

ABSTRACT

This research report critically analyses – through qualitative content analysis – how the *Sowetan* and the *Mail&Guardian* newspapers reported the alleged corruption in the arms deal in November 2001. The analysis includes a contextual discussion of factors shaping or influencing media coverage of important political topics in a transition to democracy. Theories of the role of the media in democratic transition inform the analysis of media coverage of the arms deal. ‘Transition’ in the context of this research report is used to refer to the process of South Africa’s ‘conversion’ from an undemocratic apartheid system based on unfair prejudices and practices grounded on class, race and gender to a ‘fair discrimination’ and application of remedial measures (political, social and economic) to correct the imbalances caused by apartheid policies. The research applies liberal pluralism, gatekeeping, public sphere, as well as Marxist-related media theories, including the critical political economy of the media approach and notes that it is not possible for a single approach to offer an absolute analysis of the role of the media in a transition to democracy. In addition, the research employs theories of news, language and society to show how social relations affect language used in news and ultimately affect notions of ‘bias’ and ‘objectivity’. The study observes that complete ‘objectivity’ as an ideal is unattainable, especially when one considers that news making processes are complex and influenced by diverse factors, some of which allow for anticipated processes of selection and inevitably, bias. This applies to the two publications under study. The report observes that through their reportage of alleged corruption in the arms deal during the month of November 2001, these newspapers attempted to open up, create and democratize the space for free inquiry. At the same time, however, it is noted that this space was dominated by certain voices and not representative of all civil society organizations and interests that had a stake in the arms deal. The report concludes that media should be encouraged to promote genuine diversity of voices. Diversity, within such a scheme, should be measured by equal and participatory dialogue from all the voices of all civil society institutions.