Julius Reuter founded Reuters’ news agency in 1851 in London.
The Reuters’ participant admits that news has the power to influence opinions and judgements in the broader society. It is up to the individual integrity of a reporter not to advance any cause, but to report events based on the creed of objectivity, independence, accuracy, and reliability (Reuters’ Bureau Chief, 2006). However, these news values do reflect the broader value framework of the societies in which news values have taken shape.

6.1.4 Associated Press news selection practices

There are clear parallels in the news selection practices at the AP agency and the Reuters news agency. AP Bureau Chief (2006) reiterates the news selection at AP based on news values speed, accuracy, and reliability. However, unlike Reuters’ specialisation in financial and economic news reporting, AP specialises in general political news. Similar to the Reuters agency that supplies news to a specialist clientele, AP supplies news to a focused membership and clientele, the American media and clients. AP does not focus on providing economic and financial news to their client base (subscribers) in the same way that Reuters does, and AP covers all news and includes business-related stories that their business clients around the world would be interested in.

According to AP Bureau Chief (2006), the process of selecting news items will depend on how one measures a news organisation. A bigger organisation will be able to cover more news than a smaller one because of the resources at its disposal (AP Bureau Chief).

Our [AP] clients are a little bit different [from Reuters’ clients]. Reuters will do a little bit of both. They are writing a main story; they are putting in the same material that I’m putting in, but they are putting in a little higher emphasis on the financial aspect, making sure it’s higher in the story, that somebody who is a stockbroker who only reads the first three paragraphs of the story sees this. But we know our service doesn’t go to these guys, so we don’t have to tailor it that way. So ours is more a traditional system. (AP Bureau Chief)

News selection is, in the case of Reuters and AP, influenced by the news agencies’ core subscribing markets of news. According to AP Bureau Chief, this influence
might be observable in the operations of the Reuters news agency because they have a specific market to which they are catering in their news reports. This includes their core market (i.e., the business communities all over the world) (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). News agencies’ business strategies and news strategies have been evolving over time so that more emphasis is placed on areas of their operations that are financially viable to their organisation (AP Bureau Chief).

In the case of the Associated Press (AP) news agency, their core clients are retail media, including newspapers and broadcast stations that run news programmes in the United States (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). Therefore, AP’s business strategy is predominantly providing these clients with news that they require rather than what stock-brokerage firms and business companies require. “So what they [retail media] want is the news; [they want to know] what happened there, how did it happen, why did it happen, [and] what’s been done about it” (AP Bureau Chief). Therefore, journalists pick stories and provide a straight service, but the journalist does not determine or shape the news story (AP Bureau Chief).

In the “lock-up” situation reported as a vignette in the previous chapter, various news agencies’ journalists cover the same story, as in the case of the budget speech given by South African Minister of Finance, but they each tend to focus on reporting different aspects of the event. Reuters would report based on the information that would affect their core clients, the business enterprises, whereas AP would report the same event focusing on the news aspect in which their core clients are interested. In a sense, then, news is approached differently by various organisations despite the universal journalistic news values to which the media organisations adhere. Furthermore, these news values may be universally applied if the news objectives in reporting are practiced universally by news organisations.

On the overwhelming reporting of “bad events” from developing nations, the response from AP was that there is much complaining about the global news
agencies’ role in selecting only “bad news” for global news reports. The AP respondent believes that this complaint is unfounded because “bad news occurs everywhere,” even in developed countries, “but it occurs more frequently in developing countries, which is why it is covered more frequently in these countries” (AP Bureau Chief, 2006).

According to AP Bureau Chief (2006), “there is a lot of whining (from critics) about how the global news agencies are only producing bad news stories about Africa, but there are also good news stories that are reported.” The AP respondent offered the following illustration: “I remember when I was in Kenya and one of the ambassadors there was decrying the fact that foreign correspondents only wrote bad news stories [and saying] that we should write the good stories.” The stories that global news agencies put out are not of their own creation, according to the AP respondent.

“We don’t start the wars, we don’t start the famines, [and] we don’t start the genocides,” AP Bureau Chief (2006) states. Yet, he contends, these are important issues to cover as news, and they are not issues that are covered only in poorer countries. They are covered as news in richer countries as well (AP Bureau Chief). According to AP Bureau Chief, the job of a journalist is not to tell people good news or bad news, but to tell people the news. He offers the following vignette:

So if Zimbabwe and Namibia went to war, and somebody came up here with some sweet story about helping orphans to go to college, which story are you going to do, you know? Across the road, they’re shooting each other; here, they’re going to have orphans going to college. Well that’s fine; it’s a good story, but it doesn’t have to be done today. The war story does. So sometimes it’s a matter of priorities. You have to do what’s demanded of you first, then get around to the other things. (AP Bureau Chief)

To some extent, the above vignette contradicts the focus in the literature on the imbalanced coverage of developing nations by the global news agencies in terms of their negative portrayal. It is a reality that events of a negative nature tend to be reported on more often in developing regions because these events happen more often in these regions. However, what may not be reported on or reflected in these news
reports is the broader evolutionary and transforming nature of developing nations, in
general. In this neglect, there is a bias. However, the counter argument that ‘news
people’ make, is that ‘good news’ does not attract audiences and ratings. The broader
contextualizing of developing social contexts requires an alternative strategy to
reflect a balanced reality. The argument here is that such an “alternative” focus
should take into account the developing nature of these societies and hence produce
an inclusive framework of balanced news.

A newspaper article (City Press, 13 July 2008, p. 10)\(^6\) reflects partly the changing
news environment in Africa. The newspaper article reports on a special tribute to
South African President, Nelson Mandela, on his forthcoming ninetieth birthday. The
democratically elected female President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and the
first female president in Africa, gives the tribute. According to the article, “[s]he
asserts that a new Africa ‘is unfolding in front of our eyes’, with a third of sub-
Saharan countries moving from either colonisation or dictatorships to democracies in
the past fourteen years.” Elsewhere, Hunter-Gault (2006) suggests that a new era is
dawning in Africa in which “potentially new” and more news that is positive will be
imminent from this context because it is in the furnace of transforming itself. A
“developmental news” journalism reflects these contextual changes because unlike
mainstream western journalism (liberal journalism), it takes into account the
historical conditions that have shaped the developing world context and the current
economic, political, and cultural conditions that are part of its transformation (cf.
Curran, 2000b).

\(^{6.1.5}\) **AFP and news selection practices**

According to the AFP Bureau Chief (2005), the news values that AFP adheres to are
universally applied at all news agencies. He states:

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\(^6\) The City Press newspaper is a South African daily, owned by Naspers.
We [at AFP] have some very basic rules, which are very important for all the agencies. [These] are to be quick, accurate, and balanced. That’s the three main rules. As long as you have these rules, which are respected, you can write on anything. . . . At AFP, you can write whatever you want to write as long as it is supported by these basic rules. (AFP Bureau Chief)

The above statement reflects an assumption, but a valid one, that the profession of journalism and indeed news production derived from Western traditions, mores, and practices. These emerged with Western cultural formation during the industrial process (Hardt & Brennen, 1995). Western style journalism was carried over to other contexts in the colonial histories during trade and trans-national relations (Barratt & Berger, 2007; Bourgault, 1995; Curran & Park, 2000). Missionary societies set up in the colonies were also instrumental in sowing the seeds of Western journalism in non-western contexts (Barratt & Berger, 2007; cf. Curran & Park, 2000; Golding & Elliott, 1979; Nwosu et al., 1995). Western journalism externalised Western values and maintained a liberal approach based mainly on freedom of information from state control.

AFP Bureau Chief (2005) disagrees with the criticism that news agencies tend deliberately to focus on selecting more “bad news” stories than “good news” stories about developing countries. Like the AP respondent, AFP Bureau Chief stated that the AFP news agency attempts to give an even spread of news that includes so-called bad news and good news from wherever they report. According to the AFP Bureau Chief, in Africa, South Africa is often used as an example of “positive” growth in a developing country.

We try our best [AFP reporting Africa]. We are lucky to be in a successful country in Africa, South Africa. So from SA, we write good things on Africa. I think we also have some bad problems in Europe. People are expecting positive news in Africa because they are fed up with wars, famine, and misery, but of course, we have to cover that news. But clients are also expecting good news on Africa. In SA, we can do it. We do a lot of features, for example, on the good news of this country. We try to do the same on the rest of the regions—bad news and good news. Of course, we have to cover the bad side of Africa, but we try also to balance it with some nice things out there. So, we try to write that and to show that Africa is not only about war, famine, and AIDS. (AFP Bureau Chief)
Like the AP and Reuters’ participants, the AFP Bureau Chief (2005) states that the news agencies in most African countries operate as propaganda instruments of governments and that journalists there are merely the active voice of African governments. AFP Bureau Chief believes that in Africa, in general, there is no “journalistic culture” in which journalists and information are free of government interference, but on the other hand, there is the potential that Africa can develop this journalistic culture of independence and freedom from government control in time. According to the AFP Bureau Chief, the presence of global news agencies in Africa is positive because it is contributing to the evolution of such a ‘journalistic culture.’

On one level, these views expressed by global news agencies’ participants reveal the value of freedom from interference or bias placed on news reporting. On another level, these views express a Eurocentric or Western-centric bias, that unless other (developing) media contexts journalistic practices and news sense emulate exactly those of Western (independent) news media, the news that they produce will not be of acceptable quality (cf. Curran & Park, 2000). This leaves little scope for “alternative cultures” of news development such as that of an ‘Africanist news culture’ that might explore developmental news issues and cater specifically for the news interests of and be relevant to, largely, African audiences. The IPS global news agency, for instance, might be seen as a successful experiment in “alternative” journalism because of its specialist focus in “development news” production. The question that arises from this is should the global expansion of the profession of journalism maintain its origins in Western journalism? In other words, because journalism (as a profession) was conceived alongside industrialisation in the West and is a western invention, should it adhere to these original values and practices globally? This question is unpacked along with others in the analysis of the findings in chapter 7, where the recent phenomenon of citizen journalism that emerged in the 1990s is described.
6.1.6 News selection at DPA

According to DPA Bureau Chief (2007), because the global news agencies are reporting on foreign news (i.e., news from different parts of the world) for their media clients, agencies try as best as possible to contextualise for their clients the conditions and situation in the country on which they are reporting. This applies whether they are reporting on South Africa or elsewhere in Africa (DPA Bureau Chief). However, because news reports must be written up in a limited space at news agencies, their writing has to be “very condensed” and written “compactly without losing the essential bigger picture” (DPA Bureau Chief).

This limitation of space is a constraint on the agency journalist, in general, which begs the question of whether it is possible at all not to lose the essential context in news reports or to offer a perspective that does not entirely give the media audience the full picture. Although news agencies write for other media or produce news for other media, it is their news that essentially filters down to the public, to audiences. As discussed in previous chapters, news agencies are the foundational point or channels at which news flows to other retail media and eventually reaches the public.

According to DPA Bureau Chief (2007), DPA does not report on every news story from Africa or any other context because not all the news from Africa is of interest to the overseas clients. The AP respondent expressed the same view that the AP news agency will not use all of the news that it receives and produces about the African context. It is clear from this that the selection process at the global news agencies (i.e., Reuters, AFP, AP, and DPA) is dependent on the interests of their core clients who are not in Africa, but are overseas.

The news that interests these global news agencies’ clients tends to guide how these agencies will select news. They receive a clear brief from the main headquarters on what news their clients want from different contexts based on the judgements of the bureau editors and on the executive decisions of chief editors at the head offices. The
selection process is also based on observations on which news story clients (retail media) tend more often to select and use. Taken together, these various aspects influencing the selection of news at global (and national) news agencies (based on being briefed by editors, to clients’ expectations and choices, to the developed news sense of a journalist) will impact the role that news agencies are likely to play.

The DPA English news wire posted the results of the annual DPA financial statement on 25 June 2008 that reflected the influence that the client markets in Europe have on the role of news agencies (DPA Bureau Chief, 2008). The article offers financial data for the first half of the year 2008 and for the past two years in which declining newspaper sales in Europe has led to losses in subscription fees for the DPA news agency. It also explains how the DPA has devised strategies to compensate for these falling subscriptions through various innovative means. Similarly, DPA has also begun addressing changes in the global news environment and turning financial losses into financial gains, as have the other global news agencies.

For instance, according to the article, the agency has “secured sales in China and South Africa [and] have Asia in [their] sights” (DPA news wire, 2008). Sales in news have increased in the “Arabic-language market” and “new [news] products” have been developed, which include “news video clips” and “an innovative service in German, a daily, 25-story newscast for children” (DPA Bureau Chief, 2008; DPA news wire, 2008). These latest innovations reflect a boost in news outputs at DPA and record a positive financial turnaround from the losses due to dropping newspaper circulations.

This example from an online article reveals two important things: firstly, that the role of news agencies and their very existence has been dominated by and dependent on the main markets that they serve, the retail media. In this, news agencies remain the “wholesalers of news.” This was identified in previous studies to be so (Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, 2000). Secondly, the example from the article
reflects the adaptation tendencies of news agencies to deflect external pressures and constraints that directly influence their operations and existences. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss these adaptation tendencies and constraints at length.

Global news agencies and news agencies in general have clients who are predominantly the retail media (newspapers, television, and radio broadcasters). With the exception of Reuters, Bloomberg, and other financial news agencies or information services whose core clients are financial and business enterprises, all the other global agencies still serve the mainstream retail media as their core clients. Based on this, the clients of news agencies will therefore have a direct influence on the operations at agencies, and it is therefore important for future studies to consider this. A focus on the relationship between client and news agency would provide a keen focus for further study.

One participant describes a “love-hate relationship” between a news agency and its retail media clients who are also the owners or who own shares in the news agency operation (SAPA Editor, 2005). This “love-hate relationship” probably emanates from the fact that a news agency in the broader news environment is an “indirect” competitor with its retail media clients for news, but if the retail media sales in news improves, this will have an indirect and positive impact on the role of news agencies.

Conversely, if the sales of retail media decline, this will have an indirect and a negative impact on news agencies’ operations (as indicated in the case of the DPA agency in the article above). This relationship would make interesting further investigation. However, since the 1990s, with heightened competition from other non-media and independent news sources that compete and rival with news agencies to produce and distribute information, the traditional wholesaler role of news agencies is undergoing changes.
6.1.7 IPS: selection influenced by its development focus

The IPS global news service is recognised as an “alternative” news provider (Giffard, 1998). Like all the other news agencies, news selection at IPS is based on their profile, who they are, and for whom they are writing news (i.e., their main clientele) (see chapter 4 on the formation of and some history on IPS as an alternative news provider). The IPS news focus is on issues of development, broadly defined, and development in both Third and First World nations (IPS Regional Director, 2006). The main categories of their development-focused news include human interest and feature stories. Unlike the global, national, and continental news agencies, IPS does not provide “spot-news”—that is, unexpected news about events happening from day to day, such as traffic accidents. The IPS news focus is on in-depth and investigative news stories that fulfil their “mission statement” (IPS Annual Report, 2004).

Their main concern, which is articulated in the IPS mission statement, is to build the capacity of journalists and journalism in developing or Third World countries, mainly in Africa, Asia, and South America (IPS Regional Director, 2006). This means that together with reporting on news events of a development nature, IPS seeks to train local journalists in the profession to adhere to the practices of journalism as they are applied in western democracies. This includes reporting independently of government control or other controlling influences, investigative reporting, and “fourth estate” journalism. The values of accuracy and reliability are also adhered to as part of their training. According to IPS Regional Director, IPS has bureaus in developed contexts as well in which they fulfil the same role as in developing contexts as content-providers and trainers of local journalists.

Like all the other participants, IPS Regional Director (2006) believes that African news agencies are the voice of their governments simply because the governments own them. However, IPS Regional Director does not believe that all of the news that is reported by African news agencies is “necessarily untrue.” Furthermore, in her opinion, not all of the news that is reported from western global news agencies is free
of bias either, because these agencies will select news from Africa based on what “they think” should be reported on to their overseas clients (IPS Regional Director).

According to IPS Regional Director (2006), news reports on Africa should be more balanced in that there should be a “mixture of good and bad news.” In her opinion, the Western news agencies do not always report in a “balanced” way:

It’s a mixture. It’s not always bad, but it’s largely bad. What people don’t [see as] positive things are things that are new to them, because I don’t know where we journalists got this thing from that we always want to hear the disaster news. We’re also just used to getting this [news]. It’s true; in our communities, if positive things happen, why don’t we want to report it? We are even uncomfortable about reporting about that because we think it should always be negative, and it’s something that’s always been there. News tends to be more exciting when it’s negative. [For instance,] we don’t like to see Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt getting married, but when they are breaking up . . . it’s that kind of human nature. (IPS Regional Director)

When it comes to the issue of African news agencies being the voice of their governments, this is true, because the governments own these news agencies, but not all of what they report and select is necessarily untrue. In that regard, then, as far as bias in reporting and news selection is concerned, the global news agencies are also not exempt from biased selection of news that reflects what they think should be reflected about Africa (IPS Regional Director, 2006). In her opinion, covering news about Africa is not always balanced, since the more positive news stories tend to go unreported.

So it’s not so simple as how we [the media] want to look at things . . . So one knows all these things, and I think we need to challenge that. . . . If you’re doing it [balanced reporting] in a story of three hundred words, it’s a big challenge. It’s not easy to do that. You can also not deny the fact that it’s important that, you know, they [global agencies] have [their own] reporters in Africa. People will always argue that it is important that . . . they go there and see for themselves, because they cannot trust that what I am going to tell them [as an African reporter] is true. So there is that mistrust. . . . Maybe you will gain their trust. . . . You have quite a lot of correspondents, South African correspondents, Ugandan correspondents, you know, your western media. They still [decide] whom they train and [whom] they can trust. But I think things like that should not be taken only at face value. I think we need to ask more engaging questions about it: Why is it that you think that? That Africans are inherently incapable of telling the truth? And so on. (IPS Regional Director)
The views expressed by the IPS Regional Director (2006) above represent the issue of the unavoidable encroachment of “subjectivities” in the news selection process (see also Golding & Elliott, 1979). Despite this, the belief expressed by the majority of the participants is that by developing a keen “news sense” and adhering to the “news values” of accuracy, reliability, and balance, individual journalists (and editors) restrain themselves from allowing their own subjective biases to hamper the news selection process. Subjectivity, however, can never be ruled out in news selection, and this practice therefore (of selecting news) will always involve questions of bias (Bennett, 2003, pp. 164-172; Berkowitz, 1997; cf. Golding & Elliott).

Bias in news selection does not necessarily mean that the news is not true, but it does give meaning to putting a “spin” on news or, in other words, presenting a particular point of view and a position more often than other points of view and positions in the news. Media critics Sreberny and Stevenson (1997) especially criticise Western news organisations for putting a spin on the news by over-reporting on Western leaders and their activities and only presenting the leaders in other social contexts when crises or civil unrest arise in contexts. Further engaging research is suggested by the IPS participant in observing and comparing the balance of news selection in the content of the local and global news agencies. This suggestion makes for future and further studies and research (see also Rantanen, 2004).

6.2 Revising debates on imbalances in global news flows

The debates on imbalances in news flows are relevant and important to investigating news values in the selection and production of news. News values are described in earlier sections as the defining characteristics that make an event newsworthy and that render it suitable for news production (Berkowitz, 1997; cf. Golding & Elliott, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). News values such as “timeliness” (of an event), “unusualness,” “reliability” (of the source of the information), “dramatic” nature (of an event), and so on are identified in the selection process of news (Golding & Elliott, 1979; Marris & Thornham, 1996). Three main issues concerning “imbalances” are the
foci in this section. Firstly, it re-focuses on the monopolisation debate of global news flows. Secondly, it focuses on the bias or over-representation of negative and “bad news” stories from Africa. Lastly, it examines the loss of a critical and “hard” focus in news stories such that critics speak of the “infotainment” of news (Bennett, 2003, pp. 100-104; Thussu, 1998, pp. 63-79).

News agencies at the global level have networking bureaus and relationships with locally based national news agencies worldwide. Their core media and non-media subscribers assist in funding their operations. National and continental news agencies also share in global news flows, but as compliant with global agencies, in a structure that already “profits” or advantages the latter. National news agencies have mainly locally based “clients” and subscribers of their news, even though they exchange the same news with global agencies. National and continental agencies in the global flow of news and information are as important as the global news agencies in defining exchange relationships in a changing media environment.

The relationships between global agencies, national agencies, and, to a lesser extent, the continental news agency reflect in some way the patterns and relationships in society, between nations, classes, and wherever power is pervasive in social relations. This is an important point in the discussion and analysis below. The argument proposed throughout the study is that, like world politics (and power relations), news agencies and news organisations are not static constructs, frozen in time and space. Individuals at agencies make choices on a daily basis that sustain the operations at news agencies; agencies adapt to changes over time, and they are aided in their role by technological developments and advances. The sections below discuss the imbalances contained in previous studies in relation to participants’ inputs.

6.2.1 SAPA on imbalances in global news flows

According to SAPA Editor (2005), the dominance of the global news agencies in their relationship with smaller national news agencies has been the norm throughout
the history of these relationships. He is referring to the pattern of news exchange amongst global and national agencies. On the other hand, as SAPA Editor points out, for “pragmatic reasons,” the nature of that relationship between SAPA and the global news agencies is better described in quantified terms than as simply a relationship of domination of global agencies of national news agencies. Defining the relationship in quantified terms is best because news reports can be counted as individual items. Words in news reports can be counted within that exchange agreement and hence the relationships may be quantified. He stated:

It makes sense. They, AP or AFP, supply us with (it can be) six or seven hundred stories a day, whereas our domestic produce a straight numeric count of stories . . . maybe two hundred a day, [or] two to three hundred. . . . So that is how the valuation of the product comes about, because it’s a longstanding relationship once those markets have been set. Normally, there’s an annual negotiation. We’ll take it on CPI [cost per item/calculated price index], inflation rates . . . in the United States, [and in SA] Rands. So you work it out like that, and that is the exchange of news.

According to SAPA Editor (2005), this arrangement works because if SAPA had to budget within their organisation to send their reporters to cover news overseas in Baghdad, for instance, it would be costlier. The fact that there are experienced reporters from around the world who are covering events outside of the reach of SAPA means that SAPA can get that news in an exchange arrangement with the global news agencies.

Furthermore, according to SAPA Editor (2005), local SA reporters may not know what to report on in a situation outside of the context of SA unless they receive “special training” on how to cover international issues. In the end, it is more cost effective for SAPA to buy international news from the global news agencies than attempt to obtain this news itself. In relation to this, international news is not the main news that SAPA covers for their clients in SA. The brief that SAPA has from its members who are the owners of SAPA is to focus on producing local South African news, and this speciality has become the SAPA niche.
From the above explanations, the relationship of news exchange, when explained in numerical terms rather than theoretically, presents a case against the monopolisation of news by the global news agencies. The relationship calculated on a numeric exchange of news means that the global agencies provide more news items to national news agencies than national agencies provide in return to the global news agencies. On the other hand, national news agencies have limited outreach and therefore a limited influence on the foreign news that they receive from global news agencies. Therefore, while there are numeric “economies of scale” in determining the exchange relationship, the issue of power and influence (due to the status and operational capacity at news agencies) renders the relationship unequal. In SA, the recent expansion of the news operations at SABC as well as the privately-owned E-TV news channel provide interesting case studies for further research on how developing nations’ broadcasting media can enter the realm of news flow once dominated by global media players. This expansion of news service by media from a national context has been made possible through satellite and digital technologies as well as through improved staffing and resources. SABC and E-TV news may now be considered “international” in their outreach.

From the above two SA examples and the explanations offered by SAPA Editor (2005), the argument supporting a “straight monopoly” of news markets is questionable. The argument becomes difficult to maintain within current changes in the news environment. Particularly in the present century in which relationships between news agencies continue to be impacted upon by conditions external to their operations, the monopolisation argument becomes arbitrary unless taken up in relation to some specific or contingent factor(s) such as practices that inhibit national news agencies from “going global.” These are not clearly outlined in the literature.

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7 E-TV television and the SABC, extended their news operations to offer a twenty-four hour, seven days a week, satellite news channel broadcast across Africa. However, due to investigations of financial mismanagement at the SABC, some of its bureaus were closed in 2009. E-TV continues to broadcast its satellite news channel in Africa.
As discussed in the previous chapters, global news flows are possible because the global news agencies maintain relations of exchange with national news agencies all over the world despite (global agencies) also having their own bureaus located in different regions of the world. Global bureaus, however, are fed information largely from the domestic news media in these regions. As mentioned in chapter 4, local media are largely used as “tip-offs” of news about the domestic context for the global news bureaus. Conditions of monopolisation would not allow this “symbiotic” exchange of information.

There was also much more leverage in the late 20th century (than in previous decades) for national and smaller news agencies to obtain news from sources other than the global news agencies, and this has offset the argument for monopolisation. National news agencies can, for instance, forge direct exchange relations amongst themselves as proposed in an earlier study by Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992).8 These cross-national exchanges do face several challenges, however, and include a lack of technological capacity in poorer regions; the need for translation services of news reports, which proves costly; and, more importantly, translations that often result in the loss of the original message (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Boyd-Barrett & Thussu).

However, such challenges of building capacity (of resources, technology, and human experience) do not rule out the possibility for successful news exchange across

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8 This (1992) study was undertaken in the light of findings from the MacBride Report (1980). However, Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992) have also pointed out the difficulties with exchanges across national news agencies in the developing world especially. The costs of translations of news from different linguistic contexts, the lack of sufficient technologies and training in some of the contexts and the unequal quality and quantities of news in these arrangements prove difficult to maintain such a cross-national arrangement as evidenced in the attempts at Regional level by the Pan African News Agency in Africa, and the Organisation of Asia Pacific News Agency in the Asian and Pacific region.
national contexts of developing nations. These, for instance, are successful in Europe and across diverse European nations (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2000; Rantanen, 2004). Clearly, the socio-economic and political differences between Europe and most developing nations, including those in Africa, suggest that this has much to do with the success of cross-national news exchanges (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2005). In Africa, the Chinese Xinhua news agency is generating a strong presence in news markets in Africa with the aim of developing news exchange arrangements with African and South African news organisations, according to SAPA Editor (2005).

Another “source” of news that is increasingly making news access more viable is the digital online media, or the Internet. First highlighted in chapter 4, the growing phenomenon of “blogging sites” is seen by several of the participants as significant. In a recent newspaper article in The Star (2008, p. 15), for example, blogging is said to be “a new way to beat censorship.” The article describes the use of blogging sites on the Internet to get information out to audiences outside of Zimbabwe. Blogs have become a means to bypass the strict state and censorship laws and to communicate the internal conditions of political violence with the outside world.9 In the article, the following is stated:

Increasingly, Zimbabweans are going online and using cell phone (sic) text messages to share stories of life and death in a country where independent traditional media have been all but silenced and from which reporters from most international media have been barred. (2008, p. 15)

Third, national agencies can send their own reporters to cover international news. The first and third options are limited, however, by the mere fact that the media landscape in Africa and many developing nations is not developed or comparable with that of the global and developed media. As a result, the global-local arrangements between

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9 During apartheid in South Africa, the alternative and so-called underground media were the ‘conventional’ means for conveying images and content about apartheid human violations to the rest of the world. Online technology did not exist as it does in its current state in the country. The actions and interventions by conventional means saw the instituting of economic and political sanctions against the apartheid state by the international community. See and compare Tomaselli & Louw (1991), and Hunter-Gault (2006).
domestic and global news agencies that have existed for decades have worked out cheaper for national news agencies and organisations in the long run. Yet, as the world becomes more globalised, it can be argued that the options given above are not as inaccessible today as they might have been ten years ago.

The above arguments do not mean that a monopoly of the news markets by the global news agencies did not exist or never existed. Monopolies existed also in the sense that the global news agencies have had a head start over the development of news agencies in national contexts. Over the years, global agencies have been able to build a skilled labour force and accrue resources that have enabled them to ‘lead the pack’ in terms of defining the nature of the profession of journalism and in terms of establishing and preserving news values (involved in the selection and production processes), for example. It took the global news agencies over a century to achieve their current global status (Read, 1999), and they still rely largely on national or domestic news producers for news about these contexts. This is not reflected as clearly in the previous literature as it has been established from participants in this study.

Governments, whose post-colonial media contexts have been more lenient in the regulation of information flows have, until recently, been in a position to only imitate the trends and precedents that global and western news agencies have set (cf. Bourgault, 1995; Golding & Elliott, 1979; Karikari, 2007). In contexts such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, the presence of an independent news media offers the potential for future developments in advancing their media systems beyond their own borders (Barratt & Berger, 2007; Faringer, 1991; Karikari, 2007; Kupe, 2007).

In political terms, the argument would hold that it was only after independence from colonial rule that many of the national news agencies were founded in Africa (Karikari, 2007). News agencies existed in the colonies before independence, but
these were controlled by the then governing colonial authority or the global news agencies themselves. The example of the Reuters’ South African bureau is one such case before the setting up of SAPA (Read, 1999). In the rest of Africa, the French news agency AFP has had a historical reason for their presence on the African continent, part of which is to preserve the French culture and language there (see chapter 5; see also Barratt & Berger, 2007).

Boyd-Barrett and Thussu (1992) previously addressed the above-mentioned point concerning the potential for smaller agencies to obtain alternative news sources by forming relationships amongst themselves rather than using the global news agencies as sources. This, however, has since their study, not materialised. What was lacking in their study, however, is discussion of the political and historical contexts within which the development and maintenance of the relationships between the “nationally based news agencies” could be considered. The political and historical context of SAPA during apartheid meant that the domestic news agency was isolated, and this had an impact on the loss of relations with other African news agencies. This only occurred in the 1990s, when SAPA had exposure outside South Africa to the other African news agencies for the first time (SAPA Editor, 2005).

SAPA was contained in an isolated state in ’89, prior to 1990. We had no means of making contact with other African news agencies or news distributors and any news agencies. [Not even with] PANA that was out there when the rest of Africa had no means of making contact with us, simply because the political barriers were there, the lack of knowledge and understanding of each other . . . but PANA probably didn’t know anything about SAPA, and, well, [SAPA] didn’t know anything about PANA until 1990, 1991. I met the PANA London rep at the Foreign Correspondents Association. . . . A whole lot of barriers weren’t there, and we could, in exactly the same way, portray link ups, all sorts of things, and political link ups, and so on. (SAPA Editor)

According to SAPA Editor (2005), in the early 1990s, there was an initiative to create a Southern African News Agency Pool (SANAP). There was some financial assistance from UNESCO and from the Nordic German states. The problem that emanated was that, apart from SAPA, the other member news agencies were all government-owned. There was “a fundamental clash of ideologies” with regard to
finding a common news culture and agreeing on the terms of a news exchange agreement (SAPA Editor). Further attempts were made to get the SADC news agency pool running with the involvement of the IPS as the overseeing body. The outcome in the final attempts was that SAPA was not present, and instead, the South African Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) department, a government information department, attended. From the outcome at the meeting, “it was formally decided that SAPA would be excluded from this project because they were not a government [news] agency” (SAPA Editor).

Another initiative of developing nations, set up between countries in the Asia-Pacific region (OANA), experienced similar problems to the SANAP initiative. One of the main problems of OANA is in getting their members to contribute ‘fairly’ equal quantities in exchanging news (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998). Some members reportedly contribute more news stories than other members do. This creates an imbalance in terms of the use of resources and other costs involved in producing news. There is also the added issue of translations, as some of the member contributors in Asia and in the Pacific region contribute in their dominant language or vernacular (United News of India Deputy-Editor, 2004).

In the opinion of SAPA Editor (2005), the failure of such initiatives to get off the ground or to persist over time would lie in the “ideological determination” of deciding, “there is a need for something [a news agency]” and then, in a sense, “blindly creating such an organisation within that ideological mould.” In his opinion, this strategy is the worst way in which to start a collaborative relationship. He reasons that, ultimately, it is the politicians (or the owners of state media) who decide the need for such initiatives and then their attention is diverted elsewhere with the resultant neglect of the media project. There is, according to SAPA Editor, also a fundamental clash in terms of media freedom and independence versus government-controlled media.
The implication of a bi-dependency (cf. Rantanen, 2004) relationship calls into question another of the identified “imbalances” in the literature. Global agencies are said to over-present news on conflicts, coups, wars, and disaster when this is about the developing social contexts. However, these news items are in large part reported in the local contexts by local journalists covering news in their contexts. The global news agencies then merely select news that is already produced and provided over the news wires from domestic media.

Global agencies, on the other hand, choose to focus their attention and resources mainly on that “disaster news” because this is news that sells. Negative news reporting, as the IPS participant responded (see above), has conditioned both journalists (news producers) and, to an extent, audiences in how to define news and the kind of news to expect (cf. Crigler, 1999). Yet, there is a strong case for the choices at global news agencies to focus more often on negative reporting when this news is from and on developing world nations.

Indirectly, by adhering to certain (western-derived) news values, the local media also produce news of a specific kind—news that is timely, unusual, entertaining, unexpected, dramatic, and so on. As pointed out by SAPA Editor (2005), SAPA provides a wide spread of news (good and bad, local and national), and the global news agencies pick one or two stories per day from this spread of a few hundred news stories (on crime, accidents, sports, politics, and general news).

According to SAPA Editor (2005) and the IPS participant (IPS Regional Director, 2006), there is a real felt need in Africa amongst African media groups that Africa should report itself. The perceived manner in which global news agencies report Africa tends to present Africa as overwhelmingly a place of “disaster news.”

There are flaws in the way that the Western media report Africa, I do believe, and I’m not trying to be soppy here. They concentrate on what sells, what their editors like. There’s a stereotype of Africa. There is a need for other African news . . . an African type of news, as I
am assuming there is a need for an Asian type of news and a South American type of news, which has empathy or an understanding of what’s going [on] down in those countries or in those zones. I mean, the South African media has learned a lot about reporting in, call it, in a more African way. If you look at the death of Parks Mankahlana the president’s spokesperson], and how the so-called ‘white media approach’ [ignored] the individual privacy of the recently departed, we would say that he died of AIDS. The black journalists would say, “You can’t do that; it’s disrespectful. You can’t talk about the dead like that even if he did die of AIDS. . . .” There was a heavy debate. . . . [T]here was this huge understanding within the media in South Africa of the intricacies and the sensitivities of people. . . . Now that is, in effect, a kind of African perspective of the sensitivities involved [in reporting]. (SAPA Editor)

While it is recognised by all of the participants that there is a need for developing nations to produce their own independent (and independently funded) news agencies, the problems outweigh the potential. There is firstly a lack of resources, both human and financial, and there is consistent government and political interference in information, especially in the African context (Karikari, 2007). Problems also stem from the different “sense” of what news is and what its purpose should be. There is also the argument of differences in political and historical experiences in the development of news agencies in Africa compared with their development in Western Europe and North America (Barratt & Berger, 2007; Karikari, 2007).

In Africa, the media in general “do not have enough critical momentum of [their] own” (SAPA Editor, 2005). This is explained as the concern that there are too few independent (privately owned) newspapers in African countries and that it is difficult to attract media customers in Africa (SAPA Editor). The underlying related and sociological issue might be the deficiencies in literacy levels within developing countries, as well as other socio-economic and development concerns that take preference over funding media-type initiatives. For instance, if there are no consumer markets for media products and for news, specifically, as is the case in many developing nations, then big business, for instance, would not be attracted to starting out an independent newspaper or funding media initiatives.
In effect, those [African] newspapers are all state-owned as well. There is no momentum for a commercial viability for a news agency [no private financing of a news agency]. So there’s got to be money coming from the government. I mean, it would be nice not to have [that]. It would be nice to have a sanctified commercial stream [of] money coming in, but a lot of people are beginning to say, “Okay, it’s accepted as an unpleasant reality, but let’s try to keep it as far at a distance as we can by creating a government statutory framework that guarantees the independence of that media operation.” (SAPA Editor)

So the argument is steadfastly held that there should be no government interference in media organisations and in their operations because governments are swayed by ideologies and political agendas and this acts negatively against the news values of reliability, accuracy, and impartiality. That is a lesson for African media organisations to free themselves of these kinds of interferences in the production and selection of news from political contamination. A second suggestion has been that if governments are providing funding for the operations of news organisations, as is the case with most African news agencies, then some kind of statutory framework should be written up that guarantees the independence of that media organisation, for instance, when it is “in the public interest.”

A successful example of a news organisation that has maintained a strong independence despite partial government subsidy (which, since the early 1990s no longer applies) and its public funding is the BBC (see Curran and Leys 2000). AFP Bureau Chief (2005) is also adamant that although it receives partial funding from the French government, the AFP news agency maintains an independence from government interference. According to AFP Bureau Chief, the AFP agency is generating more of its own income and relying less on the French government’s subsidizing. AFP relies more on subscription fees and income from its news

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10 See the article by Kwame Karikari (2007) which supports this point but offers an explanation based on the colonial history of African newspapers (outside of South Africa and to some extent, Nigeria as countries with examples of independent newspaper ownership).

11 In South Africa in June 2008, a ‘protection of information bill’ is been drawn up to protect information considered as vital to ‘national security’. However, various media, academic and professional groups are contesting the bill based on the need for public knowledge of certain kinds of information that is in the public interest, as well as the need to foster freedom of information.
operations around the world, and it therefore is less dependent on government funding than it may have been in past years (AFP Bureau Chief).

SAPA Editor suggests the following:

So what we need is a . . . government giving a lot of money every year to its national news agency, which has a very clearly defined article of association, which is neutral, etcetera, that the management of that news agency is selected by a public committee of experts of civil society, of government donors, whatever, that it is not beholden to the government of the day and that, in the broader interests of that country, reports the basic platform of news, the he-said, she-said [news]. [This] then provides the beginnings for the rest of the media to tap into. (2005)

While this suggestion is put forward, it still represents an ideal situation that could prevail in African news agency operations. Another related obstacle to achieving this is the fact that there is not enough “commercial viability” for African news agencies, but this is changing very gradually (SAPA Editor, 2005). For example, “[Would] a country like Sudan ever [be able] to have a truly viable independent news agency like the Reuters news agency?” SAPA Editor commented. The situation, it is said, is just not there for it, mainly because of a lack of financing and because of the culture of political control of the news media by government officials and politicians (SAPA Editor). However, the issue of developing an African market to receive African news is bigger than portrayed in this comment. In Africa, socio-economic obstacles—which then feed into development issues such as a lack of infrastructure, a lack of education and high illiteracy levels, ethnic and gender differences, and other social problems—compound the development of a versatile and flourishing media industry in Africa.

According to SAPA Editor (2005), “Afro-pessimism” around parts of the world “that count,” such as America and in Europe, but increasingly in the Asian continent as well, reflects the fact that there is a lack of a free media on the African continent. “A free media is seen as a sign of a healthier society,” in other words, a healthy democracy (SAPA Editor). He also believes that the manner in which one fosters a
free media is to have a “basic platform” of news in place with news agencies providing credible news with credible sources of information. SAPA Editor was responding to the question of the role of African politics on the continent.

6.2.2 Reuters on imbalances in global news flows

According to Reuters Bureau Chief, news and information dissemination has become so fragmented that one can no longer speak of a monopoly by any global news agency over news. The access that national and domestic news agencies have to a diversity of sources, including, especially, the Internet, has allowed them greater freedom of choice, more information, and accessibility to participate in news flows (Reuters Bureau Chief, 2006). National news agencies, because of their exchange relationships with global news agencies, have a global reach that they could not have anticipated having in previous centuries (Reuters Bureau Chief). In many African nations, however, financing an exchange relationship with global news agencies (which really is about purchasing foreign news from global news agencies), is a problem given the low socio-economic development and a general lack of an African market for news.

Reuters Bureau Chief nevertheless offers the following explanation by way of an example:

Think about how much impact a news item put on a website run by insurgents in Iraq rocks the world. When insurgents around the world kidnapped a foreigner, usually the first time we know about that is when they put it on their website. . . . When Osama bin Laden wants to get a message across, he records it on a tape, and he gives it to Al Jazeera, and they broadcast it. So, the global news structure has completely turned on its head now. You cannot afford even newcomers like Al Jazeera who have a much narrower focus [niche] than [Reuters]. So you are forced now to merely patrol the news spectrum, the news strata-sphere, so to speak. You have to have your antennae continually widely searching because there are so many little sources of news, really unconventional sources. (2006)

 Reuters Bureau Chief (2006) admits that the Reuters news agency does have an unfair advantage over all other news agencies with regard to their human and technical resources. For instance, the following example was given that if a massive earthquake
occurs in a remote part of Pakistan, the Reuters news agency “can fly people in there
to cover the news event quicker than any of the small news agencies can and could
probably even get there before the Pakistani news agency could” (Reuters’ Bureau
Chief). In this sense, the Reuters agency enjoys a dominant position that means
having access and the means to outstrip most other news agencies, local and global,
in acquiring and distributing news.

According to Reuters’ Bureau Chief (2006), Reuters takes pride in its ability as a
global news agency to be reliable to its clients and to bring them the news from all
over the world because Reuters has the resources to do so. This success is attributed
to Reuters investing in news and in bringing news to its clients by making sure they
adhere to accuracy, impartiality, and timeliness (Reuters’ Bureau Chief).

He admits that news is powerful in the sense that it can perform a function of altering
the make-up of what is going on in a nation, depending on how journalists report that
nation. That is why there has to be “responsible report[ing] in order not to give an
unfair image of a country that one is reporting on” (Reuters’ Bureau Chief, 2006).
There has to be no ulterior motive; for instance, Reuters’ Bureau Chief states that,
“we have no axe to grind against any country that [we] report on. All we want to do is
to serve the interests of our clients who in fact include the countries on which we
report.”

In South Africa, one of Reuters’ key clients is the South African Reserve Bank. In
this case, Reuters cannot afford to report news that is detrimental to the image of
South Africa by giving an unfair depiction of that context, according to Reuters’
Bureau Chief (2006). On the other hand, according to the Bureau Chief, being
“objective” means that Reuters’ news also “cannot hide what is going on in South
Africa that is not right.” According to him, news has to be “balanced, accurate, and
objective” by giving all sides. In that sense then, the Reuters agency is said to have no
“interests” that it wants to serve, which is why it is “independent of government and any corporate institutional interests,” according to Reuters’ Bureau Chief.

6.2.3 Associated Press on imbalances in global news flows

AP Bureau Chief (2006) is of the opinion that there must be different perceptions of what news is and for what it is used. Framing of news, he stated, must be taken in the context of that particular news organisation. To illustrate this, he offers the following scenario:

[If you’re the Bureau Chief of [an agency in] Switzerland, you are not going to do any developmental stories. How much more developed can they be? To a degree, what determines what is covered is partly where you are and what’s going on. I mean, there are development activities here in Africa. For example, billions and billions of dollars are being funnelled into those activities. That makes them interesting, that makes the news, [and] that makes people want to know how that money is spent or what’s been spent, what’s been done, what’s been achieved. . . . You don’t have the same questions about the West or about the Australians or the Luxemburgens or whoever. I mean, you wouldn’t. What would make news here wouldn’t be the same somewhere else . . . and what’s news on Tuesday might not be news on Wednesday. (AP Bureau Chief)

To argue the point, then, in Africa, there is no “African news focus” as such, because the news that is generated in Africa is either dominated by centralised governments or predominantly news that is used from Western news agencies. An African focus on developmental issues is lacking. The SAPA (2005) and IPS (2006) participants were of this opinion, that Africa should be producing its own “brand” of news, in other words, not the news that is regurgitated from Western media and government influence. Hence, an alternative news focus in Africa has the potential to be explored. The SAPA participant expressed the view that starting with regular and general news about the continent rather than attempting to compete with the larger global media would be the most practical position for African news media. Then, once the basics—including independent, accurate, and reliable reporting—are established, African media can extend their news networks.
AP Bureau Chief (2006) felt that it is incorrect to use the term “monopolisation of news flows” to describe the presence (and role) of global news agencies in developing continents. According to him, this does not accurately describe the relationships between the global news agencies and the local, national news agencies. He used the following analogy: if someone wants to start a car business from scratch, the person is going to have to compete with other already-established car dealerships like Mercedes Benz, for instance. In his analogy, Mercedes is not doing anything “illegal” that prevents smaller car businesses from operating, but because Mercedes is larger and has been fully entrenched and established, smaller car businesses are going to experience problems competing with them.

The point, however, is not that smaller agencies want to compete with the larger already-established news agencies, but that they are unable to even get off the ground because the news environment is already too competitive. Hence, while there are problems in identifying the global news agencies as monopolistic, the argument of monopolisation cannot altogether be ruled out. What needs to be made clearer, as this study attempts to do, is the fact that monopolisation exists under different forms because the context of global news has been and is changing.

Nevertheless, AP Bureau Chief (2006) offers possible explanations for why smaller, non-global news agencies have difficulties “competing” with the larger ones. The reasons are complex. There could be a lack of financial backing to sustain them, the wrong personnel might cause the business operations to fail, and there may even be a lack of viable news markets to sustain them (AP Bureau Chief).

So if you start up a regional news agency and you have got to go to the expense of putting in reporters all over the continent, how are you going to finance that? Who’s going to pay for it? . . . I mean, our operations in Africa, for example, wouldn’t make any money. If we had to pay for our African reporters, our African bureaus, our African operations strictly out of the money we make from Africa, we would lose money . . . But Germany wants Africa news too, and Asia wants Africa news, and South America wants some Africa news, so therefore some of the money they pay [for news about Africa] comes back to help [finance] us. (AP Bureau Chief)
In his opinion, the global Western news agencies do not need to buy or exchange news with a continental or regional news agency because global agencies have their own operations on various continents and cover various sub-regions (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). Regional (or continental) news agencies, such as PANA in Africa, cannot compete with the likes of the global news agencies, which have developed networked operations over a longer period. Financing an operation such as PANA is costly, and it is a fact that the news markets in Africa are only beginning to grow and unevenly at that. Furthermore, there tends to be elite markets of privileged groups of people who read newspapers or listen to and watch news broadcasts.

Unlike Reuters, AFP, and the previous Wolff news agencies that operated as a cartel in the late 18th and into the 19th century, AP operations expanded within its own American news market. This means that whereas the former three had close ties with their imperialist states of Britain, France, and Germany in colonialist history (Read 1999), AP did not develop under the same circumstances and conditions. AP Bureau Chief (2006) stated that the perception that AP was ever part of this 18th century cartel is invalid. “AP was never a part of any cartel” (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). According to AP Bureau Chief (2006), historically, Reuters was a news organisation that expanded its operations in Europe providing news for financial institutions, banks, brokerage firms, and companies, especially during the war years. When these financial institutions needed information on risky investments given the unstable socio-political and economic conditions during war, Reuters provided this (AP Bureau Chief, 2006).12

AP began its operations “during the war between the USA and Mexico in the 1840s” (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). A group of US newspapers that wanted to cover that war could not because of the expense in getting their reporters to follow the war and other costs. The idea of a news cooperative grew from this experience where some

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12 See Ferguson (2000) for a case study and biography on the development of the Rothschild’s empire and the role of Reuters in this.
newspapers were not being able to cover the USA and Mexico war (AP Bureau Chief). AP began as an association of American newspapers, run as a cooperative, and it remains that to this day (AP Bureau Chief).

The idea of a cooperative is that newspapers will send out their reporters to cover news events and they will share these reported news events with other members of their association (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). The history of the Associated Press therefore was not part of the cartel arrangement (Read 1999), and it never has been, according to AP Bureau Chief. The AP grew from that association of American newspapers, and once they had decided to consolidate their activities, all member American newspapers could receive coverage from distant parts of the country that they would otherwise not be able to cover themselves (AP Bureau Chief).

In that sense, the AP news agency began differently from the other global news agencies. It is independent of government, and it has never been a part of any global organisation (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). The global success of the Associated Press is attributed to many years of steady growth of its operations (AP Bureau Chief). Once it had established itself domestically in the USA, it expanded operations to different parts of Europe and then to other developing continents. The AP is almost 160 years old (AP Bureau Chief).

According to the AP Bureau Chief, the end of the Cold War “changed the political map of the world.” He states the following:

It changed the political structure of the world, and in that sense, it changed [how things are done] because it’s changed [the] news. It’s not changed our outlooks so much as it has changed, for example, the Non-Aligned Movement [NAM]. That [NAM] isn’t as important now as it was when there were two countries [USA and USSR] to be aligned with. . . . South Africa is a member of it [NAM]. The non-aligned movement still exists, [but] now, instead of being Cold War-related, in that you’re either aligned with Moscow or you’re aligned with Washington or you’re not aligned with anybody, now it means you’re either a developed country or you’re an undeveloped country because the non-aligned movement is really [a membership of] undeveloped countries now. (2006)
The Cold War period, in terms of news flows, reflected the ideological positioning of world nations. According to AP Bureau Chief (2006), during that time, “governments were always trying to put an ideological spin on things” and it was up to the reporter as part of his or her job not to be influenced by that. He maintains that public opinion is not that easily misled by the media unless news stories are repeated “over and over” and various news media present the same story. The so-called terrorist attacks of “11 September 2001” on the USA are a case in point.13

In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky (2002) offer various case studies on how the mainstream media in the United States filter information so that the news reflects a particular spin. They conduct an in-depth analysis of how the US government, at the time of the Vietnam War, indirectly manipulated the media so that news reports reflected an “unreality” to the US audiences. The media, they argue, are able to reflect a certain ideological position in how they present information, despite giving factual information (cf. Thussu & Freedman, 2003). Furthermore, Herman and Chomsky (2002) establish a detailed and convincing argument in their book on how the news is constructed to condition public thinking, especially about political events.

According to the AP Bureau Chief (2006), the end of the Cold War changed the way in which the world sees itself in the sense that nations that were previously aligned with the capitalist West or the USSR could no longer adopt either of the two ideological positions. The Cold War ending also changed the outlook of journalists (especially political journalists) and the way in which they had to report news about the world under global conditions that differed from those during the Cold War. During the Second World War, for example, the British allies used media propaganda

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13 According to Jansen (2002), a comparison of two online newspapers in Chicago, USA and in South Africa reveals that the social context in which an event is reported will take precedence over the similarities of the media formats and therefore that news media present information based largely on who their target markets are. In this case study, the target markets are the American and South African newspaper readers, respectively.
to counteract the propaganda of the German media (Gaddis, 2005; also cf. Thussu & Freedman, 2003). Beyond the Cold War years, one had “a media trying to figure out how the world was going to shape out, [and] what the new alignments were going to be, who [was] going to be aligned with whom” (AP Bureau Chief).

According to the AP Bureau Chief (2006), the end of the Cold War ended the polarisation in global politics. What has replaced it, in a sense, is the divide between very rich countries and very poor countries. He states the following:

But one of the ways [the world is] shaping out now, I think, [is that] there are differences in some parts, but the main part is the haves and the have-nots. When there are no real strong ideological differences, in the Cold War sense, what you have is more of a [developed and undeveloped contrast]. (2006)

The above comment is very significant because part of the argument about imbalances in news flows in the world has to do with how the Western media are representing and presenting the non-Western developing nations as underdeveloped places of conflicts, civil wars, genocides, and poverty. While this is an accurate representation of developing contexts, particularly in Africa, the overwhelming negative portrayal arguably leads to generalizing about all developing social contexts, whereas this is not the case (Curran & Park, 2000). Furthermore, Hunter-Gault (2006) believes that there are far more positive news events taking place in Africa that should be reported on. The Western media, however, focus rather on negative news events. Weaver (2005) believes that this, negative events and “bad news,” is really what “news” is about. According to Weaver, nothing “good” or positive is really “news.”

In the final instance, news reporting operations at agencies has diversified (meaning their business sense) because of, for example, online (Internet-based) information. The ways in which news is televised, as another example, is also more expanded with the likes of several competing news channels (AP Bureau Chief, 2006). Websites have become both clients of news (i.e., receiving news from various media and non-
media sources) as well as sources of news (i.e., by providing Internet-based information). Newspapers, especially, have had to “come onboard” with this latest technology to keep from losing their audiences and to attract newer news markets, those that are computer-literate.

“Blogs” have become an important part of this diversification of news (AP Bureau Chief, 2006), but it is not necessarily “researched” information (information based on factual evidence) provided on the Internet at these websites. Blogs are personalised and individualised media sites on the Internet that offer freedom of speech and freedom of expression as part of online communication. Blogging is becoming an issue in the news industry because it affects how newspapers see themselves and their work as news providers (AP Bureau Chief). Newspapers are becoming obsolete in this digital news presentation format.

The fact that blogging websites are not researched all of the time means that the “news” that they put “out there” is suspect (of not being credible news), and such news borders on sensationalism—that is, news merely to attract attention. However, for the most part, news provided by “bloggers” consists of “occasional” news, such as the photographs and video footage taken at the site of the burning Trade Towers in New York in 2001. Newspapers have also had to diversify and adapt their operations to incorporate online news formats in order to compete with digital news technologies including blogging websites (AP Bureau Chief, 2006).

The AP Bureau Chief (2006) suggests that the “major players,” such as the Reuters, AP, and AFP global news agencies, would still be operating despite these contextual changes in the news environment. At the same time, he believes that these global agencies will undergo a restructuring and that they will become “something different,” but he is unable to predict what they will be in the future. In fact, he maintains, they are much different now than they were ten years ago. The use of video onscreen news, for instance, is something new to agencies in the last two
It is described as an area in the market that should be explored (AP Bureau Chief).

It won’t just be video clips sent to newspapers, to television stations; it will be online [as well] and you will be able to get news on your mobile phones. It will not be to the general public, not directly from us; it will go to providers. It always has to be that way for us because we see ourselves as wholesalers of news, not retailers. We don’t want to compete with our clients. So we provide the news and they provide that to the people. (AP Bureau Chief)

The comment reflects the tendency of global news agencies to adapt to and explore changes in technologies. What remains central to their operations is the news product and the fact that as long as there are markets and people interested in news, there will be news agencies, and as long as there are news flows, there will be people interested in buying news.

6.2.4 AFP on the issue of imbalances

The AFP Bureau Chief (2005) had no qualms and was upfront and casual in his comment on the issue of a global monopoly of news flows:

It’s true that there is a monopoly from the three big news agencies in the world. . . . A news agency costs a lot of money; having offices almost everywhere in the world costs a lot of money. So the newspapers [around the world] cannot do it themselves. So they have to rely on the big news agencies like Reuters, AFP, [and] AP. So it is true that in a way there is a monopoly of the three big international news agencies in the market of the news. . . . [W]e are the three big news agencies, and you can say we have a monopoly on the news market, international news market. (AFP Bureau Chief)

An aspect of the debate on monopolisation of global news flows is the tendency for the global news agencies to vie for the domestic news markets in the developing world, especially as these are newly emerging markets. The AFP participant disagreed, however, that the AFP news agency monopolises domestic (national contexts’) media markets. In the South African context, for example, the role of AFP in South Africa means that SA is one of their biggest clients in Africa in terms of a news exchange partnership (AFP Bureau Chief, 2005). Furthermore, the AFP participant claims that there is no such thing as a monopolisation of the South African
media markets by the French-based news agency because South Africa has its own “vibrant press . . . in terms of television, radio stations, and newspapers, [as well as] a [domestic] news agency” (AFP Bureau Chief).

According to AFP Bureau Chief (2005), AFP news agency is a partner with the South African news media, not a competitor. He stated the following:

I think we don’t monopolise at all the market in South Africa. That is not true [that there is monopolisation] because South Africa has its own press and it is a very good one I think. I think we are a player. In fact, I think we are working more for the rest of the world in news on Southern Africa than news in and for South Africa. Our job is to try to explain the news in this region to the rest of the world and to give news to South Africa about the rest of the world. (AFP Bureau Chief)

According to statistics released in 2007 from the Reporters Without Borders (RWB) indexes on press freedom, “South Africa ranks 44th out of 168 countries on press freedom, down from 31st position in the 2005 index reports, but still well within the top 50 countries said to have ‘genuine press freedom’” (own italics).14 Furthermore, within Africa, South Africa is ranked in sixth position “after Benin (23rd overall), Namibia (26th overall), Mauritius (32nd overall), Ghana (34th overall), and Mali (joint 35th).” South African media remain relatively diverse, catering to and reaching various media audiences. This is reflected, for instance, in the ownership of newspapers and the diverse news audiences (All Media Products Survey, AMPS, 2007). According to an online article released by the Media Club South Africa, “South Africa’s media enjoys a robust press freedom, and can rely on the protection of the Constitution whenever threats to that freedom appear” (Nkosi, 2009).15 Hence, if there were a monopoly of information in South Africa by the global media, this diversified media environment would not exist as it does. Furthermore, there would not be a relatively stable growth of media formats (newspapers) and audiences in SA (AMPS).

6.2.5 IPS on imbalances in global news flows

The IPS is a news and information provider. It is in the unique position of being both a global news organisation with a history of association with NWICO and a development-focussed organisation (IPS Regional Director, 2006). After the end of the Cold War, the rhetoric associated with NAM as well as that of the NWICO, which was supported by NAM, also receded in global communications debates. According to the IPS participant, many other “agendas” arose after these global changes in politics and economics. The globalisation debate came to the foreground, and according to IPS respondent, communication debates, in other words debating media systems, were no longer as important an issue as other issues that had a direct bearing on the broader phenomenon of globalisation. However, it was acknowledged that information flows are recognised as an important part of the debates on globalisation (IPS Regional Director).

As outlined in chapter 4, IPS began as a cooperative of journalists who were concerned with the issue of balanced reporting and who focused on development journalism (Giffard, 1998). This collaboration on information flows led these journalists to embark on covering news from the Third World or the developing world nations. In this, it is sensitive to the needs as expressed in the ideology of NWICO that arose from the MacBride Commission findings (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998). The IPS also intends to fill a gap, as they had perceived this in the international coverage of news flowing predominantly from the North to the South, and to give a voice to peoples of the South (IPS Regional Director, 2006).

The IPS participant agrees that global information still flows largely from the developed nations’ media to the developing world and that the developing nations’ news media are still heavily dependent on the “Northern wire services” for information (IPS Regional Director, 2006). To illustrate this point, the local, domestic news agency, SAPA, obtains all of its international news from the global news
agencies, and then it filters this news to the local media and the South African newspapers. SAPA is apparently the largest news agency in South Africa to have secured agreements with the South African media, including the newspapers, radio, and television news.

SAPA, then, in the domestic context, might arguably be said to monopolise the local South African media market as a news provider. However, as discussed in chapter 4, SAPA began as a cooperative and is owned by all the domestic and independent member newspapers of South Africa. Furthermore, SAPA might be the largest news agency, but it certainly is not the only news source for international news. For instance, the broadcast media in South Africa, SABC, and the independent television station, E-TV, have their own journalists covering international news from outside of South Africa. According to the SAPA Editor (2005), the SAPA newsroom journalists closely watch and listen to local television and radio stations for domestic and international news stories that their own journalists may not have.

With this in mind, news flow in Africa is still largely reported by Western journalists to the rest of the world and to Africa itself (IPS Regional Director, 2006). Part of the reason for this is that there is no capacity of professionally trained African journalists. Furthermore, IPS sees this aspect as part of their mission in Africa and other developing contexts to train and increase the capacity of journalists in these contexts. The comment that information from Africa tends to flow via the global news agencies to the rest of Africa and the outside world was indirectly explained in the interviews with the global news agencies that the media systems in Africa do not have the resources or the capacity to expand outside of the continent.

According to the IPS Regional Director (2006), outside of South Africa, in the rest of Africa, one will find that there is a lack of capacity of trained professional journalists. In some cases, entire newspapers are dependent on the wire services of local and
global news agencies rather than having their own journalists to cover news stories (IPS Regional Director). This situation of dependency was alluded to above.

You will find, as you move out of South Africa, the media in South Africa are much better [off] than [in] other countries in Africa. So if you move out of this country, you go to Botswana or to Zimbabwe, or to Tanzania, you will find that an entire newspaper is based on wire services in those African countries. It may be a couple of stories here and there of local news, and this is mainly to do with just the capacity [or not having local capacity] of journalists. (IPS Regional Director)

The IPS participant states that IPS therefore sees it as its task and mission to report stories about Africa using African journalists. This is to build the capacity of African journalists reporting Africa to the rest of the world. The same format is followed with the IPS bureaus located in other developing world regions such as in Asia (IPS Regional Director, 2006). The IPS approach of training and using local journalists does not exclude using non-African journalists in Africa. For instance, the Regional Director (IPS) states the following:

Sometimes you get someone who is funded by the United Nations, and they’re visiting the Congo [Democratic Republic of the Congo], and they are corresponding from there; then they will share their stories with us. So if we don’t have the [local] capacity to do an in-depth story in certain areas, we would also use such writers [journalists]. But primarily, for us, it has to be journalists from Africa [to report on Africa]. (IPS Regional Director)

The issues concerning using local journalists and building the capacity of local journalists is twofold. Firstly, there is a real need in Africa and other developing contexts to strengthen the role of media because information and communication are vital elements to enhancing democratic ideals such as freedom of speech and participation. Secondly, it is important for the rest of the world to see Africa through the eyes of Africans, and not only from their own particular worldviews. So, in other words, what the global agencies produce as news about Africa has been criticised for mainly focussing on negative news when there are positive occurrences in Africa that go unnoticed and unreported.
From the above, there are several implications relevant to how the rest of the world views Africa through the lenses of the global media. Firstly, investors from outside Africa may be swayed to invest or not to invest in businesses in Africa depending on the economic potential, political stability, and cultural integration presented about the continent in news reports. Secondly, if global media are representing Africa to Africans instead of Africa reporting itself, it might reflect the lack of cooperation, collaboration, networking, and integration on the continent amongst the African countries. Finally, the lack of independent African news media is most probably a symptom of the lack of, apart from human and technical resources, democratic formation.

6.3 Analysis and conclusion
The foregoing chapter discussed the transformations in the news environment due in part to globalisation, and the concomitant impact of this on the operations at news agencies. It focused specifically on the impact of change in the news environment on the selection processes of news at the various news agencies. It also related the news selection process to understanding what news values are and how they are important, if not central, in developing news sense in the practice of journalism. The chapter introduced, briefly, the gatekeeping function of editors stating that this process ensures the application of news values in news production, on the one hand, but also “filters” information, on the other hand. The news selection process is based on universally established news values and these are associated with the development of journalism as a Western profession that found its way across nation and culture, partly because of colonialism and European expansion. The main news values identified from the participants included impartiality, speed, accuracy, reliability, and good judgement. Together, these news values enable the reporter to develop what has been termed “news sense.” Most participants described this as an innate or intuitive ability developed by a seasoned reporter or journalist in identifying and selecting those events considered as newsworthy (and fulfilling several of the news values).
The selection of news at SAPA (and at all the other participating news agencies) is not an arbitrary process. In selecting the news of the day, editors, and sub-editors plan around what their brief is, from the members’ or subscribers’ (i.e. the clients’) interests. Some critics might see this as agenda setting, however, despite the routine in the process, the selection of news at agencies allows for flexibility and open-endedness when, for instance, “breaking news” events occur. News values assists journalists in knowing what news stories take priority over other news stories. At SAPA, a “daily diary,” based on categorising news, influences the selection process. This assists journalists in their news sense or which stories to focus on. News selection, then, is a routine process. The gate-keeping function at SAPA assists in filtering out those stories that subscribers will not be interested in based on the brief that the editors, sub-editors, or bureau chiefs are given.

News selection and the filtering of information are central in the debates on imbalances in global news flows. Other aspects of these imbalances include the arguments regarding the monopolisation of news flows and the presentation of overwhelmingly “bad news” about the developing world. The news selection process is, on the other hand, not an objective process because the subjective experience of the individual reporter does affect the process. In this sense then, the conception of objectivity does not mean the same as the news value of objective reporting wherein the reporter must, as far as possible, give the different views on an issue, such as those of all the parties involved, especially if these are in opposition. This has been described as impartiality, but often gets confused with the value of objective reporting, meaning detaching individual, subjective feelings or dispositions in a news report.

The Reuters news agency selection and news production is based on their core market or core clients as are that of the other three global news agencies. For Reuters, they are financial institutions such as banks, brokerage companies, individual businesses, and stockbrokers. However, news selection for Reuters follows a set of values based
on speed, accuracy, and reliability. The Associated Press news agency also selects
news predominantly for their client market, which are the American newspapers.
However, their focus is not narrowed to financial news as is Reuters’, but tends to
include a broader spectrum of events, which includes all news that would interest
their market. Their secondary news markets would include other subscribers outside
of the United States. Like AP, AFP also focuses more on general news production
and distribution. The AFP Bureau Chief believes that they give balanced coverage by
providing a broad spread of news. However, the criticism against all global news
agencies persists; that they tend to focus overwhelmingly on negative or “bad” news
stories, especially when this is about the developing world nations. The idea requires
further investigation with regard to the “news values’ that agencies adhere to in their
selection practices.

News values tend to be closely associated with the dominant social values, or the
values of the dominant social (economic and political) framework. McMurtry, for
instance, refers to a “regulating mind-set of official society, [which] blinkers out
whatever exposes a disorder in the existing system of rule” (2002, p. xii). To illustrate
this point using a political analogy, the undemocratic apartheid period in SA saw the
mushrooming of alternative sources of news – i.e. other than ‘official’ and
mainstream sources. The state’s official news instruments were used in an attempt to
“counter” the emerging ‘uprisings’ in the society that were supported by the
accompanying alternative points of view. The South African example testifies to the
fact that the apartheid state made concerted attempts to subdue and squash the
broader (democratic) social mindset while, at the same time, opposition movements
sought to expose the undemocratic value framework and lack of moral framework in
the activities of the apartheid state (Tomaselli et al., 1987; Tomaselli & Louw, 1991).

Furthermore, McMurtry states, “The underlying connections disclose a system of
‘Free World’ approval and disapproval across borders whose moral meaning has
remained unpenetrated [sic]. . . . The deep-structural value set at work is untheorised
[sic] even in notions of ‘hegemony’ . . . because there has been no analysis of socially regulating value sets themselves” (2002, p. xv). According to Bennett et al., the concept of hegemony in its usage by Antonio Gramsci examines “the precise political, cultural and ideological forms through which, in any given society, a fundamental class is able to establish its leadership as distinct from the more coercive forms of domination” (1981, p. 187, emphasis in original text).

The dominant value framework advocating a capitalist class ideology, neo-liberalism, therefore achieves its leadership ability via institutions (e.g. of communication) among other things. It makes sense that events that are selected to describe social realities coincide with the dominant sets of values or value framework of the dominant position that is able to exercise control and influence over the tools of communication (and over ideas) such as the media institution. Chapter 7 explores this argument in detail, where it addresses an analysis of the pressures and challenges internal and external to news agencies. In that chapter, an alternative to what the private-mainstream and state-owned news agencies offer is explored under the title of a developmental or an alternative framework, including, development journalism.

Similarly, news selection and production is moving from the hands of professional media organisations into the hands of the ordinary public who ‘redefine’ what news is and what events are newsworthy. The ability to produce news shifts away from the concentration at news organisations, such as agencies, and into the public realm partly because of the intervention of technology. The study refers to this process of public intervention in news making as public journalism or citizen journalism (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Chapter 7 therefore, describes and discusses this phenomenon of “citizen journalism.” A critical discussion and assessment of the views from participants presented in chapters 4, 5, and 6, is provided in the next chapter.