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2019

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29519

Kruger, Franz Theodor (2019) Signposts in an earthquake:journalism ethics and the political transition in SA, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/29519>

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Signposts in an earthquake

Journalism ethics and the political transition in SA

By Franz Krüger

Abstract

This thesis responds to debates around journalistic practise and ethics in the South African media in the early years of South African democracy, placing the norms themselves at the centre of the inquiry. Analytically, the project investigates the extent to which the norms of journalism can be seen to have changed at this time. Normatively, it considers whether and how they should change. The South African experience raised questions about the relationship between normative universalism and the contingencies of the political, thus providing an opportunity to address a debate that has exercised the field of journalism ethics globally for some time. The project draws on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, particularly the notion of Discourse Ethics, a meta-ethical theory which argues that valid norms must be established and agreed in discourse. The project centres on four articles published independently in different journals. The first of these explores the opportunities opened by Discourse Ethics, identifying four ways in which Discourse Ethics can provide an enriched understanding of journalism ethics. These four applications are further explored in the other articles. The second article explores normative and critical questions, considering what a role conception for journalism would look like if it was based in Discourse Ethics, particularly in the context of a new but highly unequal democracy like South Africa. The final two articles consider specific examples from the South African experience in which norms in journalism can be shown to have shifted as the result of an often heated public debate. One article considers the coverage of the deaths, 18 months apart, of two prominent figures associated with the AIDS denialist position, where a marked shift in norms is revealed. In the final article, the norm of balance is shown to have come under pressure in the face of political attempts to give credibility to the denialist position, seen by medical science and civil society as not only wrong but harmful. Considered as a whole, the

project makes four contributions to the field of journalism ethics. First, it shows how the Discourse Ethics model offers an account of both universal and contingent norms by deriving universal proto-norms from the foundational rules of communication, and allowing for a wide range of contingent variations to be developed in discourse. Second, it exploits the analytical opportunities of the model to provide a new perspective to historical controversies around the media in the South African transition and, in doing so, adds to a substantial body of research described as transitological. The third contribution made by the project, based on experience from South Africa as part of the Global South, suggests adjustments to Habermas's Discourse Ethics approach that takes the reality of contestation more seriously and points to the beginnings of a model of normative change. Finally the project shows how Discourse Ethics provides a basis for critique of the media, and sketches the implications for a new framework for journalism ethics.