

NKANDLAGATE: A critical textual analysis of the press coverage

A Media Policy and Democracy Project Publication



MEDIA POLICY AND DEMOCRACY PROJECT

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About the Media Policy & Democracy Project

The Media Policy and Democracy Project is a joint collaborative research project between the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University which was launched in 2012, and aims to promote participatory media and communications policymaking in the public interest in South Africa.

The project involves three thematic areas:

- 1) media diversity and transformation
- 2) media accountability and media freedom
- 3) communications policy and the public interest

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Overview of Coverage

Findings of 'NKANDLAGATE' - a critical textual analysis of the press coverage

Findings of a research report, conducted for the Media Policy & Democracy Project: a critical discourse analysis of the *City Press* and *Mail & Guardian* coverage of Nkandlagate between Sept 2012 & Sept 2013. ('media' here below refers to *City Press* and *M&G* only)

- 1 WERE THE MEDIA HOSTILE TO THE ANC?**
NO. There is **no evidence** of undue hostility from the media. There is evidence of detailed and constant analysis, & calls for access to **information**.
- 2 DID THE MEDIA ATTACK THE DIGNITY OF ANC POLITICIANS?**
NO. The media took care to argue points logically and not engage in *ad hominem* attacks. Deriding authoritarian behaviour is not an attack on someone's dignity.
- 3 Did the media operate to the detriment of the public interest?**
NO. It would have been wrong of the media **NOT** to report on the story. The media's persistent calls for access to information that citizens are constitutionally entitled to serve the public interest.
- 4 Did the media treat the protection and promotion of media freedom as more important than responsible and ethical reporting?**
NO. The Nkandla saga has been a test of the media's willingness to protect their freedom of speech and they have done so with determination. There is no evidence that responsible or ethical reporting were neglected in the pursuit of media freedom.
- 5 Did the ANC act to the detriment of the public interest?**
YES. The ANC and security cluster officials displayed consistent reluctance to release information about the public funds spent on Nkandla - information to which citizens are constitutionally entitled.
- 6 Was the ANC hostile toward the media?**
YES. Officials consistently responded in tones of reluctance, impatience, righteousness and arrogance. The President attempted to present himself as the victim instead of accepting the responsibilities associated with his office.
- 7 Whose voices did the media include and how were these voices positioned?**
Coverage was confined to the voices of the social elite, politicians, lawyers, civil society leaders & public intellectuals.
Voices of ordinary South Africans were not frequently represented.

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Executive Summary of the Research Report

Introduction and rationale

This analysis of the news coverage relating to the expenditure on President Zuma's private home at Nkandla is undertaken under the auspices of the **Media Policy and Democracy Project**, a joint collaborative research initiative between the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University. Impelled by a concern to contribute to policy development, the project has taken into account the criticisms of the news media contained in the ANC's discussion document entitled "Media transformation ownership and diversity" (2010) so that it might also develop researched responses to the ANC's media concerns.

The focus of this study is confined to the editorial content and takes cognisance of the ANC document as it relates to news coverage. The document outlines the kind of media the ANC envisage and their criticisms of the existing news media.

They are described as ideologically biased against the ANC and thus hostile to it; as treating the protection and promotion of media freedom

media, it espouses a nationalistic approach that distances itself from personal greed, enrichment and conspicuous, capitalist consumption.

In contrast, the discourse emanating from the media condemn aspects of the ANC's treatment of the media, particularly attempts to curtail freedom of expression and access to information. The differing positions suggest that these two sets of stake-holders who both play important roles in media policy debates disagree about the role the news media should play. While they are fervently held positions, the conclusions are drawn in the absence of focussed research.

Aim of the research

The coverage of the Nkandla controversy provides a focus where the lines of combat between politicians and newsmakers are clearly drawn. The study therefore sets out to examine what the press and politicians actually do and say in relation to one another when engaged in a contestation. In other words it sets out to identify and critically analyse the contesting discourses in the news coverage.

It uses the criticisms relating to news content expressed in the ANC document to focus the research. The study investigates the coverage of the expenditure on Zuma's Nkandla homestead in the *City Press* and the *Mail and Guardian* (M&G). Limited reference is also made to the coverage in *Ilanga*.

It poses the broad question: How is the contestation surrounding the expenditure on Zuma's Nkandla homestead narrated? More specifically it addresses the following questions. Are the news media hostile to the ANC? Are they biased towards other sectional interests? Do they attack the dignity of ANC politicians? Do they operate to the detriment of the public interest? Is responsible and ethical reporting treated as less important than the protection and promotion of media freedom? Whose voices do they include and how are they positioned?

While the study is confined to a single media controversy, it does provide the platform for analysing the discourses articulated by the contesting sides. Importantly, by examining the news coverage that emerges gradually over an extended period as a coherent body of work, it is possible to identify the patterns of engagement and positioning.

Theoretical Framework

The study is located within the fields of Cultural Studies and Journalism Studies and takes the approach of critical discourse analysis.

While the news can play different roles in society, it is a broadly accepted that pluralism and media diversity are fundamental to the democratic role the news media might play. For citizens to participate in their society it is accepted that they need access to information and to a diversity of ideas.

As the nature of the news coverage of the President's private home at Nkandla is investigative rather than routine reporting, the theoretical framework draws on the literature relating to investigative journalism and media scandals.

It is informed by an understanding of investigative news coverage as a moral enterprise whereby the news media act as the 'custodians of conscience' and draw public attention to conduct on the part of elite figures that is unjust, corrupt, or not in the public interest. It acts as a call for moral indignation, holding elite figures accountable to their own expressed values and moral orders.

This report utilises Thompson's (2000) description of media scandals as organised sequences which then gives structure to the analysis. A media scandal is initiated by some kind of breach of conduct, followed by a series of revelations and responses, frequently accompanied by some form of official or legal investigation that leads to a culmination, and finally to the aftermath and reflection.

Methodology

This qualitative study undertakes a critical textual analysis. The press coverage surrounding the expenditure on President Jacob Zuma's Nkandla private home in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal serves as the case study. This mediated conflict was the focus of sustained investigative journalism reporting in the two weeklies considered for the purpose of this study, the *City Press* and the *Mail and Guardian* (M&G). The study covers a calendar year from September 2012 and makes specific reference to 84 of the 300 news articles and editorials sampled online. This investigative coverage is subsequently contrasted briefly with that of the isiZulu newspaper, *Ilanga*, where it was covered in five routine news reports over five months.

Analysis of the City Press and M&G coverage of President Zuma's private home at Nkandla

In the pre-scandal phase the *M&G* had drawn attention to the high expenditure on Zuma's Nkandla homestead, but the *City Press* broke the "R200m splurge on Zuma homestead" on 29 September 2012. It established that the expenditure was cloaked in secrecy; was extensive at R203 million; and was paid for with public funds, not by Zuma. The revelation drew on official Public Works documents the journalists had had sight of while their consequent requests for access to information relating to the expenditure from public officials were denied. The revelation was met with an indignant response from Democratic Alliance (DA) Lindiwe Mazibuko, reported in the *City Press* two days later. Two official ANC responses came from Presidential spokesperson, Mac Maharaj, and Minister of Public Works, Thulas Nxesi. Maharaj deflected attention from Zuma by arguing the necessity for accommodation for visiting dignitaries and their security guards. Nxesi expressed angry concern over the leaking of the information, but not the substance of the allegation, and he threatened legal action. The withholding of information was justified by government authorities in terms of the apartheid National Key Points Act and the level of expenditure was argued to be consistent with the Ministerial Handbook.

Morally indignant responses included those of legal authorities who define the moral order by which the president can be judged in relation to his office.

The Ethics Act, for example, prohibits the president from acting in a manner that is inconsistent with or might compromise the credibility or integrity of his office.

The expenditure on President Zuma's Nkandla private home was argued to be "unlawful" on various counts.

In the face of the criticisms, Nxesi initiated an investigation to clear up "misperceptions". President Zuma did not act to address the public concerns, but offered an ad hoc defence in Parliament claiming ignorance about the levels of expenditure. He additionally described himself and his family as victims of misinformation on the part of the media.

This initial revelation planted the seed for moral outrage about the spending of excessive amounts of money on the President's private home. Indignation was expressed by the opposition parties, Cosatu, and articulate members of the public at large and reported in the press. The DA responded by means of statements in Parliament, speeches and interviews in other public venues, and through the Zille-led march. The coverage of the statements of moral outrage from various public figures and the arguments made in the editorials constituted the resistance to the refusal of access to information and it was articulated within a discourse of democratic rights and responsibilities.

The issue of morality was not being addressed by the ANC officials involved or by the beneficiary, President Zuma.

In spite of the series of revelations and moral outrage articulated within a rights discourse, Zuma, Nxesi, and other officials had repeatedly deflected the call for information by telling people to await the findings of the Public Works Department's report which the public and journalists were assured they would have access to. However, it is now evident that, since the report itself was withheld by Nxesi and the Public Works Department, this was intended as a delaying tactic. The withholding of information about the spending of the public purse is indicative of a dismissive attitude towards the rights to information enshrined in the Constitution and which ANC public officials have recognised by taking office.

This is the battle of ideas then. The investigative journalists have declared themselves on the side of right, the self-appointed fighters of a just war. They view the extraordinarily high level of spending from the public purse for the incumbent president and his family's personal comfort as acting outside the morality of a democratic dispensation. On the other hand, the ANC have made their mark in the sand.

The persistence of the journalists in gaining access to information has been matched by the determination of the ANC officials and others behind the scenes to withhold information about the spending.

The ANC have in effect declared their position as one based on might, enabled by their large parliamentary majority. They have chosen recourse to rules and dubious acts to withhold information from the public.

When the promised Public Works report was publicly withheld in late January 2013, Nxesi saw fit to give the population a summary that exonerated the President, although it allowed that procedural malpractice in relation to tenders and payment was evident and that those responsible would be held accountable. The inappropriateness of the spending was not discussed.

What remains inescapable is that R240 million has been spent for one home that will benefit a single office holder and his family for many years to come. As noted earlier, the saga is not over, but the comments made here speak adequately to the nature of the coverage of the Nkandla saga.

The Ilanga coverage

During the five month period from September 2012 to January 2013, the Ilanga sample produced only five articles which took the form of routine reporting rather than investigative journalism. The difference in coverage is contextualised in terms of Ilanga's vision of its role in Zulu society and conserving Zulu heritage. Ilanga does not play a watchdog role in relation to this large national issue and it does not take a deeply held moral position. When Nxesi made his statement on withholding the report, his statement is described as the "truth" about Nkandla. The decision to withhold the report goes unquestioned by Ilanga. The broad issues of democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression are largely incidental in this coverage.

Findings & Conclusions

The questions relating to the alleged hostility of the news media towards the ANC, their lack of respect for the dignity of public figures, and their not acting in the interests of the public were found to be unfounded in this coverage. The analysis of the editorials in particular, but also the reporting in general, shows that the investigation takes a position of moral indignation both at the expenditure on the President's Nkandla homestead and at the cavalier way that information was obscured. This however cannot be conflated with hostility to the ANC per se. Some of the editorials are at pains to recognise the heroes of the struggle and ANC leaders who have been concerned with the public good.

While the City Press and the M&G have been highly critical, they do not attack the ANC, the Office of the President or that of public officials, but rather particular forms of conduct.

To argue that the media have attacked the dignity of the ANC politicians involved would require that the politicians have been wrongfully accused or that the journalists made *ad hominem* attacks.

On the other hand, the ANC public officials felt no obligation to provide access to the information about public spending that was requested. President Zuma at no stage saw fit to address the issue or reassure the public of South Africa. His defense remained one of ignorance, as

was that of several other ANC politicians. The impatience with requests for information on the part of these ANC officials, their reluctance to provide information and a frequently hectoring tone point to their attitude toward the news media and indirectly to the public. President Zuma's supporters similarly responded aggressively, at times resorting to accusations of racism.

That ANC public officials, on several occasions, guaranteed the news media and the public access to the report initiated by the Public Works Department and then summarily denied this access similarly speaks to a dismissive attitude on the part of the ANC. Their conduct constitutes disrespect not merely for the journalists but for the citizens of the country who have the right of access to information and freedom of expression.

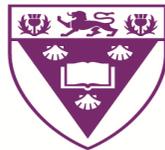
Finally, in terms of the public good this report argues that it is deeply ironic that the ANC endorse the Nkandla expenditure, while their 2010 document laments the role the media play in encouraging greed: "our souls are being poisoned by the spirit of conspicuous consumption in a socio-economic formation that encourages greed" (ANC 2010: item 83).

The excessive expenditure on the various luxuries at Zuma's homestead arguably points to personal enrichment and conspicuous consumption. Similarly, the point that the news media do not work to effect nation-building can be redirected. By seeking to hold politicians accountable and to expose corruption, this body of investigative journalism arguably bolsters due democratic process and thus constitutes a patriotic act.

This research however does not present a white wash of the news media.

The analysis has focused on an area that the investigative teams in the *City Press* and the *Mail & Guardian* do well. Yet it also points to areas where the same critical acumen is lacking, specifically around corporate collusion and improper conduct. It similarly has identified a lack of diversity of voice, an aspect that could easily have been addressed under the circumstances.

For the full report, please visit: <http://www.mediaanddemocracy.com>



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