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THE COVERAGE OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION BY THE *MAIL & GUARDIAN*, 1999 – 2004

by

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Journalism and Media Studies.

Johannesburg, 2006

Abstract

The focus of this study is on the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* between 1999 and 2004. Mainly, the study seeks to understand the coverage of labour issues by the newspaper in post-apartheid South Africa. It is argued that the coverage, or lack of coverage, of labour issues by the paper is related to socio-economic and political conditions in the country. Literature on the influential role the ownership and control of media play in the content of news, as well as the influence of advertising, is analysed to attain a clear understanding of the pattern of coverage of labour news in post-apartheid South Africa. Therefore, the study uses the coverage of industrial action as a yardstick to measure as well as to understand the extent and the shift in editorial content of the newspaper with specific reference to industrial action. The main argument of the study is that the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in South Africa, brought about by the advent of democracy, coupled with structural limitations play a fundamental role in determining the manner in which working-class issues are currently covered by the *Mail & Guardian*. It emerges in the study that the manner in which labour news in general and industrial action in particular are covered has shifted and thus replaced in the main by articles on labour politics. The extent to which the *Mail & Guardian* covers industrial action in the post-apartheid era has declined, and more emphasis is being placed on other beats that are not directly the interests of the poor and the working class.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____

Mandla J. Radebe

_____ day of _____ 2006.

To my mother

who made many sacrifices to ensure that I got educated.

Mfo ka Maganda

Uchakide ophephela ezwilwini abanye ochakide bephephela phansi

Isangoma esangenwa ngabaphezulu izinyeizangoma zingenwa ngabaphansi

Zwide ka Langa!

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Contents

Abstract ---------- ii

Declaration ---------- iii

Dedication ---------- iv

Acknowledgements ---------- v

List of tables ---------- ix

List of figures ---------- ix

List of abbreviations ---------- x

CHAPTER 1: Introduction ---------- 1

CHAPTER 2: Background – From the *Weekly Mail* to the *Mail & Guardian* ---------- 4

2.1 Introduction ---------- 4

2.2 The Mail & Guardian ---------- 4

2.3 Overview of the South Africa press ---------- 7

2.4 Media ownership and readership in South Africa ---------- 10

2.5 Language in the print media ---------- 14

2.6 The role of advertising in the South African Media ---------- 15

CHAPTER 3: Literature review and theoretical framework ---------- 17

3.1 Introduction ---------- 17

3.2 Key concepts informing the study ---------- 17

3.3 Political economy of the mass media ---------- 24

3.4 Ownership and control of the media ---------- 26

3.5 The influence of advertising on news ---------- 29

3.6 The social production of news ---------- 34

3.7 The influence of sources ---------- 36

CHAPTER 4: Research methods ---------- 42
4.1 Introduction ---------- 42
4.2 Qualitative research methods ---------- 42
4.3 Analysis and interpretation of data ---------- 54
4.4 Research constraints ---------- 55

CHAPTER 5: The *Mail & Guardian's* coverage of industrial action ---------- 57
5.1 Introduction ---------- 57
5.2 Structure of the news ---------- 57
5.3 Descriptive information about articles on industrial action ---------- 57

CHAPTER 6: The political economy of industrial action in the *Mail & Guardian*: A critical analysis ---------- 73
6.1 Introduction ---------- 73
6.2 The coverage of labour news ---------- 73
6.3 Relationship with unions ---------- 89
6.4 Reporters and contributors ---------- 90
6.5 Sources in articles and their influence ---------- 94
6.6 Ownership and control of the media ---------- 99
6.7 The influence of advertising on news ---------- 101
6.8 The Labour story – important aspects ---------- 106
6.9 Conclusion ---------- 109

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion 110
7.1 Introduction ---------- 110
7.2 Conclusion and Recommendations ---------- 113

REFERENCE LIST ---------- 115

List of Tables

Table 2.1	Newspapers owned by Independent News and Media	11
Table 2.2	Newspapers owned by Johnnic	12
Table 2.3	Newspapers owned by Media 24	13
Table 2.4	Newspapers owned by Caxton	14
Table 3.1	Industrial action in South Africa, 1999-2004	19
Table 5.1	Number of industrial action articles in the *Mail & Guardian*, 1999-2004	57
Table 5.2	Number of articles	57

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Length of articles on industrial action	70
Figure 1.2	Timing or frequency of articles of articles on industrial action	71

List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ANC	African National Congress
ANCYL	African National Congress Youth League
BDFM	Business Day and Financial Mail
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
DVC	Deputy Vice chancellor
FEDUSA	Federation of Unions of South Africa
GCIS	Government Communication and Information Service
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution [strategy]
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MP	Member of Parliament
NACTU	National Council of Trade Unions
NAIL	New Africa Investments Limited
NALEDI	National Labour and Economic Development Institute
NAPTOSA	National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa
NEDLAC	National Economic Development and Labour Council
NEHAWU	National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
PAC	Pan African Congress
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SACCAWU	South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADTU	South African Democratic Teachers Union
SALGA	South African Local Government Association
SAMWU	South African Municipal Workers Union

SANGOCO	South African Non-governmental Organisation Coalition
SATAWU	South African Transport and Allied Workers Union
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SWOP	Sociology of Work Project
TCA	Thematic content analysis
UCT	University of Cape Town
UDF	United Democratic Front
UDM	United Democratic Movement

Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The *Mail & Guardian* newspaper played a crucial role in the struggle for democracy through its brave yet innovative style of journalism. As the *Weekly Mail*, launched by a group of journalists who had been retrenched after the closures of the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Express* in 1985, the paper established itself as a serious alternative publication. It made public what was unfolding in the dark corners of apartheid South Africa, and revealed the plight of the oppressed masses. This is what the mainstream media was prohibited from doing, as most of the mainstream news organisations were part of the establishment.

While most newspapers toed the line and accepted the apartheid regime's instructions, the *Mail & Guardian* persevered and fought for its democratic right of freedom of expression. This fearless form of journalism was conducted at the height of the struggle against apartheid, at a time when the government of the day did not hesitate to torture, maim and imprison those who were opposed to its policies. Staff members of the *Mail & Guardian* had to endure this pain.

The *Mail & Guardian* stood its ground during apartheid. This led to the paper gaining an international reputation as a vocal apartheid critic, while positioning itself as the champion of the marginalised, especially the working class. However, with the advent of democracy, the socio-economic and political conditions and context dramatically changed. For many anti-apartheid organisations, including the progressive press such as the *Mail & Guardian*, victory had been achieved and

the need for political struggle was over. This led to many organisations, that had contributed immensely to ensuring that there was democracy in the country, abandoning their primary role and changing their identities in line with what was expected in the democratic dispensation. The alternative press was no exception. The new socio-political and economic climate led to the paper changing its character as alternative publication, and starting to operate as a mainstream newspaper. This shift, the study will show, had profound implications for the newspaper, particularly in the way it traditionally reported on key issues such as workplace struggle. More importantly, the shift of the newspaper from alternative to mainstream, it will be argued in the dissertation, left a void in the print media and limited the opportunity for the consolidation of democracy in the country.

This study explores the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* between 1999 and 2004. The research analyses and investigates the ways and extent to which the *Mail & Guardian* covers and frames industrial action, including the types of sources used in these articles and the extent to which the voices of ordinary workers are used as sources. It is argued that the paper has undergone a transformation from being the alternative publication it was during apartheid to becoming a mainstream newspaper in the democratic era.

Furthermore, the study seeks to examine the manner in which issues affecting the working class are covered under these new conditions. This will also bring into focus whether the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions have any bearing on the framing and utilisation of sources by the newspaper.

The broad research question for this study is: in what ways and to what extent does the *Mail & Guardian* cover industrial action in the post-apartheid era? Specifically,

a) Is industrial action framed in terms of the workplace or trade unions, or is it framed in terms of broader issues of democracy and inequality in the new South Africa?

b) Is the coverage sustained? That is, is it characterised by frequency of follow-up articles?
c) What type of sources are used in the articles on industrial action, and specifically are workers used as sources? To what extent are the voices of ordinary workers represented?

In answering these questions, the coverage of industrial action is used as a yardstick to measure as well as to understand the extent and the manner in which working-class issues are covered by the *Mail & Guardian*. This study uses the paper's coverage of industrial action as a test of whether it continues to represent and give voice to the marginalised. Industrial action is viewed by social scientists as a tool that is used by workers to voice their dissatisfactions and demands, especially when they feel exploited and marginalised in the workplace. Historically, industrial action in South Africa often linked workplace issues with broader political struggles for democracy and freedom. Their relevance, therefore, has always been broader than economic (better wages and working conditions), but also of political significance.

Apart from this chapter, the study is composed of six chapters. Chapter 2 presents the background to the study, tracing the development of the newspaper from the *Weekly Mail* to the *Mail & Guardian.* Chapter 3 is the literature review and theoretical framework. Chapter 4 presents the research methods and techniques used in the study. Chapters 5 and 6 introduce and deal with the research findings. Chapter 7 is the conclusion, based on the findings of the study.

Chapter 2
BACKGROUND: FROM THE *WEEKLY MAIL* TO THE *MAIL & GUARDIAN*

2.1 Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to provide the historical background of the *Mail & Guardian*. The history of the paper, particularly the conditions that led to its formation and those under which it had to operate during apartheid , is provided in order to contextualise the study.

Arguments advanced throughout this study are informed by this chapter. Therefore, the manner in which the paper covered industrial action between 1999 and 2004 is examined based on the historical understanding of the socio-political and difficult media conditions the paper had to navigate. Following from the research, it is argued that these very same conditions informed the manner in which industrial action in particular and labour matters in general were covered by the paper. Obviously these conditions have changed significantly, and therefore this could have a serious impact on the coverage as well.

2.2 The *Mail & Guardian*

The *Mail & Guardian* is a weekly South African national English newspaper which is published on Fridays. Previously known as the *Weekly Mail*, the paper

was launched in 1985 by a group of journalists who had been retrenched after the closures of two of South Africa's newspapers, the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Express*. This group of young journalists was keen to keep their readers informed about what was really unfolding in the dark corners of apartheid South Africa, mainly in black townships.

They risked being harassed and detained in order to tell what the then mainstream media was forbidden to cover. For example, Jackson (1993) states that the real problem for the South African media began in November 1985 when the then president PW Botha devised special regulations for the media. The government turned to the Newspaper Press Union, which represented the mainstream newspapers, and offered them a deal to tone down their reporting of the unrest, through voluntary adherence to a stricter code of censorship. If they agreed, they "[would] be spared the heavy hand waiting to descend on the alternative press." (Jackson, 1993:129).

The *Weekly Mail* built up an international reputation as a vocal critic of apartheid. Locally it built a reputation as a champion of the poor and marginalised, and thus played a critical human rights watchdog role during the difficult and trying times of apartheid. This advocacy style of journalism was the envy of many media organisations. The newspaper received accolades from its peers, mainly international, and many young aspirant journalists looked up to the *Weekly Mail*. This also caused the paper to clash with the apartheid government on a number of issues, culminating in the paper's suspension in 1988. In 1991, the *Weekly Mail* broke the Inkatha-gate scandal and as the *Mail & Guardian*, the paper has uncovered several scoops, the Oilgate scandal involving several South African ruling party officials.

During the days of the struggle against apartheid, political and civic organisations, social movements and many communities could count on the paper to make public their plight and struggles without fear or favour. This was at a time when the apartheid government had banned newspapers from reporting about riots in the

townships. Because of this, the publication was admired and respected in all spheres for its courageous journalism. In addition, the organised labour movement and the trade unions, in their struggles for living wages and other labour rights that are taken for granted today largely, relied on the progressive media such as the *Weekly Mail* to tell their side of the story without any distortion or bias. Thus the *Weekly Mail* filled a vacuum that existed in apartheid South Africa and became one of the few alternative papers that survived the banning, harassment and harsh treatments meted out by the apartheid regime. Critically, the paper is almost the only alternative press that survived beyond post-apartheid South Africa.

As Seekings (2000) states, during the anti-apartheid struggle, after establishing new forms of clandestine co-ordination and communication, and recognising the need for an innovative approach, the United Democratic Front (UDF) called for a Campaign for National United Action which was jointly taken up by the UDF and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Seekings (2000) further argues that the use of the media was limited by state regulations which prohibited the publication of blank spaces or of text obscured by thick black lines, an innovation that the *Weekly Mail* had come up with to expose the extent of censorship. Seekings (2000) also states that additional regulations were gazetted to plug any remaining gaps, and that this was followed by the prevention of the *Weekly Mail*, *Sowetan* and *City Press* from publishing statements specifically concerning the Campaign for National United Action.

During this era, reporters took on a political role and used the media as a tool to express the political reality of that time. They were thus constantly on the run from the police. For example, according to Manoim (1996), ex-*Rand Daily Mail* reporter Sefako Nyaka was both news editor and reporter; when he was not on the run from his political opponents or his editors, he popped up in some useful places like the middle of an ANC shootout with police, or a brutal police raid on COSATU House, thus supplying a steady stream of lead stories.

According to the *Mail & Guardian* (2005), the paper is aimed at serious readers. It has a circulation of about 40 000 and a readership of 233 000. The paper maintains that its readership is interested in a critical approach to politics, arts and current affairs. The *Mail & Guardian* (2005) claims that many of the paper's readers are professionals, academics, diplomats, lobbyists and non-governmental groups. Currently the paper focuses on issues such as political analysis and investigative reporting such as the murder of businessman Brett Kebble and the involvement of police National Commissioner Jackie Selebi. The paper also has a comprehensive coverage of local arts, music and popular culture. A clear indication that the paper is aimed at serious readers is its current pullout *Business* section which is trying grow the *Mail & Guardian* in that direction. The paper also has several supplements some on social issues but mostly business orientated.

In 1994 the *Mail & Guardian Online* became the first internet-based news publication in Africa. Edited by Matthew Buckland, today it is jointly owned by Internet service provider M-Web and publishing company M&G Media, publisher of the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper. Currently, the paper is owned by Zimbabwean media owner and entrepreneur, Trevor Ncube, who bought the majority shares in 2002. The London-based Guardian Newspapers Limited holds 10% of the company and minority shareholders make up the rest. The paper is edited by Ferial Haffajee, the paper's first black female editor.

In the post-apartheid era, because of the reputation that the *Mail & Guardian* built up over the years, there exists an expectation, mainly from marginalised groupings of the society, that the paper will continue to be the mouthpiece of the powerless and the oppressed.

2.3 Overview of the South Africa press

As was to be expected, the historical landscape of the South African media, and print in particular, resembles the country's past, which is characterised by the oppression of the natives by colonialist rulers and later by apartheid. The Media Development and Diversity (MDDA) (2000) states that the mainstream newspaper industry in South Africa was for many years dominated by Afrikaans and English media groups. The Afrikaans press was owned by Nasionale Pers and Perskor, which supported the apartheid government. The English press, mainly owned by the mining and industrial conglomerate the Anglo-American Corporation, was supportive of the white opposition parties.

There were a few family-owned newspapers that were independent of these groups. While they were broadly supportive of the establishment in the country, a few of these publications – particularly the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Daily Dispatch* – were outspoken against certain human rights abuses; they also gave some coverage of liberation politics during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (MDDA, 2000).

Another critical aspect of the South African print media is the history of the Black Press. As Johnson (1991:15) points out, the Black Press goes back to the establishment of a Christian mission in 1824, a forerunner to Lovedale Mission; this was a "crucial factor in the genesis of an embryonic black press"

Citing the period between 1931 and 1977 as another crucial period in the history of the Black Press, Johnson (1991) says it was during this time that there was major intervention by white capital. This was mainly due to the Great Depression between 1929 and 1932. However, since its early days the Black Press consisted of protest journalism. As early as 1884, John Tengo Jabavu, a former editor of *Isidingi*, launched a paper called *Imvo Zabantsundu* (loosely translated as "Black People's Opinion"). According to Switzer (1997), *Imvo Zabantsundu* was a protest journal which sought to articulate and unify the interests and the needs of the modernising African elites.

Switzer (1997) believes that the Great Depression led to the demise of many independent African journals. However, this resulted in the formation of "a Captive African Commercial Press" such as the *Bantu World.* This paper was founded by Bertram F.G. Paver, and launched as a national weekly newspaper in 1932. Most probably this period could be argued to be the genesis of South Africa's alternative press.

The might of the apartheid government machinery ensured that most of the alternative press, with dissenting opinions and giving coverage to the liberation struggle, was crushed. The government used every trick in the book to ensure that any rebellious coverage was limited and censored.

As the MDDA (2000) mention, the alternative press was a target, and people involved with it were harassed and some of the publications were banned. "During the 1950s the government banned the *New Age* and its various reincarnations and, subsequent to the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960, it continuously banned all publications associated with or seen to be supportive of the liberation movement" (MDDA, 2000:14).

Nevertheless, the alternative press kept on trying to survive this harsh state of affairs. In the 1980s, during the height of the fight against apartheid led by the UDF, the alternative and struggle press re-emerged:

> Newspapers, magazines, journals, pamphlets and newsletters sprouted up to give platform to the voices of the resistance movement, including women, workers, students, the youth, rural people and local communities. Sympathetic foreign donors financially supported many publications. (MDDA, 2000: 14)

As part of this re-emergence, and like many of its counterparts, the *Weekly Mail* was donor-funded. When the strategic objective in the fight against apartheid was attained, many of these publications – whose formation was based in support of this objective and in defiance to apartheid media laws – struggled to survive:

> Some lasted a decade or so, but were closed by the mid-1990s primarily due to lack of funds. For much of the period these publishers undertook to distribute their publications through their own channels, given the reluctance of mainstream distributors to provide this service. Various methods were used, amongst others: selling door-to-door in communities, visits and drop offs at factories, selling at meetings, postal and using volunteer selling. (MDDA, 2000:14)

The *Mail & Guardian* is one of the few, if not the only, survivor of those publications. With donor funding long dried up, the paper now finds itself having to survive in the dog-eat-dog world of the commercial mainstream media.

2.4 Media ownership and readership in South Africa

According to Kupe (2004), the South African print media sector is wholly privately owned and diversified in terms of demographics, as opposed to the situation in most other African countries. Mentioning the dominance of ownership of print media by government or political parties in other African countries, Kupe (2004) states that the South African print media boasts the highest levels of foreign ownership.

2.4.1 Foreign-owned newspapers

The *Mail & Guardian* is one of only two foreign media players in the South African print media. The paper is owned by Trevor Ncube who also owns two major weekly newspapers in Zimbabwe, *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard.*

Independent News and Media is owned by Irish media mogul, Dr Anthony O'Reilly. This international media and communications group with interests in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom and India has seven dailies and nine weeklies in seven of the nine

provinces in the country, with the exception of Mpumalanga and Limpopo and it is by far the biggest foreign-owned media player in the country (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Newspapers owned by Independent News and Media

Newspaper	Province	Language	Circulation
Daily Papers			
Cape Argus	Western Cape	English	73 206
Cape Times	Western Cape	English	48 774
Daily News	KwaZulu-Natal	English	51 091
Isolezwe	KwaZulu-Natal	Zulu	57 440
Pretoria News	Gauteng/Pretoria	English	26 038
The Mercury	KwaZulu-Natal	English	39 053
The Star	Gauteng	English	164 364
Weeklies			
Post (Wednesday)	KwaZulu-Natal	English	37 592
Post (Weekend)	KwaZulu-Natal	English	49 548
Pretoria News (Sat)	Gauteng/Pretoria	English	27 164
Saturday Argus	Western Cape	English	103 938
Saturday Star	Gauteng	English	136 191
Sunday Argus	Western Cape	English	103 901
Sunday Independent	National	English	40 151
Sunday Tribune	KwaZulu-Natal	English	109 500
The Independent on Saturday	Western Cape	English	308 000

2.4.2 Black-owned newspapers

Until recently there were four black groups with interest in the print media industry. Mandla Langa owns a KwaZulu-Natal isiZulu weekly newspaper, *Ilanga*, with a circulation of 98 492. *UmAfrika* is a joint venture owned by Media24, the *Natal Witness*, Cyril Madlala (the editor) and Andy Stanton (managing partner), with a circulation of 32,288.

Together with the UK-based Pearson Group, Johnnic has 50% joint ownership through *Business Day* and *Financial Mail* (BDFM) of the daily business paper *Business Day* and the weekly magazine the *Financial Mail.* The Pearson Group publishes the daily financial paper *Financial Times*, among other publications. Johnnic acquired the *Sowetan* in 2004 and the 50% of the *Sowetan Sunday World* it did not already own. The paper is now called the *Sunday World* (see Table 2.2).

The now-defunct New Africa Investments Limited (NAIL) sold its papers – the *Sowetan* and 50% of *Sowetan Sunday World* – to Johnnic. According to Kupe (2004), this was one of the most significant changes of the last few years since it meant that although a black-owned media company ceased to exist, it sold to another black-owned media group.

Table 2.2 Newspapers owned by Johnnic

Newspaper	Province	Language	Circulation
Daily Papers			
Business Day	National	English	41 653
Daily Dispatch	Eastern Cape	English	32 806
Herald	Eastern Cape	English	36 409
Sowetan	National	English	154 747
Weeklies			
Saturday Dispatch	Eastern Cape	English	32 806
Sunday Times	National	English	506 147

Sunday World	National	English	144 296

2.4.3 White-owned newspapers

Media 24, a division of Naspers, and Caxton are two major media houses which are white owned in South Africa (see Tables 2.3 and 2.4).

Table 2.3 Newspapers owned by Media 24

Newspaper	Province	Language	Circulation
Daily Papers			
Beeld	Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West , KwaZulu-Natal	Afrikaans	101 212
Die Burger	Western Cape, Eastern Cape	Afrikaans	106 499
Volksblad	Free State, Limpopo	Afrikaans	28 207
Daily Sun	National	English	283 738
The Witness	KwaZulu-Natal	English	23 477
Weeklies			
Die Burger (Saturday)	Western Cape, Eastern Cape	Afrikaans	93 964
Rapport (Saturday)	National	Afrikaans	338 702
City Press (Sunday)	National	English	188 546
Naweek Beeld (Saturday)	Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West, KwaZulu-Natal	Afrikaans	85 039
Sunday Sun	National	English	164 374
Kaapse Son	Western Cape	Afrikaans	100 615
Soccer Laduma	National	English	200 645
Volksblad (Saturday)	Free State, Limpopo	Afrikaans	131 000

Naspers also owns a host of magazines which publish in Afrikaans, English and African languages. These magazines include popular titles such as *Drum* and

Huisgenoot (family), *Fairlady* and *Your Pregnancy* (women's), *Finance Week* (financial), *Kick Off* (sport), *ZigZag* (youth) and many others.

Table 2.4 Newspapers owned by Caxton

Newspaper	Province	Language	Circulation
Daily Paper			
The Citizen	Gauteng	English	100 139
Weekly			
The Citizen (Weekend Edition)	Gauteng	English	100 139

It is quite apparent that there has been some significant movement as far as the ownership of newspapers is concerned. However, despite these changes the MDDA (2000) is of the view that the media diet is still too narrowly focused for a country as diverse as South Africa:

> While those with means can now access a wider variety of media, the majority, particularly people living outside the metropolitan areas, have experienced little change. The legacy of apartheid remains, and significant schools of thought, including that of the democratic movement, remains marginalized (MDDA, 2000:15).

The demographic profile of the staff in newspapers is another crucial aspect of the South African print media that changed with the advent of democracy in 1994. For example, prior to 1994 most editors of the mainstream newspapers were white males. "By June 2000 there were twelve black editors out of 30 of the country's major daily and weekly mainstream newspapers, of which two were women" (MDDA, 2000:20).

2.5 Language in the print media

Language remains one of the most critical impediments limiting access to information for many South Africans. A third of the country's adults have little or

no schooling (*Sunday Times*, 2006). Though the Constitution promotes the equal usage of all eleven official languages, the challenge of implementing such a policy is huge, particularly when the history of the marginalisation of African languages and limited resources are taken into account.

As Kupe (2004) states, the dominant official languages of the print media are English and Afrikaans. He explains that this is partly historical, in that newspapers have a link with processes of colonialism and apartheid which entrenched the domination of the English and Afrikaans languages.

From the patterns of media ownership and readership in South Africa, it emerges that only three major newspapers in South Africa publish in African languages – *UmAfrika, Ilanga and Isolezwe;* all three publish in isiZulu. *Isolezwe* is the only paper to have been launched after 1994. Although isiXhosa is the second most spoken language by Africans in the country, and the SeSotho languages are the most spoken languages in Gauteng, there are no major newspapers published in those languages.

2.6 The role of advertising in the South African Media

As will be argued in subsequent chapters of this study, advertising influences the content of news. Thus it is important to acknowledge that the South African media, just like the global media, operates in a capitalist environment with the main objective being to maximise profit and create value for shareholders.

One of the few available avenues for the print media to be profitable is through advertising. In a nutshell, advertising is the lifeblood of the media. The closure of most donor-funded alternative newspapers after 1994 was mainly due to their failure to attract adequate advertising.

As Bowdler (2004) points out that the greater a newspaper's appeal, the more copies it sells; the more advertising revenue it takes. He says this is a virtuous circle which safeguards the future of media business. Similarly in South Africa for any newspaper to become a more viable business entity it has to increase its advertising revenue by increasing its appeal, mainly to its desired audiences.

Critical in the South African context is the manner in which the buying of advertising space in the media is viewed. According to the (MDDA), some in the black and community newspapers have accused advertisers of bias. This reliance on advertising by the media, therefore, dictates for the media the type of audience that will entice advertisers and thus this is likely to have an influence on the content of news.

As Berger (1993) states, the marketplace means that those at the bottom of the pile, the most media-deprived, are not targeted by the media because this would be unprofitable.

Because the print media has to respond to the needs of advertisers, publications servicing the working class, the poor and the marginalised will always struggle to attract advertisers. This suggests that for a paper to survive and prosper it has to attract the “right kind” of readers – that is, those with the money to purchase the advertisers’ goods and services – thus marginalising the poor.

Chapter 3
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

Critical political economy of the media and the social production of news are the two broad theoretical frameworks that this research report draws on to examine and understand the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* between 1999 and 2004. These theoretical frameworks have been chosen to locate the *Mail & Guardian* within the broader political and economic context of post-apartheid South Africa. They assist in recognising the influence of power relations and the exercise of power in society and the media. Theories of social production of news are important in relation to the organisation of the workforce as well as the structures of newspapers, which then play a fundamental role in pre-directing the newspaper to certain types of news and news actors.

3.2 Key concepts informing the study

Key concepts that inform this study include the nature of industrial action in the South African context, and sources in news articles.

3.2.1 Industrial action in the South African context

Industrial action, or strike action, in the South African context is used in this research to help understand its media coverage, whether as an expression of broader political and democratic demands or as a narrow worker issue. Industrial action is defined in the Labour Relations Act (No. 66, 1995) as

> the partial or complete concerted refusal to work, or the retardation or obstruction of work, by persons who are or have been employed by the same employer or by different employers, for the purpose of remedying a grievance or resolving a dispute in respect of any matter of mutual interest between employer and employee.

The three basic indicators of industrial action are:

- the number of working days lost through industrial action;
- the number of workers involved in industrial action; and
- the number of industrial disputes.

Hence, the definition of industrial action varies from country to country. In South Africa, though, all three basic indicators are used.

During the research period (1999-2004), the Department of Labour (2004:1) revealed the following:

- South Africa has experienced a significant decline in the incidence of industrial action in the period 1999 to 2002 but there was a year-on-year increase in strikes between 2002 and 2003, and a decline in 2004 (see Table 3.1).
- In 2003 industrial action consisted of disputes over wages (50.8%), working conditions (18.5%), disciplinary matters (12.3%) and grievances (10.8%).
- The highest number of workdays lost occurred in Gauteng, except for 2003 when North West recorded the highest number of workdays lost. This was due to protracted industrial action affecting the Impala Platinum Refinery in Rustenburg and a construction strike on certain platinum mines

- Two large strikes accounted for just over half (54%) of all workdays lost during 2003. These were the strikes at Impala Platinum Refinery in the Rustenburg area and a national strike affecting Shoprite-Checkers.
- The community, social and personal services industry (with health, social work and education particularly prominent) was the most strike-prone industry in the period 1999-2002, while in 2003 mining was most affected by industrial action
- Most industrial action during the period 1999 to 2003 was procedural and in compliance with the provisions of the Labour Relations Act. The annual breakdown of procedural industrial action was as follows: 62% in 1999; 79% in 2000; 59% in 2001; 46.8% in 2002 and 76.8% in 2003.

Table 3.1 Industrial action in South Africa, 1999-2004

Year	Number of strikes
1999	107
2000	80
2001	83
2002	47
2003	62
2004	49

Source: Department of Labour (2004)

The two leading unions in terms of participation in industrial action over the period 1999-2003 were the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU). The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) and the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (SACCAWU) are probably the next leading unions in terms of taking part in industrial actions over this period. NUM took part in 10.8% of all industrial actions in 1999, 13.1% in 2000, 13.9% in 2001, 15.0% in 2002 and 13.7% in 2003 (Department of Labour, 2004). However, SATAWU's participation in industrial actions gained momentum in 2000, taking part in 23.3%

of all industrial actions, followed by 16.7% in 2001, 12.8% in 2002 and 17.4% in 2003 (Department of Labour, 2004). Most industrial actions have taken place in Gauteng, followed by KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape. The largest share of industrial action in 2003 occurred in Gauteng (25), followed by KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape with 10 strikes or stoppages respectively (Department of Labour, 2004).

The coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* between 1999 and 2004, or in the post-1994 era, may suggest that the newspaper has deviated from being an alternative newspaper that covered news directly affecting the working-class and the marginalised audiences to a paper that is mainly concerned with "upper class issues". This argument is developed further in the subsequent chapters, as some unionists challenge this assertion.

The paper admits, though, that a large number of its readers can be found among professionals, academics, diplomats, lobbyists and non-governmental groups to name but a few. Obviously, this is not because the paper chooses to target these groups, but it could be argued that the paper has been forced by the changing socio-economic and political context to reposition itself. From recent industrial action articles published in the paper, it would seem as if the newspaper has abandoned the working class, since there is a void as far as the voices of ordinary workers are concerned.

3.2.2 Sources in an article

Sources in an article most often indicate whether or not the article has balance, is fair and impartial. Furthermore, sources provide a signal whether all the relevant voices are represented or given access to the news media. Sources also influence the way in which issues are reported or represented. Manning says few studies give more than a brief consideration to the question of where journalists get their information:

> … although there is now an emerging body of material on the activities of certain news sources, such as environmentalist, trade unionists, and those organizations campaigning in policy arenas such as criminal justice or health (2001: 27).

It is precisely the organisations that newspapers use to obtain news and comment that bring credibility and balance to stories. However, the list of sources to which Manning (2001) alludes, though not exhaustive, cannot be taken at face value. This is further supported by Manning's (2001) argument that it should not be assumed that groups that have something important to contribute to the processes of information circulation can secure easy access to the news media. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that the representation of their arguments or perspectives will not be misrepresented or presented in ways which do not promote their own interests.

It is against this backdrop of the constraints and unfavourable ways of being represented that the working class has had to endure in the past that sources in articles on industrial action in the *Mail & Guardian* will be closely scrutinised and assessed. It will not be assumed that because unions and their representatives have something important to contribute to the process of construction of news then their views are necessarily utilised and presented favourably or in ways that privilege their interests.

Moreover, an examination of sources not only uncovers potential structural bias in the manner in which stories on industrial action are covered by the *Mail & Guardian,* but it also brings light to the way in which workers as actors in stories on industrial action are framed. It is therefore important to keep in mind that access to the news and public discussion is severely structurally limited and is dependent on institutionalised, power routine sources, the "primary definers" (Hall et al 1978). This structural bias of news therefore result in ordinary people, workers in the case of stories on industrial action, being excluded and according Tuchman (1978) their inclusion is dependent on a number of biases that reduces them to "symbol people".

Furthermore, the prominence of labour unions and workers as sources should be viewed in relation to theories on access by workers to media including structural bias as pointed by many writes such as Hall et al (1978), Tuchman (1978) and Gans (1980). As Van Dijk (1991) argues, quotation patterns are a direct function of news production. In a nutshell, sources and the interpretation of stories on industrial action in the *Mail & Guardian* are also determined by the very processes of news production:

> Reporters covering news events engage in various strategies to get relevant information about these events. Apart from exceptional events such as riots or demonstrations, in which reporters may sometimes act as direct eyewitnesses, much information is indirect and discursive (Van Dijk, 1991:151).

Because of this process of news production which structurally limits access of ordinary people to the media and often exclude them, it then follows that the access to the *Mail & Guardian* by the workers in particular is constrained. However, understating the type of people who are speaking in articles on industrial action in the *Mail & Guardian,* and their prominence as sources, is crucial to understanding the access of labour unions and workers to the paper. Furthermore, this understanding of the manner in which workers have access to the paper will reveal the way in which the paper covers industrial action and thus labour news.

Furthermore, it is argued in this research report that the informant or the point of origin of news in many instances influences and shapes the content of the news. A news product is normally deemed to be of good quality when it is constituted by a range of sources; their location in society, the expertise and knowledge they bring to a story, gender, class, race and even ethnicity are all relevant. However, not all news sources enjoy the same degree of access to the news media, especially working-class sources. This argument is also advanced further in this research. It is mainly based on the fact that the working-class media hardly exists, that the media is owned by the upper class. The Glasgow University Media Group (1976)

also observed this inclination. They believe that the nature of media coverage of unions ultimately turns upon the ownership and control of the media institutions.

The study consequently determines whether this power struggle plays itself out in the content of news through sources. As Manning (2001) asserts that not all sources are regarded as authoritative by journalists with sources close to government being regarded as more credible than the more politically marginal or the more politically militant. The degree of access of sources to the news media ultimately determines the balance and accuracy of articles. This leads to the question of objectivity and fairness. An objective and fair article should clearly portray the distinction between fact and opinion. McNair (1998) argues that most audiences acknowledge that journalists have their own opinions on issues, and they often want it in the form of editorials and commentary columns. However, he insists that the distinction between fact and opinion, information and commentary, news and analysis must always be clearly made in the journalistic text.

It is this distinction that is closely scrutinised in articles on industrial action in the *Mail & Guardian*. Entman (1989) notes that balance in news is reflected by neutrality. As such, "it requires that reporters present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equivalent attention" (Entman, 1989:30). While this is what this study pays attention to, it also goes beyond the ordinary and the obvious by looking for spokespersons for workers. It explores the ways and extent in which workers are given a chance to express their uninterrupted views.

For an article to have any credibility and balance, it must have signs of these elements – all sides are given equal opportunity to respond, factual information is used, the article reflects independent thinking and is free from any external influence. Another crucial factor that accompanies a well-balanced article is the impartiality of the reporter. Any self-respecting journalist understands the importance of being detached from the events that he/she is reporting about. This

situation, according to McNair (1988), requires journalists to refrain from commenting on the events they are reporting.

3.3 Critical political economy of the media

According Herman and Chomsky (2002), the media serve and propagandise on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them:

> This is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definition of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policies (Herman and Chomsky, 2002:3).

They view the "structural factors" that lead to biased and misleading information against the marginalised to be ownership and control of media, among others. They argue that the dependence of the media on major funding sources such as advertising, as well as the mutual interests and relationships between the media and those who make the news and have the power to define it, are some of the major causal factors of this bias.

These structural factors are explained and used as tools in this study to critically examine and understand the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* in post-apartheid South Africa. Critical political economy of the media as it relates to the media is another analytical tool that is utilised to locate media within the broader global political and economic context. This theory also recognises that the media is influenced by, but also influences, power relations and the exercise of power in society.

Golding and Murdock note that "… capitalists use their economic power with a commercial market system to ensure that the flow of public information is consonant with their interest" (2000:73). They further argue that critical political economy of the media takes into account social relations and the play of power,

unlike liberal pluralism which focuses on sovereign individuals of capitalism. This obvious distinction sets critical political economy of the media aside from other theories when critically analysing issues of social relations and the play of power.

According to Golding and Murdock (2000), the media reinforces rather than challenges the existing social order, mainly on issues of class inequality, gender, race and geographical location. They argue that technologies that require consumers to purchase certain machines (computer hardware) as a condition of access deny access to those who can not afford. “This compounded the already considerable effect of inequalities in disposable income, and made communicative activity more dependent on ability to pay” (Golding & Murdock, 2000:75).

It is apparent, therefore, that in some cases social and material conditions do dictate the access to the process of construction of news, as well as its content. An African National Congress (2002) discussion document on media clearly articulates the importance of taking into account the background which has produced the media that South Africa has today. The document argues that the current state of the media is a by-product of the prevailing socio-economic environment which the *Mail & Guardian* find itself having to navigate for its own survival. Quite obviously, it is the very same background that has shaped the political outlook, philosophies and choices of those who influence the media, particularly advertisers.

It is indeed imperative to keep in mind the state of affairs of the media as mentioned by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976) that structures and strategies of news, such as the overall selection of newsworthy topics, are indirectly controlled by the societal context of power. It is therefore critical in this study to keep in mind the relationship of societal power to the *Mail & Guardian* while examining the structure of the articles on industrial action.

3.4 Ownership and control of the media

An important economic factor that influences the news is ownership and control of media. Those who own and control the media have influence over hiring and firing as well as over editorial direction of the news organisation. Moreover, to produce a newspaper requires resources, which many in the working class do not have. In this day and age, the production of news mainly depends on a wide range of technologies including large printing houses, some of whom are connected to the newsrooms. Bagdikian (1982) mentions that new electronic technologies such as the Internet and interactive cables have blurred the lines between traditional forms of media like newspapers, television programs, and movies:

> By owning all these media, a few large corporations have mass communications power that far exceeds the capabilities of smaller firms, social action organizations, and individuals (Bagdikian, 1982:xv).

Golding and Murdock (2000) also point out that media moguls directly exercise power over the companies they own. In addition, they have indirect power over smaller concerns operating in their market or seeking to break into them:

> … the digital gap being widened is rooted in the nature of informing and communicating goods themselves. Such goods require regular updating and replacement, disadvantaging groups with limited spending power and cumulatively advantaging the better off (Golding and Murdock, 2000:88).

The elite media organisations that produce news for the elites also purport to cater for the lower end of the market. As Herman and Chomsky (2002) state, the media are tiered with a top tier. They argue that it is this top tier, along with the government and wire services, that defines the news agenda and supplies much of the national and international news to the lower tiers of the media, and thus to the general public. It is therefore apparent that the dominant forces in the media industry are large corporations with diverse business interests which are controlled by very rich individuals and run to maximise profit.

According to the ANC (2002), the way in which the media function is largely determined by economic power structures and societal stratification. It is assumed that whoever owns or controls the media can set limits to what they do and the messages they produce. A simplistic argument would be that owners of newspapers, including the *Mail & Guardian,* belong to the affluent section of society. It is highly unlikely that this stratum of society would instruct the media it owns and influences to give good coverage to the class that it would like to continue to oppress. Of course the reality in the newsroom is more complicated than this; the mere fact of ownership does not equal authority over editorial content.

The death of the working-class protest press such as *New Nation, Sash* (originally known as *Black Sash*), *Grassroots, Work in Progress, Critical Health* and many others meant the end of good information that is pertinent to the issues pertaining to workers, since it is quite obvious that these publications were the only media that understood and thus were sympathetic to issues affecting the working class. This research report explores how the *Mail & Guardian* is facing the very same challenges. As Murdock and Golding (1997:37) state:

> The underlying logic of cost operates systematically, consolidating the position of groups already established in the main mass media markets excluding those groups who lack the capital base for successful entry. Thus the voices that survive will largely belong to those least likely to criticize the prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Conversely, those most likely to challenge these arrangements are unable to publicize their dissent or opposition because they cannot command resources needed for effective communication to a broad audience.

Because of such business influences, the views that have a propensity to come across in the advertisement-based newspapers are the ones that belong to the business executives' class and the bourgeoisie. Even news editors with noble intentions to publicise dissent or alternative views find themselves under extreme pressure from their business executives. As Squires (1993:20) observes:

> Today, with few exceptions, the final responsibility for newspaper content rests with the business executive in charge of the company, not the editor. Editors such as myself who are willing to bridge the gap between editorial and business are now the standard of the nation's newsroom. Those reluctant to do so don't last long.

Shoemaker and Reese (1991) concur with this view. In the old days, they say, the primary organisational threat to journalistic objectivity may have been an over-eager publisher anxious to influence news slant. Today, however, the threat is more abstract. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) state that the growing organisational complexities have inserted more hierarchical levels of bureaucracy between front-line media workers and top management. Consequently, this has led to a situation where top management decides on the content of news. Editors are thus reduced to gatekeepers.

According to King (1987:125):

> Editors must understand dollars and cents today better than ever before. Keeping newsroom operating expenses within the budget isn't enough. Editors must understand where their budgets fit with the larger financial picture of their company, and where news priorities fit in the overall strategic plan.

However, the bottom line, as Shoemaker and Reese (1991) note, is that ultimately media owners and their appointed executives have the final say in what the organisation executes. "If employees don't like it, they can quit. Others will be found to take their place, and routine can always be changed" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991:163).

This dominance of the media by a few powerful organisations and individuals, which is also the case in South Africa, has had a direct bearing in the disappearance of the alternative and working-class press. Bagdikian (1982) asserts that the small voices are always important, a saving remnant of diversity. However, he says their diminutive voices are overshadowed and drowned by the

controlled thunder of half the media power of a great society. Herman and Chomsky (1988:xi) allude to the fact that the media "serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity".

Molotch and Lester (1974) argue that in most instances news comprises either "routine", "scandalous" or "accidental" news items. They say it is a mistake to compare news accounts to "reality". For them, the world that the news media reflects is not the real world but the practices of those who have the power to determine the experience of others. This argument describes the influence of owners as well as that of sources. As Fishman (1980) states, it is the bureaucrats who provide journalists with a reliable and steady supply of raw materials for news production.

3.5 The influence of advertising on news

Critical political economy of the media is also used to illuminate ways in which advertising can manipulate the news. In this section the following factors are closely scrutinised:

- the history and ways in which advertising undermines editorial freedom and influences news content;
- the stifling of working-class journalism by advertising;
- the failure of advertising to promote news media which cultivates informed citizenship; and
- the promotion of news that deals with light-hearted issues, fun and fluff.

3.5.1 The history and ways in which advertising undermines editorial freedom and influences news content

As outlined earlier, the broad aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which the *Mail & Guardian* covers industrial action, particularly whether it links such action to broader political demands. Advertising results in editorial pressures

which, according to Herman and Chomksy (2002:16) leads to political discrimination:

> Political discrimination is structured into advertising allocation by the stress on people with money to buy … many firms will always refuse to patronize ideological enemies and those whom they perceive as damaging their interests, and cases of overt discrimination add to the force of the voting system weighted by income.

It is quite apparent, therefore, that editorial staff in most instances have to tread carefully in publishing articles that might be in the public interest but that carry a financial burden because they may offend powerful advertisers.

Because of these pressures, the argument that the media serve the public interest is found wanting. Croteau and Hoynes (2001) say this argument is elitist and often based on the assumption that our current media system is democratic because it gives people (and advertisers) what they want. They say the media usually responds to the interest of the "democratically desirable audience", those with the buying power. This assumption of a democratically desirable audience is informed by the way in which media organisations make their revenues through advertising, and this puts pressure on editorial freedom.

Newspapers that want to survive and prosper, including the *Mail & Guardian*, have to attract audiences with buying power and not audiences per se. By reporting and covering issues that are of interest to the "desirable" audience, newspapers are able to attract and keep this audience. And this, it is argued, happens at the expense of the working-class audiences who do not have financial muscle to challenge the status quo. It is abundantly clear that it is the upper class and the affluent audiences with opulent lifestyles that interest advertisers and thus the newspapers.

Because of this situation, the content of newspapers is compromised and skewed in favour of the affluent audiences. It is structured in such a way that it entices the

wealthy. Logically, if this line of argument is followed, an inference can be reached that the type of audiences required by advertisers determine the content of newspapers. So for a paper to survive and prosper it must accommodate and satisfy affluent audiences through its content. As Herman and Chomsky (2002) state, successful media organisations today are fully attuned to the crucial importance of audience "quality".

3.5.2 The stifling of working-class journalism by advertising

According to Herman and Chomksy (2002), since the introduction of advertising as the key source of revenue of newspapers, the working-class and radical papers have been at a serious disadvantage. This was to be expected, since the readership of such publications has always been of modest means and mainly the downtrodden people in many communities. This factor, as they state, has affected advertiser interest.

Advertisers, it is argued, are only appeased by the nature and character of the readership. As Herman and Chomksy (2002:16) state,"… the mass media are interested in attracting audiences with buying power, not audiences per se; it is affluent audiences that spark advertiser interest today…". The *Weekly Mail* as an alternative newspaper did not only cater for the educated white audience but also carried news of the working class and the marginalised, poor black masses in general and Africans in particular. Because of this historical reason, it can therefore be argued that most of its audience prior to 1994 and shortly thereafter did not have the buying power to attract advertisers. The post-1994 era that led to the drying up of international donor funding meant that for the *Weekly Mail* to survive new tactics and strategies to attract audiences with buying power had to be devised and implemented.

Herman and Chomsky (2002) also point out that readers of the working-class press have tended to be of modest means and this has always influenced advertiser interest. This state of affairs, they say, has always led advertising executives to

believe that some journals are poor vehicles because "their readers are not purchasers, and any money thrown upon them, is so much away" (Herman & Chomsky, 2002:15).

Herman and Chomsky (2002) further argue that even if advertisement-based media cater for an affluent audience, they easily pick up a large part of the working-class audience; thus their rivals lose market share and are eventually driven out or marginalised. Because of this advertising impact, working-class audiences are left with no choice but to use the media that caters for the affluent audiences who have resources for saleable features. This not only leads to the demise of the working-class media but also to a situation where the working-class audience is fed the propaganda that the elites want to disseminate.

3.5.3 The failure of advertising to promote news media that cultivate informed citizenship

Golding and Murdock (2000:77) argue that:

> … an ideal, communications systems … would provide people with access to the information, advice and analysis that would enable them to know their rights and pursue them effectively … provide the broadest possible range of information, interpretation and debate on areas that involve political choices, and enable them to register dissent and propose alternatives.

Regrettably, an ideal communications system does not exist. In essence the process of production and distribution of newspapers is now under the control of big business, which has guided newspapers in their evolution process. Consequently, newspapers no longer provide news to the public but now sell audiences to the highest-bidding advertiser. As cited in an article in *Umrabulo* (ANC, 2002), South Africans are categorised into different groups based on living standards, class position, employment status, education, culture and other indicators. These are translated into the economic power they command, and then they are sold to advertisers. Many newspapers who wish to prosper are required to

structure their content in such a way that it appeals to those audiences with buying power in order to attract sufficient advertisers.

As can be expected, the end product of this dependence on advertisers by newspapers is, according to Bagdikian (1982:xxiv), a type of agenda-setting that alienates the working class:

> It is truism among political scientists that while it is not possible for the media to tell the population what to think, they tell the public what to think about. What is not reported may be lost for ever, but it may be lost at a time when it is most needed.

The fact that advertisement-based media places the interest of advertisers, the upper class and the affluent above those of the working class, poor and the marginalised is a clear indication that the advertisement-based media model has serious limitations, especially when it come to informing citizens:

> If a democracy is committed to letting citizens have equal influence over political affairs, it is crucial that all citizens have access to a wide range of well-formulated political positions on the core issues of the day, as well as rigorous debates on activities that cover the political, social, cultural and economic domains (ANC, 2002).

However, these noble aspirations which many newspapers, including the *Mail & Guardian,* subscribe to – or want to subscribe to – are curtailed by the structural problems of advertisement-based media. Among these problems is the placement of profit before the core reason for the existence of a newspaper, which is (or should be) informing all citizens.

3.5.4 The promotion of news that deals with light-hearted issues, fun and fluff

The advertisement-based model compels newspapers to focus on "fluff" stories that draw a large audience, such as sex and scandals involving the wealthy and the ruling class. These stories occupy space and obscure crucial stories that expose the plight of the marginalised and poor. Stories about the impact on society of poverty

and the high level of unemployment are of utmost importance since these are the consequence of many of the policies advocated by the elite. Among these are globalisation, which has led to the privatisation of many state-owned enterprises and hence the retrenchment of workers.

Instead of these stories, paradoxically newspapers are bombarded with gory stories about the effects of crime on society. These stories take precedence mainly because the elite are the victims while, as to be expected, the poor the villains.

Croteau and Hoynes (2001) say the rule of both entertainment and news is that a certain amount of shock value draws attention and advertisers. They argue that that sex; violence and spectacle is the sort of news that is the logical product of the corporate pursuit of profit. This sort of news is relatively cheap to produce and, like an accident on the highway, they predictably draws a regular audience, they argue. Such news in newspaper appears to have displaced news that affects the poor and the working class, including issues of industrial action and the demands of the workers.

3.6 The social production of news

Theories of the social production of news, focusing on the workforce of organisations as well as the structures of the newspapers themselves, are used in this study to critically examine and analyse the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* between 1999 and 2004. Furthermore, it is argued that the structure of newspapers – which is sometimes determined by the business leaders – play a fundamental role in pre-directing the newspaper into certain types of events.

Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts (1978) reveal that newspapers are pre-directed to certain types of events and topics in terms of the organisation of their own workforce (for example, specialist correspondent and departments) as

well as the structure of the papers themselves (for example, local, foreign, political, sports news and others).

For this reason, it is hypothesised that the structuring of the workforce, or beat reporting as is commonly known, has been in existence in most South African newspapers, including the *Mail & Guardian*. It is in this context that the labour news beat in particular is closely examined in the study, as it is the one that primarily determines whether news on industrial action is covered accurately. However, it is useful to mention up front that reporters who are assigned to this beat have been dwindling in the recent past. In many newsrooms this beat has been merged with other beats such as politics or finance, depending on the impact and the nature of the story.

According to Manning (2001), the decline of news value with a serious commitment to social justice is due to the growing importance of market criteria in news selection. As Jones (1995) points out that some correspondents complain that there is pressure to emphasize the sensational more in order to sell news … hence the succession of scandals, corruption and sleaze stories. (Jones, 1995:10, cited in Manning, 2001) It is the emphasis on such stories that leads to the decline in coverage of news that is important and relevant to the working class. In other words, serious news stories on social justice issues and industrial action are dwarfed by sensationalist news. Tight newsroom deadlines exacerbate this problem further. Manning (2001) points out that news organisations operating to daily or faster news cycle will select sudden or dramatic "events" but are less likely to select news stories that deal with gradual, unfolding processes.

Social conditions do constrain and affect journalists during the process of news production. As Schudson (2000) argues, the link between ownership of news organisations and news coverage is not easy to determine. Nevertheless, he says it is clear that patterns of ownership can be tied to specific habits of reporting, and that these result from advertisers finding papers that attract a small, concentrated, elite audience. As difficult as it may be to pinpoint, the pattern of advertising

clearly signals the fact that ownership will encourage the coverage of certain news. These considerations deriving from the capitalist market system has created many forms of internal censorship which have a serious impact on the day-to-day work of journalists. This includes assigning experienced journalist to news stories that have no significance to the poor and the working class. Understandably, opinion pieces that are not likely to antagonise media owners and advertisers would be encouraged by media managers rather than those stories that might irritate the elite.

Although most media organisations would argue that in producing news they truthfully reflect what is really happening in the world to their audiences. In most cases this is what their audiences want, however the notion that the media just give people what they want is "one of the greatest myths of the mass media" (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001: 184). Because of the media's commercialisation and thus its reliance on advertisers, the type of audiences and their need becomes more critical and this has a likelihood of influencing the content. As Croteau and Hoynes (2001) argue that for the industry to remain profitable it is important that it pays attention to audience tastes as measured by ratings and readership. They claim that audiences have been avoiding advertising:

> In this area, the media are clearly *not* giving audiences what they want. Instead, the industry must find new and ingenuous ways to load more and more advertising into the daily media diets of resistant consumers (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001:184).

3.7 The influence of sources

News sources are crucial in news production since journalists cannot be everywhere, mostly due to high demand and the tight deadlines they have to meet. Because of this need, journalists depend on various institutions for crucial information and according to Shoemaker these organisations conduct public relations campaigns, often using the media to focus public attention. "To the

extent that these campaigns are successful, media content is affected directly (through the publication of press releases) …" (1991:67).

Corporations and institutions that issue press statements and hold press conferences on a regular basis are deemed more reliable by news organisations than those who do not have resources to do likewise. Many institutions have media relations divisions whose primary task is to provide news to the media, primarily for favourable coverage. It is to be expected that the media views the information provided to them by sources in these companies as highly credible because of the prestigious position these institutions have in the society. Herman and Chomsky substantiate this assertion when they state, "Partly to maintain the image of objectivity, but also to protect themselves from criticism of bias and threat of libel suits, they need material that can be portrayed as presumptively accurate" (2000:19).

The tight and demanding deadlines that journalists face in the process of news gathering is sometimes the driver that leads to the acceptance of information fed to them by corporations. This point is emphasised by Hall *et al.* (1978) when they say that the media reproduce the definitions of the powerful because of the pressure journalists face in the process of news production. They argue that when journalists work against the clock with limited resources, as well as the demands of impartiality and objectivity, the media produces "… a systematically structured *over-accessing* to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions" (Hall *et al.,* 1978:649). The production process, they argue, subsequently allows these institutional structures to establish the initial definition of the topic and to set the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing their version of the problem. These privileged and powerful institutions thus set the tone for subsequent contributions, which are then measured against this to determine their relevance. Hall et *al.* (1978) deduce that the structure of the media and the social production of news lead to the production of dominant societal views in the media.

The reliance by the media mainly on established sources is consolidated through sophisticated strategies utilised by these powerful institutions that have significant resources solely budgeted for this purpose. The media officers of these institutions use their resources strategically and in a shrewd manner to ensure that information is readily available and easily accessible to the media. Journalists are supplied with embargoed statements and reports in advance while their questions are swiftly clarified. As Herman and Chomsky (2002:22) observe, "… they schedule press conferences at hours well geared to news deadlines; they write press releases in usable languages …."

Because many media organisations are now juggling between their main focus of producing news that is balanced and accurate to the benefit of all citizens and maximising resources, they are bound to fall into the trap of using the most easily accessible source instead of using the most appropriate source. This is a clear indication why only a handful of voices come out in the news. It is inescapable that many voices, especially those of the working class and the marginalised, will be suppressed because of this process of gathering the news.

As Hall *et al.* (1978) argue, it is those in large institutions and high positions that are first given a chance to give their opinions on issues, before the ordinary citizens:

> … the likelihood [is] that those in powerful or high-status positions in society who offer opinions about controversial topics will have their definition accepted, because such spokesmen are understood to have access to more accurate or more specialized information on particular topics than the majority of the population (Hall *et al.,* 1978:58).

Since many of these institutions can either provide what is perceived to be credible information or spokespersons – what Hall *et al.* (1978) call "primary definers" – it is quite apparent why many journalists and newsrooms accept information supplied to them while maintaining relationship and contacts with these organisations. According to Herman and Chomsky (2002), this "continuous

contact on beats" is likely to lead to mutual dependency and the creation of personal relationships; once this is the case "the media may feel obligated to carry extreme dubious stories and mute criticism in order not to offend their sources and disturb a close relationship".

It is this relationship that plays a vital role in the dissemination of distorted news defined by the ruling elite, even when the content is purely working class. What is clear about those who define the news is the fact that because of their locations, one can easily argue that the views they express are consonant with the ideology of the ruling class. Hall *et al.* point out that "… their structured relation to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the definition of those who have the privileged access … to the media accredited sources" (1978:59).

As Hall *et al.* (1978) point out, moving from this premise, the media stand in a position of "structured subordination" to the primary definers in the process of news production. This view is based on a belief that the media's need for constant news and therefore its over reliance on source organisations to meet various deadlines puts it in this position of "structured subordination".

Since the media cannot be everywhere at the same time, this leads to an over-reliance on sources from authorised organisations. According to Hall *et al.* (1978) the over-reliance of the media to these sources leads to the media reproducing the definitions of the powerful as source organisations become the "primary definers" of the news relegating the media to "secondary definers". Hall *et al.* (1978) furthermore states that such a relationship reduces the media's role into ideological reproduction.

This "structured subordination" of the media to the primary definers has negative consequences for the marginalised and the working class as Tuchman (1978) mentions that there is a bias against marginal groups, not only because of the

effects of elite-centredness, but also because of the journalistic values of non-advocacy.

Manning (2001) uses Marx and Engels (1970) to argue his point of how the powerful in society exercise control over the circulation of ideas:

> The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it … the individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is itself-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (Marx & Engels, 1970:64, cited in Manning, 2001:35)

This is indeed the prevailing state of affairs in South Africa. Because of this condition, the poor and the marginalised find themselves at the receiving end and having to contend with the ideas of the ruling class on issues affecting them. This is so because of structural process of news production, which is at the mercy of the ruling class. Therefore, logic dictates that the working class will be disadvantaged. The ideological role of the class that controls and influences the media is critical in analysing the manner in which the working class is covered by the media.

As a follow-up to the Marxist definition of the *ideological role* of the media, Hall *et al.* (1978) state that Marx's contention is that in producing their definition of social reality, and the place of "ordinary people" within it, the ruling class constructs a particular image of society which represents particular class interests as the interests of all members of society. Without doubt, the manner in which stories on industrial action are covered by the South African media is largely through the lenses of the ruling elite. In many instances these stories are defined

and debated from an economic perspective, even though they affect people and their well-being.

In this study it is therefore argued that sources in news play a fundamental role in influencing the media and its content. Furthermore, sources subtly influence the content of news and help the media in producing ideas of the ruling elite at the expense of the working class.

Concurring with this view McNair (1995) says marginal political actors that operate outside of the established institution stands at the disadvantage with respect to mainstream parties, government and official bodies. He says these marginal political actors are relatively lacking in the resources which enables the latter group to makes news and set public agendas:

> They are unlikely to have access to the sources of finance which are available to the major political party, and thus to all the components of effective political communication which money can provide: qualified professional and skilled creative personnel, advertising and public relations material, etc. (McNair, 1995:137)

Furthermore marginal political actors would normally lack the credibility and authority accorded to established institution and members of recognised elite groups. McNair goes and argue that at the outset the access to the media for a particular source is never completely open, but dependent on such factors as the degree of "institutionalisation accruing to that sources; its financial resources; its 'cultural capital' or status, and the extent of its entrepreneurship and innovation in media management." (1995:141)

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) also acknowledge that because of the resources such as skilled professionals at their disposal, government and business sources are more accessible to journalists and as such most news would come from "official" channels. Any newspaper that is open to deal with these issues, in all likelihood, is bound to be a by-product of its environment.

Chapter 4

RESEARCH METHODS

4.1 Introduction

This study uses qualitative research methods and techniques, given its aims and the numerous advantages of this methodological approach. In essence the aim is thus not to simply to make generalisations but to achieve an in-depth understanding of the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian.*

4.2 Qualitative research methods

In this study, elements of qualitative research are used to "identify and count the occurrence of specified characteristics or dimensions of text, and through this, to be able to say something about the messages, images, [and] representations of such texts and their wider social significance" (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine& Newbold, 1998:95).

In short, these research techniques are used to count the number of articles on industrial action in the paper and to analyse these articles for focus and types of

sources used, particularly the presence and the extent to which ordinary workers' voices are given access.

4.2.1 In-depth semi-structured interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews are employed as a primary research technique. Semi-structured interviews provide "… the opportunity for the researcher to probe further, to uncover new clues, to open up new dimensions of a problem, to secure vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts from informants that are based on personal experience" (Burgess, 1982:107).

A case in point of the benefits that are provided by semi-structured interviews is the interview with Anton Harber, founder and former editor of the *Weekly Mail*. Harber painted a very colourful picture of the paper in its early days and under different and difficult social conditions; he juxtaposed that situation with the current scenario. He argues that though the *Weekly Mail* was partially donor-funded, it was not completely donor-dependent as were other alternative newspapers that existed then. From this interview it emerged that though there was a need for advertising, it was not as strong an imperative as it is today. Harber also states that it is inevitable that the more the paper relies on advertising there more challenges it will face:

> … the surrounding circumstances, in which the paper finds itself, have affected what and how the paper publishes it (Harber, Interview, 2005).

Therefore, in-depth semi-structured interviews in this research were used as a guide or framework for conducting interviews. Moreover, Wisker (2001) points out that interviews can assist in providing both detailed information that the researcher sets out to collect, while also providing some fascinating supplementary information.

Of the twelve initially targeted respondents, only eight responded positively. Consequently, a total of eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research with current and past editors, labour reporters and union representatives. During the interview, the emphasis was placed on the coverage of industrial action between the years 1999 and 2004. Though the country might have experienced a significant decline in industrial action incidents in the post-1994 era, the adoption and introduction of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy by the government saw a rise in industrial actions, hence the significance of the period 1999 to 2004.

Furthermore, in this study interviews are used to explore and understand the coverage of labour issues, particularly industrial action, since it is argued that historically, and as part of the alternative press, the *Mail & Guardian* provided extensive coverage on worker issues. Thus the side of the story of the most vulnerable members of the society, the poor and the working class, could be heard.

Five of the eight interviews conducted were face-to-face. These interviews were recorded using a dictaphone to ensure that no information would be missed. However, where respondents were not available personally, telephonic interviews were conducted and respondents were requested to answer a questionnaire and submit their response by email to ensure that information was accurately captured. Where necessary, follow-up questions were sent to respondents. An open-ended questionnaire was used as a guide during interviews, permitting the interviewer to probe and get in-depth responses.

Of the four former editors of the paper, only Anton Harber was available. The interview mainly focused on the historical coverage of industrial action and of labour in general. Issues pertaining to the financial survival of the paper and its relationship with various stakeholders, mainly organised labour, were thoroughly examined and probed.

Current editor, Ferial Haffajee, and the paper's long-serving former labour editor, Drew Forest, were interviewed. Forest in particular provided a rich reflection of the paper's current labour coverage compared to its historical coverage. The interview also focused on how the paper perceives labour news currently and the challenges it is facing in balancing the needs of several of its stakeholders. A particular focus on the effects of advertising in the content of news was clear in the interview. Haffajee provided detailed information on both historical and current coverage of labour news. She was also helpful in bringing to light and sharing the paper's future strategy and direction.

Representatives of labour unions were interviewed to gain an understanding of how they perceived the *Mail & Guardian's* current coverage of industrial action and labour news. Critically, the interviews focused on their expectations and the relationship they had with the paper. Of the targeted unionists, only the COSATU spokesperson, Patrick Craven, and SATAWU's Ronnie Mamba were unavailable for the interview due to hectic schedules. Four union representatives, Roger Ronnie (SAMWU), Moferefere Lekorotsoana (NUM), Mziwakhe Hlangani (NUMSA), Mduduzi Mbongwe (SACCAWU) were interviewed.

These five labour union organisations were mainly chosen because, according to the Department of Labour (2004), they are the leading unions in the country in terms of participating in industrial action during the research period, 1999 to 2004.

Of the five unions' representative, only Lekorotsoana was available for a face-to-face interview. The other four interviews were conducted both telephonically and electronically. Lekorotsoana's (Interview, 2005) views, particularly on the coverage of labour by the media in general and specifically the *Mail & Guardian*, were quite intriguing. He puts the blame for the coverage or lack thereof squarely on the shoulders of society and the labour unions themselves. He argues that the coverage of labour is a reflection of how the society perceives labour unions:

> The general perception that exists of organised labour by society is that they are problematic and have nothing to contribute except for strikes and other social problems that lead to mayhem and chaos… another element is that organised labour itself is not aggressive enough in seeking the space that will ensure that its voice is heard (Interview, Lekorotsoana, 2005).

All labour union representatives interviewed pointed out that they expected and hoped for balanced coverage from the paper. At no point did they mention viewing the paper as a strategic ally.

4.2.2 Content analysis

Qualitative content analysis, or textual analysis, is used in this study as a secondary research technique. It assisted in answering questions about production – for example, the influence of ownership, commercial interests, editorial policies, journalistic practices, news sources and consumption issues. Therefore the purpose is to investigate the role of news coverage in relation to social, political, ideological and economic processes, or in relation to individual audiences or readership phenomena. As Hansen *et al* (1998:100) state, for "practical reasons therefore content analysis must start with the selection and narrowing down of the type of coverage to be analyzed".

4.2.2.1 Structure of news

The structure of news is one of the important aspects in determining the nature and manner in which a specific topic or issue is covered. In this study the structuring of news on industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* is scrutinised in order to detect the ways in which industrial action is covered. Bearing in mind the argument advanced in earlier chapters that the definition of newsworthy events is determined by the powerful, social ideologies and organisational routines as argued by Gans (1979) and Tuchman (1978) in Van Dijk (1991):

> … powerful elite groups and institutions, especially in the corporate and political domain, are able to partly control their access to, as

> well as their portrayal in the media. They have effectively organized access through press offices, press releases, press conferences, and in addition they have partial control over news-gathering and portrayal by strategic leaks, personal contacts, financial incentives, or various forms of retaliation against non-complying reporters or newspapers (Van Dijk, 1991: 40).

Furthermore, in examining these news articles, structural issues such as the headlines, leads, thematic organisation, the presence of explanatory background information, style, pictures, page location, sources and many others are used in this study to understand the coverage of industrial action. The primary focus is on the manner in which these news articles on industrial action are framed, the sustainability of the articles and the sources used in these articles.

4.2.2.1.1 Headlines

Headlines are one of the most important elements in news articles. According to Van Dijk (1991), headlines have very important textual and cognitive functions:

> … they are the most conspicuous part of a news report: they are brief, printed 'on top', in large bold type, and often across several columns. Their main function is to summarize the most important information of the report (Van Dijk, 1991:50).

Furthermore, headlines not only direct the reader's attention to the news report but, because they are usually the first part of the article that the reader will read, they define the news article. As Van Dijk (1991) states, cognitive function is important since the information expressed in the headline is strategically used by the reader during the process of understanding in order to construct the overall meaning of the rest of the text before the text is even read.

A common practice that many newspaper readers employ when reading the newspaper is to read the headline and if they are interested in the issues they will then read the rest of the story.

Van Dijk (1991) furthermore argues that the headline information is also used to activate the relevant knowledge in the reader's memory that is needed to understand the article. Talking about racism, he states:

> Thus, as soon as the word riot is used in the headline, the reader will activate relevant general knowledge about riots, that is, a so called 'riot script'. This script monitors the interpretation of the details of the rest of the text (Van Dijk, 1991:50).

The same argument certainly applies to the coverage of industrial action. As soon as the words "strike", "unions" or "COSATU" are used in the headline, the reader will activate relevant general knowledge about strikes and unions, whether positive or negative. Because of the very conditions under which labour unions operate, it is prudent to acknowledge the fact that they are mired in ideological differences that are often characterised by class differences and contradictions.

Coupled with this, headlines have their own ideological implications (Van Dijk, 1991). Van Dijk (1991) says that because headlines express the most important information about a news event, this may impact on the manner in which the reader will absorb, analyse and digest the event. In a nutshell, headlines might paint a very different picture to a reader who reads them alone as compared to a reader who read the entire article:

> … they summarize what, according to the journalist, is the most important aspect, and such a summary necessarily implies an opinion or a specific perspective on the event. Thus, journalists may 'upgrade' a less important topic by expressing it in the headline, thereby 'downgrading' the importance of the main topic (1991:51).

It could also be argued that, by and large, the most important part of the story is often likely to be the headline.

Garst and Bernstein (1982, in Van Dijk 1991) mention that it is a common practice that headlines are not written by the reporters themselves, but by a special editor (sub-editors in the South African context), who must not only try to come

up with the best possible summary for the story but also with a “catchy” headline that will entice readers.

It is therefore quite apparent that the mention of certain words in the headline will certainly play an important role not only in creating an understanding and interpretation of the article but also in ensuring that the article gets the deserved publicity and make readers keen to read it.

4.2.2.1.2 Leads

The lead, or the opening paragraph, is one of the most important parts of a news story. As in any form of writing, the opening paragraphs can make or break the story. According to Bond (1995), the present-day reader resembles the man who both “runs and reads”. It is crucial for such readers to get their information as crisply as possible, and newspapers seek to ensure that takes place: “The convention has developed of telling the main facts of a news story in its first lead paragraph” (Bond, 1995:156).

Having mentioned this critical aspect of news stories, it is however important to bear in mind other social issues that affect the final news product. As mentioned by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980), the structures of headlines, leads and the overall selection of newsworthy topics are indirectly controlled by the societal context of power relations.

Therefore, while analysing the structure of the news, it is fundamental to keep as background these social aspects and their impact on the coverage of the news. Because the lead or intro is the part of the news article most likely to be read, its slant and the words used are crucial to enabling the reader to formulate an opinion. Furthermore, these parts of articles play a fundamental role in painting a certain picture for the reader, and therefore the remainder of the article will be read with that picture or viewpoint in mind.

In this study, and as part of understanding the ways and extent in which the *Mail & Guardian* covers industrial action in the post-apartheid era, leads are closely examined. This focus enables us to understand the coverage of industrial action and labour news by the paper.

Just like in the headline, a mention in the lead of the union involved and its action plays a critical role in setting the tone for the remainder of the story. As an example, the intro of the article "Cosatu, government square up for fight" read:

> The battle lines hardened into a standoff between the government and the giant Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) on Thursday as three public services unions went on strike in protest against the government's refusal to bow to a 10% pay increase demand (*Mail & Guardian*, July 20 – August 5, 1999).

A reader of this article would have formed an opinion from the onset, based on the words used in the intro such as "battle lines", "standoff", "Cosatu", "public services unions", "strike" and "pay increase demands". It is such intros, that describe the action and the parties involved without taking sides, that could be argued to be fair and balanced.

Another structural issue that the study focuses on is the types of articles that are published in the *Mail & Guardian* relating to industrial action. This examination of whether the article is a news report, editorial or an opinion piece is crucial in understanding the manner in which industrial action news is covered by the newspaper. For example, an opinion piece or an editorial can play a critical role in condemning or advocating a particular demand. This view is shared by Van Dijk (1991) when he states that one of the functions of editorials is to accuse or recommend.

4.2.2.1.3 Photographs

Photographs tell a story on their own before the reader even begins to read the article. They are viewed as a powerful medium and an important form of

storytelling. As Will (1965:27) points out, photographs are the supreme form of self-expression of our time.

> The photograph is universally understandable and so appears not to need explanation to supplement it. Its power conveys experience increases as superfluous details are eliminated.

The presence of photographs in a news story therefore enhances the appeal of the story, and thus the chances of the news story being noticeable and read are greatly increased. News articles that were viewed as important were accompanied by photographs. Even articles that were related to industrial action were accompanied by photographs. These would be file photographs and images taken in previous industrial action. The need to have photographs in most news stories underlines the importance and the manner in which they are viewed.

In most instances photographs are manufactured where newsmakers are requested to pose for a camera to produce photographs that would be convincing to the reader. As an example, a labour analyst would be asked to sit in front of a bookshelf and pretend to be doing some serious reading to portray an image of knowledge. Some of the archived pictures are used to support a particular viewpoint. If, for instance, the article says the strike action is harming foreign investment and thus harming job creation, an old picture of unemployed black males queuing for employment would be shown.

The usage of photographs in this fashion, in a nutshell, proves the importance of photographs as part of storytelling but also as a tool that powerful individuals and organisations that are in control of the media often use to re-present facts to drive their viewpoints home.

4.2.2.1.4 Length and frequency of articles

The length of a news story is also an indication of how important a story is. Space in newspapers is a contested terrain, with many stories rejected outright and some

being discarded in the last minutes. So if a news story is covered by the paper, first and foremost this is an indication that the story is indeed important or at least viewed as important by the paper's editorial team.

Page location and the section in which a story is located within the paper are also elements that enhance the story's prominence in the paper. Furthermore, the length and timing of a news story are other elements that improve the prominence of the story.

As mentioned, the prominence of a news article indirectly determines if the article becomes "news in brief" or a two-page story. Related to this element is the timing or frequency of the coverage of industrial action. Timing or frequency is important as such actions are not spontaneous but often a result of protracted negotiations that deadlock and result in strike action.

This term, timing or frequency, is therefore used to detect if the *Mail & Guardian* is able to anticipate these actions while they are building up, and critically for post-industrial-action coverage. As an example, if there is build-up to a strike action in the paper, it becomes easier for readers to follow up and contextualise the stories when they are covered during the strike action.

Reporting of post-industrial action is also an important measure of the timing and frequency of stories on industrial action. Through presentation of the outcomes of the strike action, coupled with drawing lessons learned from the strike, the paper's attitude towards issues of the working class is uncovered. It is of absolutely no use to cover a strike action and then say little about it when it is over. Putting the strike action into perspective when it is over is a trait of a good newspaper. It also reflects the paper's outlook on labour issues and the welfare of the working class.

4.2.2.2 Section and page location

The location of a story in newspapers often indicates the importance and the prominence of that particular story. This frequently indicates the thinking of the newspaper's editorial team and their views about how interesting and newsworthy the story is. This interest and newsworthiness is mainly manifested by the page number and section in which the articles are placed.

The *Mail & Guardian* places important stories that are viewed as national news in the national news section. The first page is used to advertise the lead story, using pictures and its page location, the second and the third pages are normally used to carry the actual story. The most important pages in the *Mail & Guardian* are the first three. These pages also fall within the national news section of the paper. Therefore, any story that is carried on these pages clearly is viewed as a story of national importance by the paper.

The subsequent pages, normally up to pages 11 or 12, carry stories that fall within the national news section. The closer the story is to the first three pages the more chance it has to be read – thus a barometer of its importance. This observation is used in this study to understand the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian.*

4.2.3 Sampling

A judgmental sample was used, together with snowball sampling, to identify individuals to be interviewed. As Babbie and Mouton (2001) states that snowball sampling is appropriate when members of a special population are difficult to locate:

> This procedure is implemented by collecting data on the few members of the targeted population you can locate, and then asking those individuals to provide the information needed to locate other members of that population whom they happen to know (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:167)

Judgmental sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which the researcher uses his/her own judgment in the selection of sample members. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001) sometimes it is appropriate to select a sample on the basis of ones knowledge of the population, its element s, and the nature of the study aims.

Subsequent to the identification and interviewing of suitable subjects, they were asked to refer the researcher to additional subjects – in other words, snowball sampling. An example of this was the referral by Anton Harber to Drew Forester, Phillip van Niekerk, Stephen Friedman and many more of his former colleagues that he thought could be of assistance.

In conducting this exercise, there was a need to choose a sample of articles on industrial action in the paper. A hypothesis had to be made based on a fact that most industrial action occurs during the bargaining period where trade unions and employers' organisations are engaged in substantive negotiation through bargaining councils to deal with issues such as collective agreements, labour disputes, establishment of various schemes and make proposals on labour policies and laws. This period is usually between July and September. It is this period that this study focused on for sampling purposes. However, the sample included the months of June and October in order to fully understand whether there was any build-up to industrial action as well as to assess the nature of follow-up articles. Thus the sample period was between June and October of each of the years that were selected. The sample consisted of 120 editions of the paper. Of these 120 editions, the analysis focused on 23 editions of the paper that covered industrial action.

4.3 Analysis and interpretation of data

In analysing and interpreting qualitative research data, thematic content analysis was utilised. This research technique allowed the researcher to identify the themes

in articles on industrial action. According to Williamson, Karp, Dalphin and Gray (1982) thematic content analysis is a qualitative data analysis method designed to extract consistent themes from a wide range of written or verbal communication. In Chapter 5 (findings) and Chapter 6 (critical analysis), thematic content analysis is utilised, as it is easy to follow and hence to make inferences.

Using the sample period, the number of articles on industrial action were counted in each year. Subsequently, the articles were categorised into news reports, editorials, opinion pieces and analysis pieces. This categorisation enabled the researcher to critically analyse the coverage. Based on this counting and categorising, inferences could be made about the coverage of industrial action. This technique enabled the researcher to count things such as the number of sources used in an article, the number of photographs accompanying the article, the number of reporters and contributors used to cover industrial action, and the number of articles on industrial action which were the lead articles. Hence in Chapter 5, descriptive statistical information is provided.

4.4 Research constraints

The major drawback in this research, just like in any other study that utilises a sample, is the fact that any articles on industrial action that fell outside of this period were left out.

Another limitation that the researcher encountered during the data collection period was the unavailability of the labour unions' top leadership. As political heads of labour unions, it was difficult to pin down Secretary-Generals; out of the five identified unions, only Roger Ronnie, SAMWU's Secretary-General, was available for interview other Secretary-Generals were not available. However, SACCAWU Deputy Secretary-General, Mduduzi Mbongwe, availed himself in the absence of the Secretary-General.

The fact that the spokespersons of the other unions were interviewed also had its advantages since they had a particular understanding of the media, as officials charged with interacting with the media, and hence their views were of assistance.

Chapter 5
THE *MAIL & GUARDIAN'S* COVERAGE OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis and understanding of the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* from 1999 to 2004. The focus is on the content of news articles on industrial action. Various aspects that accompany news articles, such as the page location of the article, the heading, its length, sources used, the reporters and many other crucial elements are discussed.

5.2 Structure of the news

In scrutinising articles on industrial action, the study first focuses on the types of articles that the *Mail & Guardian* published during this period. It then focuses on the structure of these articles, regardless of their type. This will paint a clear picture of the tone or the stance that paper takes on these issues, as well as the manner in which these actions are covered.

5.3 Descriptive information about articles on industrial action

5.3.1 Type of articles

Table 5.2 below is a sample of articles on industrial action between 1999 and 2002, it emerges that most stories covered by the *Mail & Guardian* fell within the news report category. Of the 33 articles sampled during this period, 26 were news report articles, two were editorials and three were opinion pieces.

Table 5.1 Number of industrial action articles in the *Mail & Guardian*, 1999-2004

Type of articles	1999	2000	2001	2002
News report	3	2	16	7
Editorial	1	-	1	-
Opinion	2	-	1	-
Analysis	-	-	-	-
Total	6	2	18	7

Table 5.2 Number of articles in the *Mail & Guardian* related to industrial action, 1999-2004

Type of articles	1999	2000	2001	2002
News report	1	2	12	3
Editorial	-	-	-	-
Opinion	-	4	-	-
Analysis	-	3	1	-
Total	1	9	13	3

Table 5.3 above presents the number of articles that were not directly about industrial action but that were related to industrial action. Mainly these articles emanated from articles on industrial action that were published in the paper, while some were build-up articles towards industrial action. Of the 26 articles that were published during this period 17 were news reports, four were opinion pieces and three were analytical articles.

On face value, an inference can be made that the articles were mainly based on factual reports characterised as news reports. However, covering a news story goes beyond facts, as a closer examination of these articles will reveal. Furthermore, the process and manner in which news story articles are gathered and covered is not an innocent process.

5.3.2 Structure of articles on industrial action

In this study, the structure of news is used to analyse these articles in order to elucidate the manner in which stories on industrial action are covered by the paper. Crucial aspects such as page location, section, photographs, length and timing, reporters and contributors, build-ups and follow-ups, and the frequency of news articles are analysed in order to make an informed inference on the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian*.

5.3.2.1 Headlines

Out of 33 industrial action and 26 industrial-action-related articles sampled during the period under review, 34 either mentioned “strike”, the name of a labour union or COSATU in the headline. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that when industrial action is covered in the *Mail & Guardian,* many of these news stories are likely to catch the attention of interested readers and thus get the deserved publicity. However, such publicity does not necessarily equate to good publicity, as it could be manipulated and have a negative impact on the labour union in question.

It is not only the mention of certain words in the headline that is important; the structure of the headlines is also quite important. The headlines that mention certain words in a positive, neutral or negative way. For example, a strike action by unions that is supported by COSATU might be portrayed as a direct cause of a negative outcome; for example, the following headline appeared in the 24-30

August 2001 edition of the *Mail & Guardian* – "Bosses: It harms foreign investment". It could be argued that such headlines are likely to portray the labour unions involved as irresponsible since their actions are purported to have negative effects on the country's image and economy. On the other hand, such headlines might be viewed by the concerned labour unions and their sympathisers in a positive light since their actions could be construed as having an impact and thus perhaps leading to the desired outcome.

Nevertheless, of the 33 articles on industrial action and the 26 articles related to industrial action sampled, most headlines described the action or the content of the story with the exception of the above-mentioned headline. Judging by these headlines, there emerges a picture suggesting that in covering industrial action the *Mail & Guardian* summarises the most important information of the story in its headlines. This could be translated as an action that gives readers of such news stories a chance to grasp the most important information early.

5.3.2.2 Leads

In analysing these leads, of the 33 articles on industrial action and the 26 articles related to industrial action, almost all of the 45 news report articles had leads that could be considered to be fair and balanced towards the strike or the labour union. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is up to the reader to interpret these leads based on their outlook and experiences around the issue at hand, in this case industrial action. It would be difficult for an ordinary government worker and, say, the Minister of Labour to interpret this intro the same way. Moreover, it is crucial to bear in mind that, just like any paper, the *Mail & Guardian* operates within capitalist market conditions and as such it is not immune to prevailing societal power relations.

5.3.3 Sources

As discussed earlier, sources in news articles most often indicate whether or not the article has balance, is fair and impartial. It was initially argued in this study

that sources provide a signal whether all relevant voices are represented or given access to the news media. Furthermore, it was argued that news sources are most crucial in news organisations since newspapers cannot be everywhere, mainly due to high demand and the tight deadlines they have to meet.

In response to the broad question of this research – in what ways and to what extent does the *Mail & Guardian* cover industrial action in the post-apartheid era? – close examination is made in order to understand the selection and the prominence of news sources in articles on industrial action.

All the news articles on industrial action sampled used union officials, analysts and representatives of affected organisations as sources. Some of the sources used in articles on industrial action during this period are discussed below.

5.3.3.1 COSATU officials used as sources

Various officials from COSATU were cited in the sampled articles, including the following:

- Willie Madisha (COSATU President)
- Zwelinzima Vavi (COSATU General Secretary)
- Neva Makgetla (COSATU economist)
- Moloto Mothapo (acting COSATU spokesperson)
- Patrick Craven (COSATU spokesperson)
- Vukani Mde (COSATU spokesperson)

5.3.3.2 Union officials used as sources

Below is a lost of union officials who were cited in the sampled articles:

- Thulas Nxesi (SADTU General Secretary)
- Edwin Pillay (SADTU Deputy President)
- Vusi Nhlapo (NEHAWU President)
- Moloantoa Molaba (NEHAWU spokesperson)
- Gwede Mantashe (NUM General Secretary)

- Crosby Moni (NUM Deputy President)
- Dumisani Ntuli (NUMSA spokesperson)
- Jane Barrett (SATAWU spokesperson)
- Dale Forbes (SAMWU Chief Negotiator)

These officials espoused the views of their unions while providing context to their threatened or existing industrial action. For example, in the article "Union threat to down tools" (page 31, July 20 – July 27 2001 edition), NUM General Secretary, Gwede Mantashe, was interviewed and he elaborated on the reasons behind the strike. He provided more details on the strike and the situation that led to the strike thereby presenting a context on the strike as a whole. This is mainly the manner in which most unions' officials were used in articles on industrial action where their access to the paper appeared to be dependent on clarifying their action rather than setting the agenda.

5.3.3.3 Labour unions used as sources

The following are some of the labour unions and union federations used in articles on industrial action:

- Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)
- National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU)
- Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA)
- South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU)
- National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)
- South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU)
- South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU)
- National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA)

Generally, the trend in articles on strike action was that the action was attributed to the union involved before its officials were given a chance to give more details. In some instances, statements from unions were used as part of the article. An

example of this is the same article on “Union threat to down tools” (page 31, July 20 – July 27, 2001, edition), where a statement from the NUM was used. Subsequent to remarks attributed to the NUM’s statement, General Secretary, Gwede Mantashe’s analysis on the matter were then used where he mainly elaborated further on what was said on the statement and gave further clarity and context that led the union to issue the statement.

Other articles that used statements from unions included the article “COSATU challenge to ANC leaders” (July 7 – July 13, 2001 edition) which used a discussion document by COSATU before officials are interviewed. The article “National strike against the state” (August 3 – August 9, 2001 edition) used a position paper to clarify the role of unions while the article “SADTU slams state’s negotiation” (October 19 – October 25, 2001 edition) used a statement to give NAPTOSA’s position.

5.3.3.4 Officials of political organisations used as sources

Many articles on industrial action drew a great deal of attention from political organisations, especially those that are part of the Tripartite Alliance.

The following are some of the officials of political organisations used in these articles:

- Mazibuko Jara (South African Communist Party [SACP] spokesperson)
- Nomfanelo Mayosi-Kota (United Democratic Movement [UDM] spokesperson)
- Phillip Dexter (ANC member and Executive Director of the National Economic Development and Labour Council [NEDLAC])
- Smuts Ngonyama (ANC spokesperson)
- Kgalema Mothlante (ANC General Secretary)
- Malusi Gigaba (ANC Youth League [ANCYL] President).

The utilisation of political organisation officials simply reveals the fact that most articles on industrial action are linked with what is now viewed as labour politics. In the main, because the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance is in power, some labour demands and strike actions are, sometimes, viewed as an attack on the ANC by ultra-left union leaders. Therefore, the major publicity that COSATU received between 1999 and 2004 has to do with alliance politics. For example, in the article titled "Mbeki 'fuels alliance tensions'" (September 1 – 7, 2000, edition), Kgalema Mothlante is quoted on the challenges of communication between COSATU and the ANC.

Other articles on labour politics included "Government reaches out to unions" (August 20 – 26, 1999) where the Minister of Labour, Membathisi Mdladla addressed the COSATU congress and raised issues such as the "workplace renaissance". The article "Too left-wing official axed by Numsa" (July 28 – August 3, 2000 edition) focuses on the dismissal of Dinga Sikwebu over his views on whether COSATU should maintain the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance.

5.3.3.5 Political organisations used as sources

Similar to the trend with labour unions, sometimes statements by political organisations were used in articles on industrial action to articulate their positions and views. For example, the SACP's discussion documents were often used in these labour politics articles, either to show a divergent view or the inherent dichotomy of an alliance involving a ruling party and a major trade union federation.

The following are some of the political organisations used in articles on industrial action:

- South African Communist Party (SACP)
- African National Congress (ANC)
- African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL)

5.3.3.6 Other organisations used as sources

The following organisations played a pivotal role in entrenching and consolidating democracy in South Africa, and as such their views on various issues including labour are indeed fundamental:

- National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC)
- South African Non-governmental Organisation Coalition (SANGOCO)
- South African Local Government Association (SALGA)
- Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA)

It is therefore not surprising that whenever industrial action, which is another form of expression of democratic rights, is unfolding the views and positions of these organisations are critical. For example, as result of strike action, some employees find themselves in dispute with employers the CCMA becomes central and plays a role during the mediation process. Many of NEDLAC's discussion documents and its directors are often used to provide in-depth analysis of the labour landscape in the country.

5.3.3.7 Government officials used as sources

Many government officials were used in articles on industrial action. Inevitably, because in the past few years the country witnessed numerous strike actions involving public servants, senior government officials find themselves having to defend government policy. The role of these officials is mainly to give the government's perspective on these disputes. However, the Department of Labour has been drawn into almost all disputes as a custodian of the labour policies in the country.

The government officials quoted in articles on industrial action include:

- Jeff Radebe (Transport Minister)
- Peter Mokaba (former Environment and Tourism Deputy Minister and Member of Parliament [MP])
- Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (Minister of Minerals and Energy)
- Joel Netshitenzhe (Government Communication and Information Service [GCIS] CEO)
- Essop Pahad (Minister in the Presidency)
- Alvin Rapea (Acting Director-General of Public Service and Administration)
- Robinson Ramaite (Director-General of Public Service and Administration)
- Kader Asmal (Minister of Education)
- Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi (Public Service and Administration Minister)
- President Thabo Mbeki
- Lisa Seftel (Chief Director in the Department of Labour)
- Ngoako Ramathlodi(Limpopo Premier)
- Rams Ramashia (Director-General of Labour).

5.3.3.8 Analysts used as sources

Analysts are used to bring an independent view on the issue to ensure that the story has credibility and balance. The list below shows the type of analysts that were quoted in articles on industrial action:

- Jackie Kelly (*Labour Bulletin*)
- Ebrahim Hassen (National Labour and Economic Development Institute [NALEDI])
- Oupa Lehulere (Director of Khanya College)
- Duncan Innes (*The Innes Labour Brief*)
- Charles Nupen (Project Director for the International Labour Organisation [ILO] in Southern Africa)
- Vic van Vuuren (chief operating officer of Business Unity South Africa)
- Eddie Webster (Sociology of Work Project [SWOP] at the University of the Witwatersrand)

- Gavin Brown
- Greg Hunter.

5.3.3.9 Business organisations and officials used as sources

Businessman, Thami Mazwai, in his opinion piece "COSATU acts irresponsibly in criticising the government" (September 1 – 7, 2000 edition), he criticised COSATU and its General-Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, of being myopic on their criticism of government. He says: "If we leave ourselves at the mercy of COSATU's hysterical demands, we would soon be out of business."

In the article "SA business lambastes the labour changes" (September 22 – 28, 2000 edition), Frans Rautenbach of the Labour Liberation Institute the labour law changes on condition of employment. He proposed a deregulation of the labour market. These are some of the position that business organisations took in defence of their business interests.

Below are some of the officials used during the time of the study:

- Frans Barker (mine negotiator)
- Ian Robertson (National Association of Automobile Manufacturers)
- Christof Kopke (DaimlerChrysler)
- Martin West (Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Cape town [UCT])
- Derek Swemmer (Registrar, University of the Witwatersrand).
- PriceWaterhouse-Coopers

5.3.3.10 Publications quoted

ANC Today was the most frequently cited publication in articles on industrial action. This publication is a weekly online publication of the ANC that provides up-to-the-minute information on the programmes, perspectives and policies of the

movement on current national and international issues. Among its regular features is a column by ANC President Thabo Mbeki.

What emerges from all the sampled articles is that the sources used, as far as workers are concerned, were officials of the unions.

5.3.4 Labour story – important aspects

This section describes the placement of stories on industrial action and understanding of the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* and the focus is on the content of news articles on industrial action. Various important aspects that accompany news articles, such as page location, section, photographs, length and frequency of articles, and reporters and contributors are discussed.

5.3.4.1 Page location of stories

Of the 33 articles on industrial action and 26 industrial-action-related articles sampled, six articles appeared on the third page, which is viewed as one of the most important pages in the newspaper. Three articles were published on the second page. In 2000 and 2002 respectively there were two lead articles published on the front page (page 1) and carrying over to the third page.

Also in 2002 one article was published on the second page, which is an important page in relation to section and prominence. The rest of the articles were published from the fourth page onwards, including the supplement sections.

5.3.4.2 Section and placement of stories

With the exception of five articles published in the *Inside* section, three in the Work to Rule Supplement in 2000, another three published in the Monitor section in 2000 and two opinion pieces, the rest of the 33 articles on industrial action and

26 industrial-action-related articles sampled were published in the national news section, an indication of the importance of such news stories to the paper.

5.3.4.3 Photographs

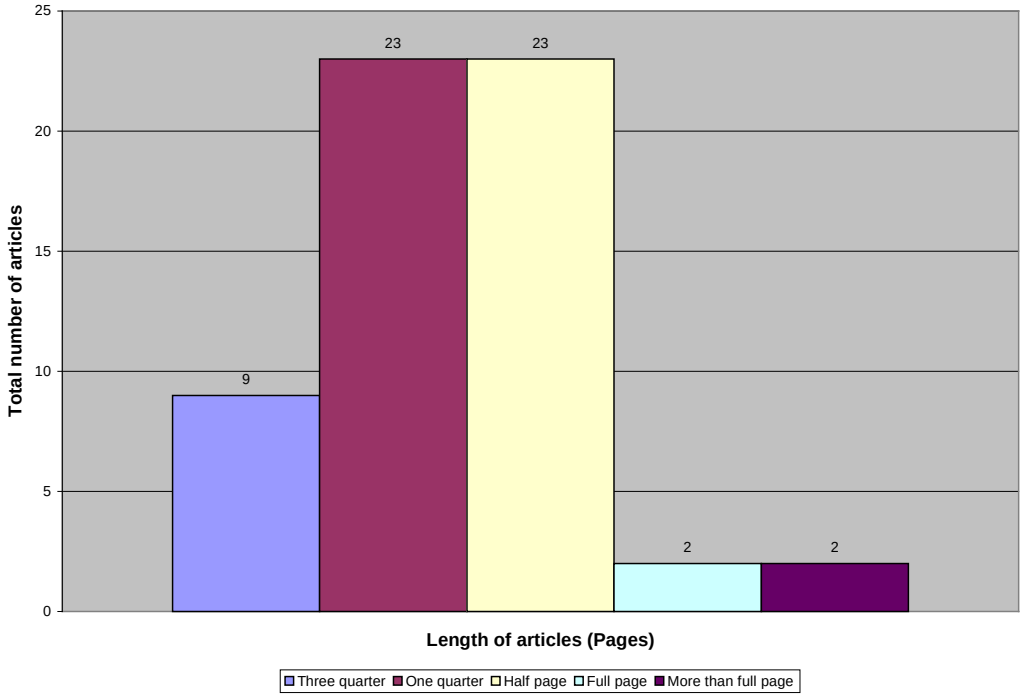
As an indication of this important view of images, of the 33 articles on industrial action and 26 industrial-action-related articles sampled, 30 had photographs with two articles carrying more than one photographs. These articles are: “Jury out on strike’s success” (August 31 – September 6, 2001 edition) and “State is infiltrating us” (October 4 – 10, 2001 edition).

Because of the presence of photographs in these articles, an inference could be made that industrial action is taken seriously and viewed as an important news story by the *Mail & Guardian.*

5.3.4.4 Length and frequency of articles

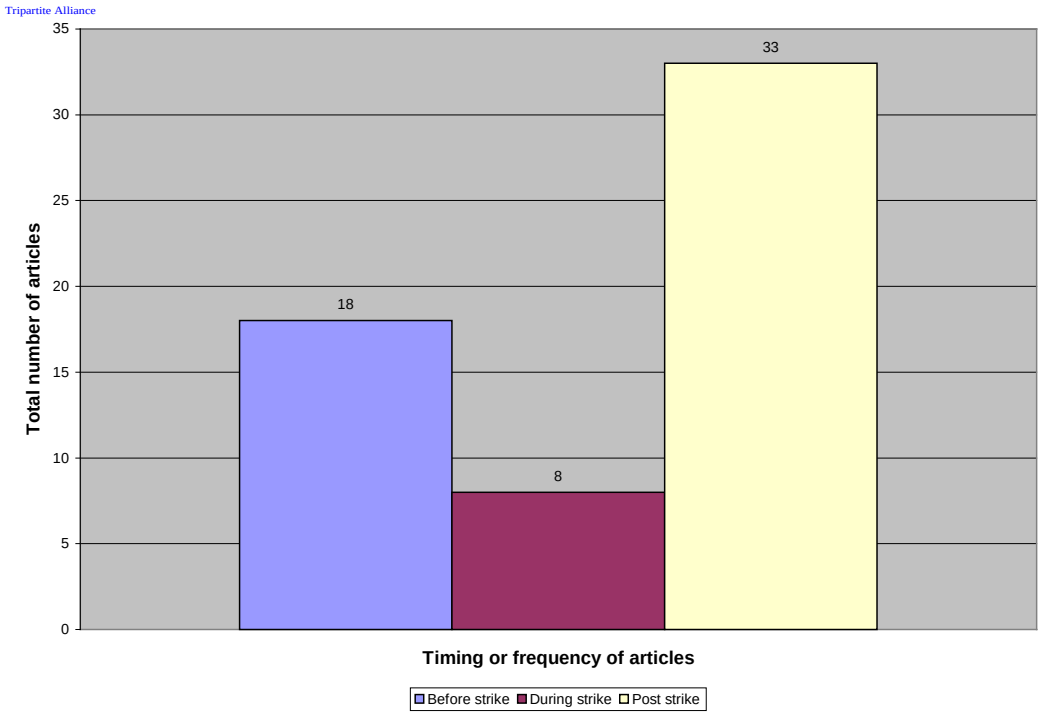
As far as the length is concerned (see figure 1.1 below), of the 33 articles on industrial action and 26 industrial action related articles sampled during this period, two news article were published over two pages, two were full-page news articles, nine took three-quarters of a page, 23 were half-page articles and another 23 were one-quarter page long.

Figure 1.1 Length of articles on industrial action



Presentation of the timing or frequency of news articles during this period (see figure 1.2 below) reveals that 18 articles were published before the industrial action took place, while eight articles were published during the strike and 33 were published following the industrial action.

Figure 1.2 Timing or frequency of articles of articles on industrial action



5.3.4.5 Reporters and contributors

Glenda Daniels was by far the most prominent and consistent writer of labour news during this period. Of articles sampled during this period, 46 were news reports, six were opinion pieces, five were analysis articles and two were editorials. Daniels contributed 17 news report articles, and co-authored four joint articles with Jaspreet Kindra and David Macfarlane. She also co-authored two analysis articles, one of them with Howard Barrell and Sipho Seepe.

Following Daniels with the number of articles published during the time under review was Jaspreet Kindra, with eight news report articles, four joint news reports and an analysis piece. David Macfarlane chipped in with two news reports and co-authored one during the same period. Howard Barrell wrote one news report, one opinion piece and co-authored one article, while Ivor Powell, Marianne Merten and Heather Hogan wrote a joint news report article during this time.

Wally Mbhele, Steward Bailey, Shyaka Kanuma, Drew Forest and Wisani Ngobeni all wrote one news report each, while the Deputy General Secretary of the SACP, Jeremy Cronin, contributed one opinion piece during the period. Drew Forest contributed two news reports while Thabo Mohlala, Ngwako Modjadji, Sechaba ka Nkosi and Barry Streek each wrote one news report.

John S. Saul (Professor Emeritus of Politics at York University) weighed in with a single analysis article, while Thami Mazwai (Chief Executive Officer of Mafube Publishing), Tony Ehrenreich (Western Cape General Secretary of COSATU), Ebrahim-Khalil Hassen (Researcher at NALEDI) and Jackie Kelly (editor of the *Labour Bulletin*) all contributed an opinion piece during this time.

Chapter 6

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE *MAIL & GUARDIAN*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

6.1 Introduction

This section of the study critically analyses the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* in post-apartheid South Africa, and makes inferences based on the qualitative findings presented in Chapter 5. Most responses by interviewees pertaining to the coverage by the *Mail & Guardian* of industrial action in particular and of labour news in general are grouped thematically so that the views of different individuals can be used to either support or dispute the argument advanced in this study.

6.2 The coverage of labour news

The section focuses on both pre and post 1994 coverage and the influences of the political and social landscape. It is argued that socio-economic and political conditions play a fundamental role in shaping the content and the direction the paper is taking in particular with regard to the coverage of labour news in general.

From the views of labour unions taken into account, it becomes apparent that the function fulfilled by the alternative press before the 1994 democratic

breakthrough was recognised as crucial. Therefore, the dearth of the working class press that can participate constructively in consolidating democracy has left a vacuum.

6.2.1 Pre-1994 coverage: influences of the political and social landscape

Some of the major differences in the ways in which industrial action was covered in the selected period (1999-2004) and the newspaper's pre-1994 era are due mainly to differing social conditions. It is no secret that social and political conditions in post-apartheid South Africa are diametrically different to the conditions that existed in the early 1980s. At that time political organisations opposed to the apartheid regime were banned and their leaders incarcerated; mass action and public gatherings more often than not turned ugly.

It is these conditions that must be taken into account when critical analysis of the coverage of industrial action by the paper is undertaken. As the paper's long-serving former labour reporter and editor, and now part of the editorial team, Drew Forest (Interview, 2005) states that what was important about the strikes of the 1980s was the political dimension they had in opposition to apartheid government policies. Currently, it could also be argued that recent strikes have a political dimension to them. As a consequence of prevailing class contradictions, the present government has introduced myriad progressive labour policies.

Forest says that there was a political vacuum in the 1980s because of the banning of political organisations; trade union organisations filled this vacuum, and their actions and campaigns became extremely popular:

> … there was a tremendous focus on strikes by the media in the 1980s because everybody knew that they had a political significance … So throughout the entire period there was tremendous media focus on industrial action because of political immersion about them (Interview, 2005).

He goes on to argue that there was a stage in the 1980s where every single strike was a newsworthy event because of this political dimension. Forest (Interview, 2005) recalls that for about 10 years between the 1970s and 1980s there had been little industrial action in South Africa because of the brutality of the apartheid system. It follows that industrial action under such circumstances was likely to be viewed as a highly newsworthy event because of its uncommonness and political implications.

According to Forest (Interview, 2005), during that period the government desperately tried to separate trade unions and their worker rights from politics and political rights. Furthermore, he points out that the government passed a series of labour laws to prevent trade unions from being used for political purposes. He says the coverage of industrial action took a turn in the early 1990s, when it became apparent that the apartheid government's days were numbered. He states that when it became abundantly clear that there would be transformation of power which would eventually result in the demise of apartheid and white minority rule, trade union organisations and industrial action became less interesting to the media and thus garnered less coverage:

> Only large strikes involving big and important organisations such as the motor industry received coverage … We would cover those because of the economic aspect, mainly the impact they had on the economy (Forest, Interview, 2005).

However, what is important to note about this epoch in the history of the media in South Africa (the early 1990s) is the fact that this time was characterised by the demise of the alternative press. When it became categorically clear that there would be transformation in the country that would lead to the end of white minority rule, many donor-funded newspapers, including the *Mail & Guardian*, struggled financially. It is quite apparent that the advent of democracy led to the downfall of the alternative press. These are the contradictions of democracy and capitalism, since the very same alternative press played a critical role in bringing about democracy. The alternative press contributed immensely and played a

constructive role in the fight against apartheid by highlighting the plight of the marginalised and the working class.

On the issue of the paper's historical coverage of industrial action, joint founder and former editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, Anton Harber (Interview, 2005) concurs with the view that the paper focused its attention on big strikes of national importance. He points out that, as a national paper, the *Mail & Guardian* tended to pick on issues that were viewed to be of national importance. He says a strike had to have all the ingredients, including a political dimension, in order to be deemed as newsworthy:

> So the mineworkers' strike would have been of national importance, as well as a national stay-away. But a strike down the road – we would cover it if we saw that it was of national importance, but generally not. So that was what defined it, and the fact that it was a weekly newspaper, so it tended to pick up on major trends during the week … (Harber, Interview, 2005).

Juxtaposing the current coverage with pre-1994 coverage, Haffajee (Interview, 2005) states that recently the general coverage of labour news, characterised by industrial action, was no longer viewed as important as it used to be in the late 1980s. She bases her viewpoint on the fact that when she joined the newspaper there was a full labour team:

> We took it [labour] very seriously … labour news would often lead the paper [and] it had its own whole labour page because the labour movement was quite central to politics … the RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme] came out of the labour movement, just like most of the key economic, trade and labour policies … during that period labour was a hot bed of policy … but as the role of labour moved from centre stage to its normal role in society, it is reflected by our current coverage, but I think it is a mistake (Haffajee, Interview, 2005).

A big mistake indeed, when the fact that the *Mail & Guardian* is the only surviving former alternative publication is taken into account. As the

contradictions of capitalism[2] become clearer, labour and working-class issues are once again taking the centre stage; the only difference this time around is lack of coverage of these issues as the demise of the alternative press has left a vacuum.

Moreover, the *Mail & Guardian* can no longer be classified as part of the alternative press since it has become part of the mainstream media with new owners and sophisticated readers, most of whom are not interested in the issues and the hardships of the workers and the marginalised.

Harber (Interview, 2005) echoes these sentiments and says there has certainly been a shift in the coverage of industrial action post-1994. He asserts that before 1994 the paper defined its role differently, and very often provided a voice for people who, under the prevailing political circumstances, had no choice and whose voice was neglected by the mainstream media. Referring to the political dimension that industrial action possessed in those days, he says the coverage of labour news then by the paper was not only about individual strikes or workplace issues, but much more related to the Congress Movement and its struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed majority, which the paper viewed as important.

According to Harber (Interview, 2005) major strikes that were of national importance and with a political dimension, such as the mineworkers' strike, had dedicated reporters who covered them because of their centrality to the struggle against apartheid. Because of this political dimension that accompanied labour news, Harber (Interview, 2005) states that many reporters considered labour to be a desirable beat. It is apparent that the political dimension in labour news, brought about by the injustices of the apartheid system, had a major impact on how labour

[2] The term is associated with Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) who claimed that capitalist societies suffered from two unresolved problems that would prevent both social harmony and a stable economic life … Capitalists corporations grew more concentrated and larger, the number of individuals owning the means of production became fewer … It is this development of social polarisation that provide the unsolvable social or relational contradiction of capitalist society. (http://bitbucket.icaap.org/dict.pl)

news was defined. As Harber (Interview, 2005) points out, politics and labour reporters were close, and labour was often the route to political reporting.

It emerges, therefore, that because of the social conditions that prevailed then, the paper considered the labour beat as very important in its setup. As Harber (Interview, 2005) furthermore mentions, there was a time when one could not understand the political dynamics in the country unless one understood the dynamics of organised labour.

It is because of such dynamics that Harber (Interview, 2005) argues that labour reporting was closely tied to political reporting, and some people even dubbed the beat as a political and labour beat. Following the unbanning of political organisations, which led to the commencement of formal constitutional negotiations in 1991, the focus on labour news and industrial action was dwarfed by these obviously important developments as the struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed masses shifted to another level.

These developments, accompanied by the shift in political power, subsequently affected the coverage of industrial action in the *Mail & Guardian*. Harber (Interview, 2005) confirms this viewpoint when he mentions that the focus on constitutional negotiations and the adoption of the Reconstruction and Development Programme became central issues. While this was unfolding, a majority of the COSATU leadership was absorbed into the negotiations. Furthermore, the ANC assumed its rightful leadership role in the Tripartite Alliance, relegating COSATU to a much more junior position, whereas in the 1980s and early 1990s COSATU had been much more a driving force against apartheid inside the country, through the UDF.

In addition to this, Harber (Interview, 2005) believes that the exodus of COSATU leaders to assume leadership positions in government further weakened the labour unions. All these developments conspired against and contributed to the decline of coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian*. Logically, it follows that

once there is a decline in the coverage of labour news, the manner in which it is covered would also change, as labour reporting would not be an important beat in the paper.

Nevertheless, Harber (Interview, 2005) concurs with the perspective that historically the paper was sympathetic to workers and the marginalised. Revealing that there was always sympathy towards issues of inequality, poverty and those issues related to the trade union movement, he attributes the decline of coverage to the country's political state of affairs, as he believes that they influence the content of news.

It is this prevailing state of affairs that has contributed to the manner in which labour news, and principally news about industrial action, is covered in the mainstream media and in the *Mail & Guardian*.

6.2.2 Post 1994 coverage: political and social conditions

Most would argue that the 1994 democratic breakthrough changed the landscape of many organisations in the country, whether private sector or philanthropic organisations. Forest (Interview, 2005) concurs when he says the 1994 breakthrough led to a decline of industrial action as trade unions were no longer fighting the apartheid government, while on the other hand the new government passed a series of worker-friendly labour laws. This in a nutshell meant that there was little for organised labour to be disgruntled about, as disputes could be resolved through institutions such as the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), resulting in less discontent and industrial action.

It was during this time that the *Mail & Guardian* had to rethink its strategies, and the coverage of industrial action was not immune to these changing socio-economic and political conditions. Because of some of these factors, industrial action was viewed differently by the media, including the *Mail & Guardian* and hence its coverage. The newsworthiness and importance of industrial action in the

post-1994 era is therefore defined using the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions as opposed to the pre-1994 epoch that was mainly characterised by protest journalism and opposition to apartheid. Forest (Interview, 2005) mentions, the paper now mainly covers "big strikes" with serious economic impact and severe repercussions for the country:

> We do not cover every strike, we only cover big strikes that involve tens of thousands of workers and those strikes that either have huge economic impact or that have impact on services like hospitals (Forest, Interview, 2005).

Because of this definition, Forest (Interview, 2005) says they will certainly cover industrial action like a nationwide strike by teachers. In a nutshell, he makes it clear that any industrial action that the paper covers must have social and economic impact. However, strikes with political dimensions, such as a national strike by public servants, are likely to be viewed as newsworthy because they pit COSATU and the ANC-led government, both members of the Tripartite Alliance, against each other. These strikes in the past have led to speculation in the media that they reflect discontent by some alliance partners, and have been interpreted as signalling the end of the alliance. An example of such media speculation is the anti-privatisation strikes by COSATU in 2002 which were interpreted as "a crippling salvo into the ailing ANC-led tripartite alliance" (*The Star*, 23 July 2002).

These strikes were mainly viewed as the deterioration of relations within the alliance. However, what fuels these assumptions by the media is the political climate under which these strikes take place which is often characterised by breakdown in communication. In the case of the anti-privatisation strikes, the breakdown in communication was followed by mudslinging between leaders of ANC and COSATU.

Another crucial element of these strikes is their timing. In 2001, COSATU called a two-day national strike, a call heeded by more than four million workers, during

an international conference on racism attended by more than 10 000 delegates. This move by COSATU infuriated the leadership of the ANC as they felt that the strikes were meant to humiliate the ANC-led government.

The post-1994 coverage of labour news by the *Mail & Guardian* also follows this trend and focuses on labour politics rather than issues affecting the working class. The coverage of labour news by the paper therefore no longer reflects the historical role the paper played as a voice of the oppressed and the marginalised by highlighting their plights during the apartheid era. Labour news in South Africa are still very important for the consolidation of democracy. As Haffajee (Interview, 2005) points out, in the South African context the trade union movement makes up a significant and large piece of the country's leadership, and as such it is still a very important stakeholder. However, this is not reflected in the paper's coverage.

> … the labour movement in South Africa is one the few in the world that continues to grow … It is probably your next layer of political leadership … So I think it [current coverage] is a strategic mistake and we are working on fixing that. (Haffajee, Interview, 2005)

Nevertheless, to critical analyse the current coverage of labour issues, and industrial action in particular, it is imperative to acknowledge the economic and social conditions under which the *Mail & Guardian* finds itself having to operate. These conditions that the paper now finds itself having to operate under requires it to transform for its very own survival. Alternative publications that could not transform and become part of the mainstream commercial press simply died. For the *Mail & Guardian,* to survive and prosper under current conditions it has to do away with ambitions of playing a constructive role for the marginalised and the working class as it did during apartheid because capitalism impedes that.

6.2.3 Views of labour unions

Many labour unions recognise the role that the alternative press played during apartheid. Under these conditions the alternative press became a conduit and a

platform through which labour unions, the oppressed and the marginalised used to express their views and to highlight their predicament. The dearth of media that could play such a constructive role under current conditions, as the economic struggle intensifies and the vacuum left by the demise of the alternative press, is to the detriment of the poor and the marginalised.

The role that current socio-economic conditions play in marginalising a press that is biased towards the working class is also expressed by the spokesperson of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Moferefere Lekorotsoana. He argues that the coverage of labour news in general and industrial action in particular reflects society's attitude towards labour unions. Pointing out that society's general perception of labour unions is that they are problematic and have nothing to contribute to the development of the country, except strikes and causing social disorder that leads to mayhem and chaos. He says from his experience this is a dominant view of labour unions.

He argues that because of such thinking, no attempt is being made to seek out the contribution that labour unions could make as part and parcel of global transformation and change:

> There are a number of things that labour unions can do … But those things are missed completely because people are not looking for that, but they approach you because they think that there is a strike (Lekorotsoana, Interview, 2005).

However, he put this blame squarely on the shoulders of the labour unions themselves and states that: "… another element is that the organised labour itself is not aggressive enough in seeking the space that will ensure that its voice is heard" (Lekorotsoana, Interview, 2005). According to Lekorotsoana, the people tasked with the responsibility to strategically position the labour unions using various conduits, including the media, are not effectively doing so and most often miss the boat. He stresses that these people rarely pick up a phone and call news editors and reporters, or come up with good and innovative ideas on how labour

could be covered in the media. Instead of leveraging on their position and networks developed over the years with the media, he says, all they can do is send out a media release and hope that they will get favourable coverage from it:

> My experience is that when you call editors or you just email directly to them and say look here's an article… these are our thoughts on this particular aspect. They normally take and publish it; they don't have a problem with it. So you'd find that there are people who write a lot and acquire a lot of space (Lekorotsoana, Interview, 2005).

This is where the problem lies for organised labour. It appears that there is lack of understanding of how the media operates and the challenges it faces today under globalisation and capitalism. The reality is that the media operates just like any other business, where maximising profit while reducing cost is the order of the day. The *Mail & Guardian* is certainly not immune from these challenges. Therefore, for labour unions to get coverage that is favourable and sympathetic to them they have to come to the party. This would include labour unions learning to understand the dynamics and the complexities that papers like the *Mail & Guardian* face in the process of news production, as the paper is no longer an alternative newspaper but part and parcel of the mainstream press.

Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005) acknowledges, however, that because of the patterns of media ownership in the country, the balance of forces is heavily stacked against labour unions. He nevertheless emphasises the fact that labour unions themselves should take up the responsibility and be proactive to ensure good and positive coverage. Good and positive coverage is not something that will happen at the spur of the moment, but a process that includes forging links and creating conducive relationships with the media.

Moreover, labour unions need to be relevant and their programmes should be applicable to the social conditions and challenges that are facing the country. The challenges of high rates of unemployment and the scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, coupled with workplace issues are some of the problems gripping the

country that labour unions should be grappling with. The squalor in which many working-class people still live, juxtaposed with the growing middle class and the control of the economy by the bourgeoisie, poses a real challenge for organised labour.

This process of developing good working relationships with the media that are beneficial for both parties is indeed critical for positive coverage of labour unions. As Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005) observes, in most cases representatives of labour unions think that journalists are there to be used, instead of building a continuous relationship which would be more to the advantage of labour unions.

However, to be able to identify problems and put in place programmes that would turn around the situation requires resources. For example, big corporations have budgets for their propaganda campaigns to ensure that their reputations are kept intact and enhanced, and hence they jealously guard their brand and manage issues that might compromise it. This cannot be done without a proper budget. Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005) states that many labour unions, especially the smaller ones, lack sufficient resources:

> … you would find that other unions are much stronger and are able to have communication expertise, like the NUM has a whole communication department while other unions have smaller departments and others have none (Lekorotsoana, Interview, 2005).

Another problem that Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005) alludes to that contributes to the way in which labour issues are covered is lack of understanding by office bearers about the media and the role of communication or media officers within the labour unions. This lack of understanding of the role of communication divisions within labour unions and the importance of the media in building their reputation, without a doubt contributes immensely to the declining coverage of labour issues and thus of industrial action. Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005) says because office bearers do not cascade information in time to relevant people, opportunities of good news stories are completely missed.

Nevertheless, Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005) is still positive that his union is getting good coverage of its strike action from the *Mail & Guardian*.

> … at least from 2001, from NUM's point of view, we had a very good coverage … You cannot miss the fact that there is bigger and better coverage of labour in the *Mail and Guardian* … The one thing that I find difficult though, is the fact that most reporters do not know labour that well … while they are supposed to be conducting an interview, you often find yourself actually running a workshop … There are various things in terms of the law such as the rules that govern industrial action, processes that are followed during retrenchments, and you would find that many reporters are not well versed on such issues (Lekorotsoana, Interview, 2005).

Furthermore, he is pleased with the manner in which NUM's strikes have been covered in recent years and says their current relationship with the paper is cordial; he describes the paper's editorial team as easily accessible and understanding:

> Sometimes, to my surprise, they managed to cover the stories that other people have not managed to cover, which are related to mineworkers … we might disagree with the content of the story but the bottom line is that they have covered the story and that for me makes it a different paper … they go out there and cover the story. That distinguishes them from others that] only wait for the press release … (Lekorotsoana, Interview, 2005).

Because many good and experienced labour reporters have left the profession and been replaced by younger reporters, lack of understanding labour is one of the contributing factors that could be attributed to the decline in coverage of industrial action. For example, an experienced reporter covering a strike would know exactly who to speak to, what questions to ask and the slant that the story should take. When that reporter goes back to the news room, he/she would have a solid basis for the story that might emerge and thus increase the chances of having a story published.

SAMWU's General Secretary, Roger Ronnie, says the *Mail & Guardian* has tended to cover most of their disputes and any resultant industrial action. However, he raises serious concerns about lack of initiative by the paper in sourcing and giving coverage to issues that involve his union:

> In most instances they have simply relied on union press releases rather than on-the-spot coverage of the event. Additional comment was seldom sought and quotes attributed to the union were drawn from our statements (Ronnie, Interview, 2005).

Ronnie (Interview, 2005) also points out that the coverage has tended to take a neutral stance, with news articles covered from both the perspective of capital and the workers. He is of the view that the paper has been quite restrained in its coverage of the "trashing" aspect of their strikes, where striking union members caused havoc in the streets of Johannesburg.

Though seemingly content with the fact that the coverage simply seems to record the views of the protagonists, Ronnie (Interview, 2005) hastens to say that neither himself nor his union has been directly approached for an opinion piece. "But we have managed to get a few opinion pieces published by the paper at our request" (Ronnie, Interview, 2005).

He says that as a labour union they are conscious of the interests that are represented by the commercial media. Furthermore, he contests the notion that the *Mail & Guardian* at some point in its history was a voice of the working class:

> … the best that we normally hope for is to at least get our side of the story reported. Currently this seems to be happening. The *Mail & Guardian* has never been a voice for the working class. It has, however, tended to cover issues affecting the poor and the working class a bit more than other papers. It would therefore be naive of us to expect the *Mail & Guardian,* or any other paper for that matter, to take a working-class perspective on industrial disputes (Ronnie, Interview, 2005).

It is this view that that makes Ronnie (Interview, 2005) believe that although the paper continues to cover issues affecting the poor and the working class, this is not done from an overtly class perspective:

> I must however acknowledge that it does from time to time run opinion pieces which tend to raise issues from an anti-capitalist perspective. The Editor is, however, very clear on where she stands in relation to the new social movements (Ronnie, Interview, 2005).

It could be such an undefined ideological position that manifests itself, not only in the clash of opinions from role players on the manner in which labour should be covered but in the way in which it is currently covered. Any mainstream or commercial publication will be contested terrain, especially in an environment where capital and labour coexist and both are strong.

However, Ronnie fails to comprehend and acknowledge is that as an alternative paper the *Mail & Guardian* was able to manoeuvre and play a very constructive role for the working class. There is a plethora of actions and risks that the paper took to expose the injustices of the apartheid system. It would be disingenuous, therefore, for labour unions to forget such meaningful contributions that the alternative press made towards the emancipation of the oppressed.

Nevertheless, Ronnie (Interview, 2005) understands the current conditions and states that the *Mail & Guardian* has to exist in an extremely harsh and unforgiving capitalist environment. As such it needs to ensure that its advertisers and subscribers feel secure with the product. In showing lack of understanding of the media and its role as earlier indicated by Lekorotsoana (Interview, 2005), he mentions that:

> I wish to reiterate that I do not think that the *Mail & Guardian* has radically changed the manner in which it reports on workers issues (Ronnie, Interview, 2005).

NUMSA spokesperson, Mziwakhe Hlangani, is of the view that, just like many media institutions in the country, the *Mail & Guardian* supports a virtual blackout of labour coverage. He says that from his union's perspective, the paper has not maintained sustained coverage of industrial disputes in the country since the late 1990s.

However, he concedes that when the paper covers important industrial action, follow-up news articles are certain:

> The voices of ordinary workers are often overtaken by the views of labour analysts who are required to articulate the positions and the reasons for the labour unions and workers on taking decisions to embark on industrial action (Hlangani, Interview, 2005).

Concurring with Ronnie, he points out that the union does not expect any favours from the paper; however, they want accurate reportage that represents their views. Hlangani (Interview, 2005) is certain that the paper has shifted from its historical coverage of working-class struggles. He says this is because the struggles are now focused on economic inequalities and other broader political issues.

SACCAWU's Deputy Secretary, Mduduzi Mbongwe, is adamant that the coverage they have been receiving from the paper has not been up to scratch. Using their national strike following a dispute with Metcash as an example, he says the coverage of industrial action involving SACCAWU has been very poor and inconsistent:

> The paper's coverage of our disputes is negative and does not sufficiently convey SACCAWU's point of view. Their coverage sympathises with the employers since they often interview them only and publish stories without soliciting any response from us (Mbongwe, Interview, 2005).

Mbongwe (Interview, 2005) says not long ago his union was approached on the Jacob Zuma saga,[3] and in that instance the paper went on to publish a false story on their view on the issue. It is such experiences that have left him believing that the paper is interested in sensational reporting.

Pointing out that what SACCAWU expects from the paper is merely more balanced coverage, since they do not expect the paper to be their mouthpiece, Mbongwe (Interview, 2005) is of the view that the *Mail & Guardian* has indeed undergone a shift to the right and that the paper no longer contributes to effective social dialogue because of its one-sided coverage.

6.3 Relationship with unions

In order to understand the way labour is covered and viewed by the paper, it is necessary to fully comprehend the relationship between the paper and labour unions. Forest (Interview, 2005) mentions that the paper is no longer as close to unions as it used to be. He says in the 1980s they saw it as their job to represent unions because unions were such an important part of the working class and because workers in those days had no legislation protecting them. He says today workers are represented by strong labour unions that are recognised by management. Prior to 1994, under the abusive and hostile apartheid legislation, these rights were a luxury but now conditions are very different indeed.

Because of those hostile conditions prior to the 1994 breakthrough, Forest (Interview, 2005) says the paper saw it as part of its duties to advance the interests of workers. Conversely, those conditions have completely changed with progressive labour policy in place in favour of the workers. This, according to Forest (Interview, 2005), has created a rupture as far as a relationship between the paper and the labour unions are concerned, and they are no longer as close:

[3] African National Congress and former South African deputy president Jacob Zuma's saga stems from his release as the country's deputy president by President Thabo Mbeki. This followed Judge Hillary Squires' findings that Zuma had a generally corrupt relationship with Schabir Shaik.

> In a situation where unions and the workers are not free, the press is not free, and this anomaly can be corrected by doing away with ideas of objectivity (Forest, Interview, 2005).

Ronnie (Interview, 2005) points out that the union's relationship with the *Mail & Guardian* is not antagonistic. This mutual relationship can be defined as certainly not the friendliest, and this could go a long way in explaining the current coverage of labour issues by the paper. It simply appears that there is no expectation from either side for any favours:

> … we are able to request space for an opinion piece which is normally considered by the paper, and many letters written by different members of SAMWU on behalf of the union are also almost always published. As a union we expect the paper to cover issues in a fair manner and to refrain from expressing an opinion without first canvassing the issue more extensively with the union (Ronnie, Interview, 2005).

Mbongwe (Interview, 2005) mentions that because of what they perceive to be the paper's shift from its traditional position in its coverage of labour issues, his union does not enjoy a healthy relationship with the *Mail & Guardian*.

6.4 Reporters and contributors

One thing a close scrutiny of reporters and contributors reveals is the commitment of the paper in making resources available to cover industrial action and labour. Furthermore, a reporter who is dedicated to the beat, apart from keeping abreast on issues pertaining to the field, is likely to develop a rapport with major role players in the field such as labour unions, government departments and officials.

This dedication is also manifested in the coverage, since the reporter becomes an expert in the field and less likely to be susceptible to the propaganda from either side. It is this commitment that makes the paper a leader in a particular field and thus a trustworthy source of unbiased information on a specific issue.

Moreover, the existence of a labour desk or lack thereof will determine whether the *Mail & Guardian* takes this beat seriously. If it does, it is likely that its readership gets accurate information on industrial action and thus labour news.

While the spread of writers is important in giving a diverse view on issues of industrial action, equally important is the consistency provided by Glenda Daniels as a dedicated labour reporter during this period. Both these critical aspects, in as far as industrial action writers at the *Mail & Guardian* are concerned, are likely to benefit the readers with in-depth information on the subject matter. Though Haffajee (Interview, 2005) concedes that their current labour desk is nothing close to what it was when she first joined the paper in the early 1980s, nevertheless it emerges through reporters such as Glenda Daniels and Jaspreet Kindra that the paper still values the labour beat.

Furthermore, the paper's commitment to the labour beat and its attempts to give readers deep information are shown by the calibre of contributing writers that include researchers, academics, analysts, unionists and business people. It is also crucial to acknowledge that in this study it emerges that the overall role played by reporters and contributors indicate some commitment by the paper to the labour beat and the fact that the beat is still held in high regard.

Although Haffajee (Interview, 2005) concedes that this coverage is nothing compared to the paper's coverage of labour news in its early days, this commitment in covering labour beat is fundamental in framing the issues affecting the workers. Haffajee (Interview, 2005) mentions that when she first joined the paper there was focus and commitment to do more labour news. As a result of this commitment, she and many of her contemporaries gained a lot of insight on labour. She says that they were equipped with the necessary skills to handle the labour beat, and important knowledge was imparted to them by experienced reporters:

> We understood the rationale for wage demands and the collective bargaining. It is my greatest sadness that nowadays when we cover a strike we do not do it much better than anybody else. Because you always have to understand where worker demands are coming from, and very often it is basic household needs. They are very clever, well thought of, they are strategic demands, and very often I think we just cover it like, well, crazy unions have put forward a basket of wage and other non-wage demands (Haffajee, Interview, 2005).

Haffajee (Interview, 2005) attributes some of the current shortcomings to, among other reasons, the reluctance of the new breed of journalists to take up the labour beat. She says it has been very hard to find journalists who are willing to devote themselves to the labour beat:

> Most journalists, at least in our newsroom, want to do investigations and they are quite keen on feature writing. It has been really hard to find someone who would devote him/herself just to covering labour. In fact no newspaper any more has got a dedicated labour reporter … (Haffajee, Interview, 2005).

Quite obviously if the paper has no dedicated labour reporter, and those that do cover the beat would normally dabble in other beats from time to time, then the coverage of labour will certainly suffer. As mentioned earlier, to cover any event and produce well thought out and well written copy requires an understanding of the issues and good contacts.

Currently the paper has Matuma Letsoalo as its official labour reporter, Haffajee (Interview, 2005) admits that he often gets distracted by investigations and his focus is not solely the labour beat. Letsoalo has been writing investigative stories such as the Gauteng finance minister Paul Mashatile's alleged conflict of interest through his connection with a company that benefited from a multimillion-rand contract with the Gauteng government and the story on former director of the National Prosecution Authority Bulelani Ngcuka's R23-billion Gautrain project involvement.

However, Forest (Interview, 2005) is steadfast in his view that the country's changing social conditions and labour policies have played a prominent role in the decline of labour coverage by the paper. He says that ordinary labour reporting in South Africa has declined and is being replaced by what he terms "labour politics". He mentions that the contradictions between the trade union movement (COSATU) and the government have taken centre stage, and that labour reporting as it used to be in the early days of the paper has virtually disappeared.

It is, however, not only the shift in the country's socio-economic and political conditions that has contributed to the general decline in the coverage of industrial action and labour news by the paper. Fundamentally, the decline in the coverage of industrial action and the dearth in labour reporting should be understood within the context of the paper's shift from an alternative paper to a mainstream publication. This shift can be attributed to the shift in the country's socio-economic and political conditions.

As (Forest, Interview, 2005) states:

> We cover many labour politics and the coverage of labour is part of our political coverage. Matuma Letsoalo and Ricky Robertson are also political reporters who write about politics, so it is not the same as specialised, like what news used to be.

While during the period of the study the *Mail & Guardian* has dedicated reporters to cover the beat and hence the consistency in coverage, it is therefore apparent that the paper at present does not have dedicated labour reporters, and this clearly reflects not only the attitude the paper has towards labour issues but the structural challenges that it faces as a mainstream paper. For that reason, the availability of dedicated reporters during the study period is a reflection of the manner in which industrial action and labour news in general are covered and viewed by the paper.

6.5 Sources in articles and their influence

Sources are most crucial for news media organisations and as part of news production because without them there would be no news. Furthermore, sources do not only indicate whether a news article has balance but also reflect the manner in which different sectors are given access to the media. Haffajee (Interview, 2005) believes that the main sources of the *Mail & Guardian*, as far as labour news is concerned, are labour unions themselves:

> Inevitably we go via the unions; that is our first port of call. Sometimes I think we go too much to the union, that we can become unbalanced. Unlike the *Business Day* and *Business Report*, who will give authority to the company from the business point of view, we come in from the union side of things … (Haffajee, Interview, 2005).

Most of the articles sampled contained as sources union representatives, the spokespersons of the affected companies and "experts" – these are either political analysts, economists and or labour specialists. Obviously the unions and the companies make the news, while the experts have the powers and the know-how to define the news. What is striking about these articles is the conspicuous absence of the voices of ordinary workers. Since they are central to the story, one would expect workers to be the important source of the story. However, this is not in stark contradiction to what Haffajee (Interview, 2005) is alluding to as union representatives are used to translate views and demands on behalf of ordinary workers.

Furthermore, the utilisation of labour unions representatives is somehow tenable considering the formation, structures and democratic approach of labour unions in the country when dealing with such sensitive issues. By virtue of their election to leadership positions, union leaders are therefore mandated by their constituencies to, amongst others, represent them in various forums including addressing the media. However, this cannot be an excuse for not interviewing ordinary workers

and denying them a chance to express their opinions, since they are central in most of these disputes.

A close scrutiny of articles that appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* during this period reveals that many are balanced, fair and impartial. As an example, the first article sampled during this period – "Cosatu, government square up", in the July 04 – August 05, 1999, edition – shows that almost all the views of the affected organisations were captured through their representatives who were at least given a chance to state their case and defend their positions.

In the above mentioned article, COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, the Department of Public Services spokesperson, a Police spokesperson, the Western Cape General Secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and the Department of Education spokesperson were all interviewed. Conspicuous by their absence as sources in these articles were ordinary workers, teachers in this case. Instead, it seemed as if the *Mail & Guardian's* labour reporters believed that the views of labour union representatives translated to those of ordinary workers. Although the article is technically balanced, as all the concerned parties were a give a chance, from the ordinary workers' perspective the article might appear to be imbalanced since the voices of ordinary workers are missing.

This could be exacerbated by the fact that of the of the 33 articles on industrial action and 26 industrial-action-related articles sampled during this period, only one used an ordinary employee as a source. In the story titled "Security guards left out in the cold" (page 48, Monitor section, August 17 – 23 2001 edition), security guard Piet Mabotja told his story about the strike. This form of news reporting, where a story is told from the perspective of an ordinary worker, brings into light the reality of the conditions to which workers are exposed. Thus it is easier for the reader to sympathise with them than if they were reading a straightforward news report.

Even in situation where unions' officials are used as sources it appeared that their access to the paper was dependent on clarifying their action rather than setting the agenda. In most of the articles on industrial action unions' officials were largely used in a reactive way where they had to clarify and defend their actions. There are few instances where an opinion piece was written by the workers engaging on issues that are of interest to them.

However, this access and utilisation of labour unions as sources in the *Mail & Guardian* should be viewed in a broader context on how workers are framed by the media in general and the serious manner in which their viewpoints on issues that in which they have interests are taken. Over the years labour unions and the workers have accused the media of bias in presenting issues of their interest. This stance also emerges in the study conducted by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976) where it was argued by trade unionists that the media reported issues in which they have an interest such as the economy, employment rights, and industrial relations legislation, from an inherently anti-labour, pro-capital perspective. They argued that media accounts of the causes of industrial disputes, for example, tended to be dominated by management, while the view points of the workforce were simplified and distorted.

Ronnie (Interview, 2005) concurs with this view and mentions that the *Mail & Guardian* news articles affecting SAMWU simply appear to draw on official statements issued by the union, and as such the voices of ordinary workers are often not reflected.

However, Haffajjee (Interview, 2005) voices her concerns about these trends and mentions that the paper is trying hard to develop and implement policies that will ensure that, in covering labour news including industrial action, ordinary workers are interviewed and stories are written and told through their eyes. She says they are already trying to make it a rule that in any strike coverage, ordinary workers are found and interviewed so that their voices are heard and that there is a human element in the story. Nonetheless, it is difficult to comprehend the reasons behind

the failure of such a rule since ordinary workers are not used as sources. But the challenges of attaining such an ideal under prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in country coupled with "structural bias" of news production are huge and they are driving the paper in the opposite direction. The structural bias of news, argued in Chapter 5, results in the exclusion of ordinary people as Tuchman (1978) state that their inclusion is dependent on a number of biases that reduces them to "symbol people".

However, Forest (Interview, 2005), attributes the utilisation of labour union representatives or leadership to the growing dominance of labour news by labour politics. He says that the sources would tend to be tilted towards the leadership of the unions because there would often be issues of leadership in the story.

Exemplifying this point, he mentions the Jacob Zuma saga. He says it would be interesting to get ordinary workers' views on this issue, but what is of interest to people is mainly the relationship between the leadership of the labour movement and the leadership of the ruling party. Furthermore, he stresses that the relationships within the Alliance really lie between the leaders, and for that reason most of their stories deal with leaders rather than ordinary workers.

The fact that ordinary workers are least used as sources in articles on industrial action reflects not only the attitude of the paper towards the working class but also the difficulty that the working class faces when it comes to issues of accessing the media. Even though access barriers could be removed there are no guarantees that the workers' views on issues that affect them will not be constrained and misrepresented. The dominance by analysts, mainly academics, and union leaders as sources in these articles can be attributed to the notion that a news product is normally deemed to be of good quality when it is constituted by a range of sources.

On the other hand business organisations and their officials were given space to express their views and largely they were quoted defending the position of their

companies when they were involved in disputes with labour unions. Mainly they painted a gloomy picture as a consequence of the strike and gave a predictable forecast of the losses their companies would suffer as a result of the strike action.

However, it is apparent that what is taken into account when these sources are considered are issues such as their location in society, their expertise and the knowledge they bring to a story. In order to grasp this dominance by a particular group of sources, it is imperative to locate the issue within both the social production and the political economy of news theories.

Manning (2001) points out that information can be controlled and deployed with powerful political or elite groups capable of applying informal pressure to promote or restrict the circulation of information through the media. He says the flow of information can be influenced not only by the conscious intentions of social actors but also by the existence of certain dominant structures:

> The market position of any particular news organisation; the extent to which the news organisation may depend upon advertising revenues or equally, upon finding a formula that successfully addresses key segments of news audience; and the strategic importance of a newspaper's raison d'etre in fostering an organic relationship with a particular political constituency or elite grouping, all represent examples of the kinds of structures that loom large in journalist's live … (Manning, 2001:19-21).

This situation therefore discriminates against and excludes the labour unions and the working class from expressing their views on issues that affect them. Quite clearly, not only because of their standing in society and their perceived lack of knowledge on the subject matter but also because of the structural bias and the control of information by the few elites, ordinary workers are thus compromised as sources.

Although sources used in the paper's articles on industrial action reveal that the *Mail & Guardian* ensures that all relevant voices are represented or given access

to the news media, there is no doubt that ordinary workers are not regarded as important sources. This is a typical example of the challenges that the working class is facing when it comes to accessing the media.

Because journalists have their own opinions on issues, there is a need for them to express these views in an unbiased manner. While the *Mail & Guardian* has its own position on industrial action and its causal factors, from articles on industrial action it appears that the paper clearly differentiates between fact and opinion as news reports are mainly based on factual information. Where a commentary or an opinion is necessary, articles are clearly distinguishable from news reports.

6.6 Ownership and control of the media

Ownership and control of the media plays a pivotal role in defining the content of the news. The decisions regarding the manner in which particular topics are covered and the methods of determining the type of actors that are utilised in news stories often lies with those who own the means of production and control the media.

It is well known that media owners are business people who have made large investments and therefore expect returns. In a nutshell, media owners are mainly interested in maximising profit while cutting the cost of news production. Because of this scenario, most newspapers find themselves having to contend with the "juniorisation of the newsroom", and also with being understaffed. This often undermines the quality of the news as young and inexperienced reporters, who do not demand high wages compared to their experienced older counterparts, are assigned to this beat without proper guidance. Furthermore, lack of adequate resources habitually leads newspapers to ignore and trivialise issues that would otherwise be considered newsworthy.

The structural limitations of media ownership have an impact on the content of news and on what is covered by news organisations. As Bagdikian (1982) argues that news reporting and commentary controlled by mainstream media companies are the most politically narrow in the democratic world. He says major industries, including those controlling the media, have always been more comfortable with conservative politics:

> Now that these industries own the country's daily printed and broadcast news, it is not surprising that their newly acquired staffs have come to understand that they remain in their employers' good graces by downplaying or keeping unwanted ideas out of the printed and broadcast news. With time, this shrunken social-political range becomes the accepted definition of what is news. (Bagdikian, 1982: xiii)

According to Forest (Interview, 2005) one of the difficulties the paper currently faces is that it is now promotionally driven, whereby the media is used as a marketing tool to sell business and consumer products using editorial pages, and to him this is a big difference. He says until recently the paper relied heavily on its sister paper in London, *The Guardian* and they did not worry very much about how many people bought the newspaper and how many advertisers advertised in the paper. Now the paper has to worry about its readership to ensure that more advertisers are attracted and kept.

Since the business side of the paper is now crucial, as big sister in London is not there any more to pay the bills, the structure of the paper had to be reviewed to take issues of readership and advertisers into account. This simply meant that the paper was no longer donor-driven but had business corporation with commercial interest as owner. Such a situation poses various challenges for the paper as its ownership is a manifestation of the societal power structures. The manner in which the paper functions is now determined by economic power structure and societal stratification.

The owners of the paper understand that to consolidate and grow, it is important to focus and attract the audience that will appease advertisers so that they can get their investment returns. As a commercial and advertisement-driven publication, the *Mail & Guardian's* editorial team has to contend with some of the structural limitation challenges brought about the current ownership patterns and the control of the media. Furthermore, the socio-economic and political conditions that the paper operates under influence the content of news in a subtle manner.

Because of the ownership patterns of the media, which has seen powerful corporations enter the market, most news organisation find themselves in a compromising position and having to fight harder for their editorial independence. Bagdikian (1982) says this "media monopoly" has led to the disappearance of political variety among the mainstream:

> … the news and analyses of progressive ideas and groups are close to absent in the major media … positive accomplishment of labour unions, for example, continue to be rarely reported in the standard news. Even added pay for workers is depicted as a "problem" (Bagdikian, 1982:xvi).

It is quite apparent that the dynamics of media ownership and advertising also afflict the *Mail & Guardian* thus putting the editorial team in an unenviable position. With these challenges to contend with, the needs of the poor and the marginalised working-class masses most often get relegated and their issues become peripheral.

6.7 The influence of advertising on news

In this study it is argued that advertising has a history of playing a subtle yet crucial role in influencing editorial freedom and the content of news. This influence in content follows what Croteau and Hoynes (2001) call an approach of advertising to reluctant audiences by merging advertisements with content.

However, when it comes to the role of advertising in the *Mail & Guardian* and its influence on the content of news, Haffajee (Interview, 2005) holds a different view. She argues that advertising plays a very insignificant role when it comes to influencing the content of news. She says the paper's coverage of labour news is in no way swayed by advertising, and she emphasises that the labour beat could be turned into a successful commercial vehicle:

> With the maturing and sophistication of the labour market in South Africa … some companies want to talk to organised workers. They want to engage with trade unions, so it is really silly of us not to do it better. I think there are a thousand investigations to do, for example, whether the SETAs are working or they are not working – that is the part of labour coverage. The same thing with the skills development; it is crucial to our county's success and that is labour coverage, and we are not doing it (Haffajee, Interview, 2005)

Haffajee (Interview, 2005) goes on to say that with better co-ordination and concentration on NEDLAC processes and the way the country's labour processes are structured, the paper could probably make some money from labour coverage rather than losing it. She contends that it would be much easier now to be a newspaper that takes labour seriously than it was in the olden days. Back then, she says, the paper was viewed as left-leaning because of the serious manner in which the labour reports were taken. In contesting any influential role that advertising plays in the content of news, Haffajee (Interview, 2005) believes that the labour beat can be turned around and money made from it.

Forest (Interview, 2005) concurs with this view and mentions that advertising has absolutely no control over the manner in which labour and stories industrial action are covered. He mentions that most coverage of industrial action is focused where the action is, and argues that in covering any strikes they always give all the sides involved a chance to express their viewpoint on the matter. "… I do not think the fact that a particular company advertises in the *Mail & Guardian* will influence our coverage" (Forest, Interview, 2005).

This is indeed quite a simplistic view of the influence and impact advertising has on the content of news. Although advertising might not have a direct impact on the content of news, it certainly has an indirect influence as the paper now has to contend with issues of increasing the readership while at the same time attracting advertising. The process of selling advertising space goes hand-in-hand with the type of the audiences advertisers wants. It then follows that in order to increase the readership, the *Mail & Guardian* has to give its audience what it wants, but most importantly in order to attract advertisers the paper must deliver the type of audiences that will appeal to advertisers.

Logically, there is only one way to achieve these two imperatives. On the one hand the paper must ensure that the content is designed in such a manner that it attracts and appeals to the right type of audience, the readership profile desired by advertisers. On the other hand, this readership should match the profile of the audience that advertisers want before they buy advertising space. Otherwise there are many advertising vehicles that could easily be utilised by advertisers to achieve their objective. Therefore, advertising might not have a direct influence in the content of news but it certainly has an indirect influence. As Herman and Chomsky (2002) point out that:

> In addition to discrimination against unfriendly media institutions, advertisers also choose selectively among programs on the basis of their own principles. With rare exceptions these are culturally and politically conservative …

Furthermore they argue that money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. They mention “advertising as the primary income source of the mass media” among the filters that the raw material of news must pass through, thus leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They say these filters fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns.

Moreover, Herman and Chomsky (2002) state that the elite domination of the media and marginalisation of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news "objectively" and on the basis of professional news values.

Consistent with his opinion that social and business conditions have changed with time, Forest (Interview, 2005) concedes that the withdrawal of *The Guardian* as the paper's main sponsor has had some negative repercussions. He says that before *The Guardian* pulled out, they cared little about the commercial aspects of running the paper. Now, however, they have to think about advertising which has made them more careful about writing stories which are more interesting to their readers. Once more, this is a clear indication that commercial constraints lead to a need for advertisers, which inevitably lead to careful consideration about the content of news.

In justifying the current status quo on the manner in which labour is or is not covered, Forest (Interview, 2005) says:

> I do not know how many typical *Mail & Guardian* readers are interested in the judgement of the labour court or some little dispute … we focus on big issues and the things that are going to have an impact in shaping the future of South Africa, and that is why we focus on labour politics because it is critical.

As much as this approach is understandable, COSATU and its unions are part and parcel of the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance. Therefore, issues that pertain to their politics, particularly the way they relate to the government and other structures, are important. However, labour and industrial action are a reflection of the views of the workers, and as such they represent the aspirations of the working class and their access to the media.

The alternative press played an important and constructive role during apartheid. However, there is a general feeling that the demise of the alternative press has left a huge void in coverage of issues that affect the working class. The focus on significant issues with national impact cannot be translated to mean a complete neglect of workers' concerns. However, the shift of the *Mail & Guardian* from being an alternative publication to being part of the mainstream commercial press suggests that the paper can no longer play that role to the same extent and in the same way.

Forest (Interview, 2005) believes that because the paper focuses on the bigger issues of labour politics, this is sufficient to represent the paper's labour coverage:

> There was a stage where we covered every single or major labour court judgement. But it is not a novelty any more. The labour courts and industrial position counter-existed [that is, existed at the same time] in the early 1980s and it has been around now for nearly 25 years (Forest, Interview, 2005).

Forest (Interview, 2005) furthermore states that for the paper to cover any labour issue, it has to be something huge and significant such as a labour court judgement with massive implications for the economy and the country. Otherwise, he says, they cannot cover any labour issue that has no significance for the country. Pointing out that they are interested in knowing whether the paper is doing a good job as far as the coverage of labour news is concerned, he nevertheless hastens to bring up the fact that circumstances have changed. "We cannot operate like shop stewards; for us to cover a story it has to be big and have an influence on workers" (Forest, Interview, 2005).

Such sentiments are a clear indication that the paper has a different outlook and a completely different role to play compared to the one it played before the 1994 democratic breakthrough. Harber (Interview, 2005) concurs with a view that economic imperatives have tilted the *Mail & Guardian's* traditional role. He believes that advertising and the need for the paper to survive and strive financially, in these changed conditions, have played a significant role in

influencing the content of the paper. He cites various examples on how historically advertising always played a role in the paper.

In his day at the helm of the paper Harber (Interview, 2005) says he always tried to sell advertising and to develop a good relationship with advertisers:

> … when the political donors and other supporters of the 1980s and 1990s fell away, this radically increased the dependence on advertisers, and that has to have an impact on the newspaper (Harber, Interview, 2005).

In refuting Forest's and Haffajee's assertions that advertisers have little influence on the content, he says there were things that they covered that are less much covered now – not because they are less important or they are not central, but because they draw less advertisers:

> Clearly the surrounding circumstances, in which the paper finds itself have affected what and how it publishes … but I think the paper is now more driven by financial matters and therefore that would tend to move it towards the centre (Harber, Interview, 2005).

Harber (Interview, 2005) is of the view that this shift to the centre by the paper arises from the greater need for financial stability. This did not happen before 1994 because, according to him, a lot of the views and the ideas that the paper espoused were distinctly antagonistic to capitalist issues and its advertisers, while giving prominence to the voice of the working class and the poor.

6.8 The Labour story – important aspects

In order to obtain a full picture on the way in which articles on industrial action are covered it is imperative that various and important aspects such as location of the story in the paper, the length and the frequency of articles are analysed.

6.8.1 Location of stories on industrial action

The use of stories on industrial action as lead stories and their placement in the national news section does not directly mean that labour news in general and industrial action in particular enjoy good coverage from the paper. Although the paper is able to use these stories as lead stories, the angle taken is necessarily not beneficial to or favourable to the working class.

An example would be the story "Cosatu: state is infiltrating us", published as the lead story in the October 4 – 10, 2002, edition which was published during a strike by public servants. This story carries a photograph of workers engaging in industrial action, but certainly that is not the reason why the story was a lead story. At the core of this story's as a lead story is the dichotomy and the schism that existed between the Tripartite Alliance (ANC, COSATU and the SACP), which led to COSATU accusing some government officials of infiltrating the labour movement and trying to undermine it.

Though such a location of articles on industrial action gives prominence to issues raised by workers, this certainly does not simply mean that the content in the story is favourable or places workers in a good light.

6.8.2 Length and frequency of articles

A quick glance at the figures on length and frequency of articles (see figure 1.2) discloses a spread as far as the timing of articles on industrial action is concerned. Most importantly, it appears that there was indeed follow-up on industrial action articles. Furthermore, it can be argued using these figures that the length of these articles was indicative that the news was taken seriously by the newspaper. From these figures it can therefore be deduced that, in relation to the number of articles covered, the *Mail & Guardian* viewed articles on industrial action as important.

6.8.3 The labour story

In making inferences about the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian*, based on the aforementioned elements, it will be prudent to keep in mind current political and economic conditions under which the paper operates. Although the current editorial team would like to believe that these external factors have no direct bearing on the content, the fact is the market conditions and social and power dynamics that the paper operates under are likely to manifest themselves through the content, whether deliberate or not. The fact is, during this period, the sample reveals only one news article that used an ordinary worker to tell the story and the plight of the workers. This is indeed worrying.

However, an encouraging sign emerges through the structure and location of articles. A sign that shows that the paper still views workers' actions in a serious light is the fact that many headlines and leads clearly mention the unions involved and the causes of the actions. What should be equally encouraging to the labour unions and the working class at large is the fact that most articles on industrial action are located within the news section and not hidden somewhere in the middle of the paper, which makes them easy to recognise and to find. This is further enhanced by the fact that, during the selected period, the *Mail & Guardian* produced an annual supplement focusing on issues affecting workers and labour policies. However, it could be argued that this was designed to raise more advertising revenue for the paper. Nevertheless, not many newspapers could boast having produced such a supplement.

The spread of sources, and mainly the space given to the leadership of labour unions to write and publish on topical issues, coupled with the utilisation of photographs in depicting issues on industrial action, further signal the importance of labour news to the paper. Although the current editorial team admits that the paper could do better and that lack of resources compromises their labour desk, it appears that an effort is made to do it right. An example of this effort would be the two dedicated labour reporters who covered most of these stories during this time.

6.9 Conclusion

It is quite apparent and inevitable that the more a paper – any paper – relies on advertising for revenue the more difficult it becomes to keep its independence and to carry radical news stories. Clearly, with the advent of democracy the *Mail & Guardian* ceased to be an alternative paper and became part and parcel of the commercially driven mainstream media. Therefore, its coverage of labour issues, particularly industrial action, is necessarily not different from any other mainstream newspaper. However, the manner in which labour is covered could be argued to be slightly different when compared to other publications. This is mainly due to the vestiges of its alternative identity that remained during its shift from being an alternative to becoming a mainstream newspaper. Another reflection of this alternative identity that still remain in the paper would also include both Forest and Haffajee, who were part of a very dynamic labour team in the paper during the dark days of apartheid's repression.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* between 1999 and 2004 has been explored in this research report. The ways and extent the paper covers and frames industrial action have been closely scrutinised.

A number of factors that impact on the coverage of industrial action have been identified. These factors include the structure of news articles; headlines; leads; the type of sources; section and page location of news articles; the number and presentation of photographs; length and timing of articles; and reporters including contributors.

Although the country has undergone some significant shifts both politically and economically as well as the change of ownership of many news organisations, including the *Mail & Guardian*, the research findings have revealed that there has not been a significant shift in the coverage of labour news by the paper in post-apartheid era. However, due to changed socio-economic and political conditions in the post-apartheid South Africa that the paper operates under, the overall outlook of the paper has somehow changed. This change has had particular effects on the coverage of industrial action.

The main arguments and research findings of this study are summarised below. Firstly, as far as the framing of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* is

concerned, the above mentioned factors reveal that the paper has been able to reflect adequately the voice of the workers in articles on industrial action. In a nutshell, industrial action is framed in terms of trade unions where the workplace issues including workers' demands such as wage increase take precedent. Even in articles on 'labour politics' industrial action is seldom framed in terms of broader issues of democracy and inequality in the new South Africa.

Secondly, the role of labour reporters is crucial in determining the way industrial action is covered by the paper. It is apparent that the decline in numbers in the previously big labour desk of the 1980s has somehow compromised the manner in which industrial action is covered and thus framed. Nevertheless, the paper's labour reporters, Glenda Daniels and Jaspreet Kindra, provided consistency and as such many of the news articles had context and substance.

Although operating under different socio-economic and political conditions that have pushed the paper to be part of the commercial mainstream media, the utilisation of different writers for diverse reasons on industrial action during the study period, sets the paper apart from many publications. These different writers from various organisations provided further insight and depth to articles on industrial action, thus affording readers different viewpoints on these issues. As McNair (1988) states, most audiences acknowledge that journalists have their own opinions on issues and they often want it in the form of editorials and commentary columns.

Thirdly, the study found that the structuring of news in the *Mail & Guardian* does not, in anyway, disadvantage news articles on industrial action. Just like any news articles and the order of their importance in the paper, articles on industrial action are accorded their importance based on their newsworthiness. As a clear manifestation of the latter point, the research findings show that the headlines of articles on industrial action captured the most crucial information as expressed by labour unions and their representatives. Van Dijk (1991) states that headlines have very important textual and cognitive functions since they are the most

conspicuous part of a news report; their main function is to summarise the most important information of the news report. Because if this, an inference can therefore be made that the paper still recognises labour issues as important.

Fourthly, using the length and timing or frequency of articles to understand sustainability in coverage of industrial action, it surfaces that there is indeed follow-up in industrial action articles. As shown in the findings, many articles on labour politics run in the paper for weeks, with some published months before the intended strikes take place and many more published weeks after the strike has gone by. For example, the strike by public servant unions in 1999 received substantial coverage before the actual big industrial action throughout the country, with headlines such as "Cosatu, government square up for fight". Because of this coverage, labour issues such as the 1999 COSATU Special Congress received special attention; speeches and inputs to the Congress were interpreted in the context of the standoff, with headlines such as "Government reaches out to unions" following a speech by Labour Minister, Membathisi Mdladlana. Therefore, based on this observation, it can be concluded that there is sustainability in the coverage of news articles on industrial action by the *Mails & Guardian*.

The fifth point is on the type of sources used and their influence. As Entman (1989) points out that balance in news requires that reporters present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides, both being given equivalent attention, this study went beyond that and explored the ways and extent in which ordinary workers are given a chance to express their views. All news articles related to industrial action sampled during the period of this study were balanced and fair with the views of ordinary workers articulated by labour unions' representatives.

This therefore aptly answers the third specific question in this study: What type of sources are used in the articles on industrial action and, specifically, are workers used as sources? To what extent are the voices of ordinary workers represented?

Although there is a challenge with regard to the utilisation of ordinary workers as sources, the answer to this question is an emphatic “yes”.

Lastly, the influential role of ownership and control of the media as well as the influence of advertising on news, are some of the external pressures which the study focused. As Murdock and Golding (1977) point out that the underlying logic of cost operates systematically, consolidating the position of groups already established in the main mass media markets but excluding those groups that lack the initial investment plus subsequent investments to make successful entry into the market. This results in a situation where the voices that survive largely belong to those least likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth and power.

Furthermore, Herman and Chomksy (2002) mention that political discrimination is structured into advertising allocation by the stress on people with money to buy. The findings in this study reveals that these external pressures have had an impact on the content and hence the direction of the paper. As an alternative paper, the *Weekly Mail* played a vital role as the voice of the oppressed and the marginalised a contribution that helped to bring about democracy and the press freedom that the commercial mainstream press enjoys today. Because of these pressures the *Mail & Guardian* shifted from being an alternative publication to be part of the commercial mainstream media. This move came as a blow to the working class.

7.2 Conclusion and Recommendations

Whereas it is apparent that the framing and therefore the coverage of industrial action by the *Mail & Guardian* is fair, especially when journalistic principles are taken into account, it is nevertheless clear that, due to structural limitations, the space for the working class within the paper is diminishing.

This research report furthermore has identified socio-economic conditions that the media operate under as some of the fault lines and impediments that are facing the media in the democratic dispensation.

Furthermore, as pointed by the findings in the research report is the excellent manner and the extent in which industrial action is covered by the *Mail & Guardian* in terms of quantity and quality. However, what is needed now and moving forward is a close examination of how the South African media in general and print in particular covers issues that affect the workers. Critically, is what impact exactly has the demise of the working class press have had on the flow of information that is essential to the workers.

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