

# Factional Journalism in South Africa's Privately Owned Print Media: An Exploration

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## Abstract

This paper theorized the concept of “factional journalism” and media capture within South Africa’s privately owned print media landscape. This theorization attempts to understand media capture along partisan and factional cleavages in the post democratic dispensation. To understand the factional journalism phenomena in South Africa, we employ a case study design that relies on interviews with Media24 and Independent News and Media (also known as Independent Media) aligned political editors and journalists who have covered the Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa’s presidencies. Theoretically, we rely on the political economy framework of the media. For this investigation, we wanted to understand how, if at all, media ownership structures and political-economic interests influence journalistic bias in how the Zuma and Ramaphosa presidencies are/have been represented. Findings from this study confirmed the enduring political and business pressures exerted on journalists when covering political elites. While our study observed few cases of outliers, the general trend confirms the continued relevance of the political economy framework as a viable model when seeking to understand editorial bias when covering political elites.

## Keywords

activism, advertising, advocacy journalism, audience reception, broadcasting

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## Introduction

The media occupies an intricate position, on one hand the normative role of informing, educating and entertaining, and on the other end there is capitalist driven interest of fulfilling shareholder interests which at times might be in conflict with normative expectations. It is within this context that this study investigates how media ownership structures and political-economic interests influence journalistic practices and content production in South African print media.

We look at how the print media has covered two consequential figures in South African politics for the past two decades: Jacob Zuma<sup>1</sup> and Cyril Ramaphosa.<sup>2</sup> These two political actors, though coming from the same party (the African National Congress), represent and have been framed as patrons of contradicting and at times conflicting ideologies. Zuma's politics, at least at a rhetorical level, is rooted in black people's struggles, often referred to as the "Radical Economic Transformation" with his nemesis, Cyril Ramaphosa, a billionaire businessman, being labelled as the representative of "white monopoly capital" due to his pro-business friendly rhetoric, ties, and policies.

Ramaphosa's presidency has been characterized by the "Thuma Mina," translated to mean send me, tune which promised business, political reforms and an ethical government. Thuma mina mantra is a derivative from the late famous jazz musician, Hugh Masekela, song *thuma mina*. After Ramaphosa's appropriation of the phrase, his opponents have gone on to brand media sympathetic to his policies as thuma mina media or thuma mina minions. Allegations of thuma mina media and journalists believed to report in favor of Ramaphosa rose following a controversial #ThumaMina media WhatsApp group composed of senior journalists, editors, and government spokespersons (TimesLive, 2020). This group was accused of doing the hatchet job for Ramaphosa as he was the preferred candidate to succeed Jacob Zuma.

Since his forced removal from the country's presidency and after the lapse of his ANC presidency, Zuma has been brandishing a typology of politics that advocates for a radical approach to redressing colonial and apartheid created imbalances. Some of the signature policies he has been advocating include land expropriation from white commercial farmers with no compensation (Reuters, 2017). It is with this background that we ask journalists questions such as (a) how would you describe your media organization's coverage of Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa during their respective presidencies? (b) What factors, both within and outside your newsroom, influenced your coverage of these political leaders? (c) Does/did your media organization maintain any specific editorial stance or policy regarding coverage of Zuma and Ramaphosa? If so, how has this shaped your reporting?

Extensive scholarly attention has been given at the normative role of the media in politics (Duncan, 2014; Radebe, 2017). This media role is crucial role in helping the public to understand political developments and helping them make informed decisions. Due to the politics-media-business nexus, it is imperative to understand, atleast in the South African context, the relationships between media entities and

political institutions (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). In recent history, this interconnectedness has become complex with ownership patterns constantly changing hands and big businesses, in most cases having controlling stake in the media, finding ties with political and labor elites (Hadland, 2007).

Since the dawn of democracy, the ANC has questioned the role the media has been playing and its implications on the state of democracy. The former ruling party accuses the media of an astonishing degree of dishonesty, lack of professional integrity and independence. In 2010, the party sought to resuscitate its calls for a Media Appeals Tribunal when it published a discussion document titled “Media Transformation, Ownership and Diversity” for consideration (Rumney, 2023). This, of course, was not the beginning as the global political icon, Nelson Mandela, had previously made sharp remarks about the media. In his Presidential Speech to the ANC National Convention in 1997, Mandela accused the media of being “counterrevolutionary” and “undermining” government’s attempts to work at implementing the ANC’s 1994 election platform of widespread reconstruction and development (Jacobs 1999, p. 7). This shows how ANC has been gradually shifting its stance on the media, which helps to explain why, at the height of his political career, Jacob Zuma created and supported an alternative media, ANN7, considered loyal to the ANC party and his political agenda.

### *Tracing the History of the South African Print Media and Politics*

South Africa’s history of the print media spans three different epochs—the colonial, apartheid, and the democratic era (Tomaselli, 2002; Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). As Fourie (2007) correctly puts it, these media establishments are always linked to the capitalist and the political system. The English press was in cohort with the British mining capital, while the Afrikaans press became a competitive player in the media environment through Naspers when the National Party came into power in 1948 (Tomaselli, 2002). As Tomaselli (1997) intimates, the Afrikaans press played a propaganda role for the National Party. These political cleavages between media and political elites are fundamentally informed by vested interests in economic and political decision-making (Bombi, 2024). For example, *Die Burger*, one of the earliest newspapers in South Africa, was formed in 1915 with direct alignment to the National Party due to the publication’s links with D.F. Malan, then leader of the Cape National Party, who became the first editor-in-chief of the publication (1915–1924) (Lubbe, 1997). The publication was used as the party’s propaganda machine with the board of directors of the holding company, the Nusionule Pers Beperk, being politicians who could indirectly determine the editorial policy of the publication (Lubbe, 1997). This conflation demonstrates why there are always calls for media organizations to provide fair and balanced coverage of political developments because of their considerable influence on shaping beliefs and positions of society. This is why Schudson (2002) argues that, due to their influence publications become political actors.

The fall of the apartheid regime brought change in the media landscape. As Ndlovu (2015, p. 116) argues “the increase in the number of media outlets also created fragmented postmodern media consumers who are exposed to a wide variety of entertainment messages that compete with mainstream journalism.” Media24, which is a subsidiary of Naspers, remains the biggest print publisher in South Africa and has over the years grown from a small-sized Afrikaans newspaper group into a multi-national company (Rumney, 2023).

Post 1994, the former ruling African National Congress (ANC) has sought to define the role of the media, going so far as to label, mainly, the print media as anti-transformational. In one of the policy documents, the ANC (2007) argued that “media and communications are contested terrains and therefore not neutral but reflect the ideological battle and power relations based on race, class and gender in our society.” Here, the ANC is arguing that the media has been instrumentalized to advance certain ideological positions and in this instance being those of the media owners and at the time being mainly whites. These details, which have to do with the political economy of the media, or the print press in the case of this study, raise questions about the objectivity of the media and its ability to report fairly without bias on political developments and the related role players. The influence of business or capital in politics and its coverage in news has one important strain of contemporary research in both political science and news reporting.

Business plays a part in the distribution of power in politics and how certain political actors are perceived in the media (Vogel, 1996; Parsa et al., 2021). Political economy scholars argue that businesses do not just donate money to the news media for no reason but are doing that to influence public discourse and gain access in the political scene (Lewis et al., 2008; Prat & Strömberg, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to study the prevalence, if any, of factional journalism and its centrality in South Africa’s body politic. This is why, Nkomo (2016, p. 18) rightly intimates, journalists should navigate their role more cautiously even as they engage “their role of criticism, engagement, promotion and keeping people informed through their reporting plays a significant role in how they represent certain political leaders and figures, and how certain parties govern.” It is for that reason that this study’s interest is in how the media represents political leadership and governance during the Zuma and Ramaphosa presidency, particularly tracing political and economic pressures that determine the typology of the coverage.

### *A Brief Review of Literature*

There is scant literature that maps the concept of factional journalism within the academy. Al Moghayer (2007, p. vii) notes that “the concept of factional journalism is shown to have a great deal to offer in increasing understanding of the influential role and responsibilities of print media in highly polarised conflict situations.” Chuma et al. (2020) who also wrote on this phenomenon of factional journalism within Zimbabwe defined it to be “the capture of the state media by the ruling party

and the virtual erosion of journalistic agency in the state media institutions.” In this instance, Chuma et al. (2020) seem to locate factional journalism within the narrow confines of state media in Zimbabwe. In both instances, the above scholars seem to argue the contours of factional journalism within partisan polarization. Our case study extends the two identified earlier works, (a) we look at factional journalism within the context of on independent media whereas Chuma et al.’s (2020) study is focused state-controlled media, (b) we appropriate the term “factional journalism” in as far as it pertains to how South African journalists report on public figures even though coming from deep rooted differing ideological positions. Our case study involves media entities owned by Naspers in the case of Media24, a pro-capital white Afrikaner establishment (Teer-Tomaselli et al., 2019). We also look at Independent News and Media owned by Sekunjalo Holdings, an entity owned by Iqbal Surve, who has openly declared himself as the defender of the broader “black majority” interests against what in the contemporary South African lexicon is known as White Monopoly Capital (Mgibisa, 2017).

Media control by business and political interests has received substantial scholarly attention (Chuma et al., 2020; Kuypers, 2013). This has become even more pronounced in the contemporary world, with two of the world’s richest, Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, extending their control into media products. Musk, a technology mogul, owns X, formerly Twitter, which he has weaponized to endear himself within the Trump and MAGA circles. On the other end, Bezos came under attack when he blocked his newspaper, *The Washington Post*, from endorsing Kamala Harris—the first act by the company in decades to withdraw endorsing a political candidate in what he described as “neutrality.” The act by Bezos was met by an unprecedented action of more than 200,000 people who canceled their digital subscriptions (Reuters, 2024), challenging the media owner’s interference with a long-held tradition of editorial independence.

Outside of the American gaze, the media has often aligned itself with political ideologies and formations. The recent election in the UK saw the Sun backing the Labor party ahead of the Conservatives in what the entity described as “tactical voting” (The Spectator, 2024). The trend is the same in other developed economies—Australia, Germany, Sweden, and Norway, among others. The developing world has a different type of media, especially in semi-authoritarian states and autocracies. In most Eastern European countries—the Soviet Bloc—as Tepliakova (2021, p. 19) notes,

media must operate in disabling environments with limited journalistic freedom and judicial independence. Central and Eastern European states represent such settings to various extent, as the takeover of media regulatory organisations and decreasing media pluralism have become characteristic for this region, indicating a systemic shift.

In Africa, where this case study is located, there has been a marked disparity across countries. For example, South Africa remains an outlier with media freedoms, independence, and plurality which still hold governments accountable (Plaut, 2018). However, neighboring countries like Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Eswatini have constrained media

which is either absolute state mouthpieces or compliant. Writing on the operating environment in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, Mare (2019, p. 100) intimates that “the weaponization of the mainstream media by various political factions has also rendered it pliable in the eyes of the citizens.”

The control, in part, is informed by the political premium that comes with the power the media has in “giving” and withdrawing attention to actors. Writing on this, Cook (2012) intimates that “the news media have also become a more central and visible political player between the 1950s and the 1990s,” which explains contestation over control. As Van Dijk (1995, p. 10) notes, “this power is not restricted to the influence of the media on their audiences but also involves the role of the media within the broader framework of the social, cultural, political, or economic power structures of society.” This role can include highlighting issues that may be closer to politicians’ interests. Supporting this view, Cook (2012, p. 127) says “of course, political actors rarely call attention to an issue merely for the sake of doing so; instead, they stress issues that hold together their coalition and fragment the opposition.”

The contemporary world of politics is fed by the media frenzy, which explains why politicians see the need to maintain relations with journalists. In some instances, politicians go further to recruit journalists to become part of their communications department, who can help them shape narratives and communicate government policy. What further complicates perceptions around this grey zone journalists occupy is the ease with which they straddle the two fields—being partly politicians or aids of politicians and being journalists. Writing on this, Bedingfield (2013) opines that the revolving door between press and politics has always existed, and the transition from one to the other, if handled transparently and with no overlap, has been an accepted practice. This, in our reading of the contemporary media landscape in South Africa, has become the order of the day.

In countries such as Zimbabwe, this capture has been more pronounced, with Chuma et al. (2020) concluding that such capture has been promoted by state actors for factional political expediency. Ruhanya (2018) found that due to the worsening economic and political situation in Zimbabwe, publishers have had to resort to two strategies: internal cost-cutting strategies and building good business relations with the ruling political elites. Ruhanya (2018, p. 201) adds that “internal cost-cutting strategies have included newsroom convergences, retrenchments, salary reductions and freezes, reduction of newspaper pages and shutting down national newspaper bureaus. External survival methods, on the other hand, have been seeking donor funding, attracting political investments, and embracing the new political order for government protection in the event of failure to pay statutory obligations such as taxes and pensions.”

The issue of partisan and factional journalism is not unique to developing economies; if anything, it is more pronounced in the developed world (Bauer et al., 2022). This phenomenon was more pronounced in the nineteenth century where, as Patterson and Donsbagh (1996) argued, “the press was rooted in partisan advocacy

and supported by party patrons, in and out of government.” To some degree, this is what Meyers (2019) argued, concluding that

the objectivity standard became the dominant norm in modern journalism, even while most working reporters and nearly all scholars acknowledge that a strict version of it cannot be achieved. This means that all news providers can only approach their work from a normative and political perspective; all are, that is, ‘biased.’

South Africa provides an interesting case considering its developed media market, media independence and freedom, constitutional guarantees that protect journalists and media entrepreneurs from state actors and the Competition Commission that offers safeguards from collusion and manipulation.

### *Considerations on the Political Economy of South African Privately Owned Print media*

This study employs the political economy of the media as our theoretical departure. Political economy pertains to the study of how values of all kinds (power and wealth included) are produced, distributed, exchanged, and consumed. This theory traces its origins from the work of Adam Smith (1776) who argued that political economy had to do with the study of “wealth” (material goods) or the allocation of resources and was concerned with “how mankind arranges to allocate scarce resources with a view toward satisfying certain needs and not others. In this instance, with a specific focus on the media, this would entail the allocation of media attention towards satisfying the needs of political or business elites. The Political economy theory examines how economic systems, political institutions, and social forces interact and shape one another. It investigates how markets function within broader social and political contexts (Veseth & Balaam, 2006). For this study, we borrow from Tshabangu and Salawu (2024), who define political economy of the media theory as “an approach that focuses on the operations of media within a given social system and how they are affected by structural constraints of politics, economics, technology, culture and legislation.” Our paper looks at how media entrepreneurs, in cahoots with political and business elites, allocate positive or negative attention to achieve intended goals, what others have described as media capture by business and political interests.

### *Methodological and Ethical Considerations*

Our paper used qualitative interviews as our design to gather information. We sought to understand perceptions and experiences of influences over how journalists reported these two political actors and their leadership in South Africa. We used purposive sampling to select journalists (Table 1) we knew reported on these two politicians. The interviews granted informed consent to the interviewers. We were aware of our

**Table 1.** Representation and Demographic Details of the Interviewees.

| Media house/stable        | Position                           | Years of experiences |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Media24/News24            | Reporter (code A1)                 | 7 years              |
| Media24/News24            | Senior Politics Reporter (code A2) | +10 years            |
| Independent/Pretoria News | Senior Politics Reporter (code A3) | +10 years            |
| Media24/News24            | Political Reporter (code A4)       | 8 years              |
| Independent/Cape Argus    | Reporter (code A5)                 | <5 years             |
| Independent/Cape Times    | Editorial (code A6)                | +10 years            |
| Independent/Cape Argus    | Editorial (code A7)                | +15 years            |
| Independent/IOL           | Senior Politics Reporter (code A8) | +10 years            |
| Independent/The Star      | Political Reporter (code A9)       | 8 years              |
| Independent/IOL           | News Reporter (code A10)           | <3                   |

ethical responsibilities when collecting data, and we followed all necessary ethical considerations in line with ethical procedures. According to Bless et al. (2006) ethics are an important aspect in research and help researchers to avoid exposing participants to harm, to protect their dignity and rights. For that reason, the interviewees were accorded adequate anonymization to cater for some who asked for their identities to be protected.

Jacob Zuma has framed himself as a pro-African leader, with Ramaphosa having been framed as pro-business. Our study focuses on two leading media conglomerates: Media24 and Independent News and Media also known as Independent Media (shortened above as Independent). Our in-depth interviews were informed by three main questions:

1. How would you describe your media organization's coverage of Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa during their respective presidencies?
2. What factors, if any, both within and outside your newsroom, influenced your coverage of these political leaders?
3. Does/Did your media organization maintain any specific editorial stance or policy regarding coverage of Zuma and Ramaphosa? If so, how has this shaped your reporting?

The above interview questions informed us of the themes we adopted for the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2024) note that

although thematic analysis is often used merely to describe or summarize key patterns in data...a good thematic analysis involves more than simply reporting what is in the data; it involves telling an interpretative story about the data in relation to a research question.

For this paper, we employ the above questions where our themes emanate: (a) journalists' perceptions on how they covered the two actors, (b) influences on the coverage

and framing of the two politicians, and (c) journalists' view on news organization's editorial stance when reporting these two political actors. The overarching purpose of the above thematic approach was to understand how South African journalists understand the state of factional journalism in their news work. We also sought to understand if the country's journalists, in their understanding, have moved post the Hutchins Commission recommendation that set the ground for some of the normative expectations around objectivity and neutrality (Siebert et al., 1963).

## Discussion

### *Perceptions on Coverage*

Our study found that when it comes to perceptions of coverage, some journalists conceded that they tended to give a *carte blanche* to an incoming president in the hope that they would become good leaders. However, this blank check often ended within the usual first 100 days often used to track the progress of any new administration. A journalist (A9) from Independent News and Media's *IOL* said, our coverage of the two presidents was pretty much the same. It first started off as being positive, *per se*. This is informed by the hope that any new leader will bring much-needed change. However, the interviewee concedes that with time, the approach had to change due to familiarity and scandals. The experiences from the journalist (A1) from Media24 stable were different, noting that:

While most of my reporting on both Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa was a regurgitation of what the political commentators/analysts said to me during interviews, there was a clear agenda set by those who assigned the stories. Zuma was the known villain, the problem child, the troublemaker; while Ramaphosa was somewhat of a sweetheart, a better look for the country, the lesser evil and more forgivable of the two.

What is interesting from the above sentiment is that it shows a clear editorial bias, from the interviewee's perspective, in how *News24* decided to cover stories around Zuma in comparison to Ramaphosa. The data gleaned from interviews with journalists and editors associated to the Media24 confirms Graham's (2007, p. 237) observations that "media and communication systems and content" do certain things ("reinforce," "influence") to "existing class and social relations," with a special focus on the role of "economic factors." Our study shows that the negative coverage of Zuma was largely informed by perception of the harm his policies inflicted on the economy and fears that the redistributive rhetoric would turn South Africa into a "mini-Zimbabwe"—a country which has become a reference point for economic collapse. Hence, the negative coverage of Zuma's presidency was meant to reinforce his perceived "chaotic" and corrupt behavior as president.

However, as both actors have been embroiled in political scandals, but as the Independent Media journalist (A3) noted "many have shied from Ramaphosa, we

were by far the only media that had appetite to tackle the issue [Phalaphala Scandal]. Likewise with Zuma, we did not hold back when his Nkandla dealings dominated news headlines.” Ramaphosa has received a largely favorable reception from media entities like Media24 because of media proprietors’ economic interests which have tended to view his policies as business-friendly. One of the interviewees (A8) who worked for both case studies (Media24 and Independent News and Media) confirmed editorial bias by *IOL* in giving favorable coverage to Jacob Zuma. He had this to say:

One cannot deny that *IOL* has been more sympathetic towards former President Jacob Zuma, whereas *Daily Maverick* and *News24* have generally aligned more favourably with President Cyril Ramaphosa. My approach to covering both leaders has always been objective, but the reality is that one has received more favourable coverage than the other. From a journalistic standpoint, it is difficult to ignore Zuma’s Presidency’s legacy, which included widespread corruption, state capture, and institutional decay. Given this, the persistent media scrutiny he faces is not unwarranted. His tenure significantly damaged state institutions, so the media has continued to hold him accountable for his role in that decline.

The reportage of the two has also been influenced by the leaders’ personal lives. For example, an interviewee from Independent News and Media (A3) notes that:

Zuma was a controversial figure who was accused of rape, and corruption. These factors, while one would have wanted to be objective, played a role on how one reported on the president. In my own opinion, State Capture will remain Zuma’s legacy. Contrary to what many believe this was not a term manufactured by the media.

The interviewee (A3) also notes that part of the influence on how Zuma, in comparison to Ramaphosa, was negatively covered had to do with his legal troubles, including the findings of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture. The interviewee notes that

the Public Protector’s report that found that Zuma was central in corruption manifesting within government mainly shaped how we (the media) portrayed him. It was that report that would ultimately be Zuma’s legacy. So, in short, external factors played a major role in how one reported on Zuma.

This is consistent with observations made by McLaughlin et al. (2017, p. 864) that “public opinion is often influenced by the way political leaders, and their policy positions are covered by the news media” we extend that the same influence applies to public figures, top government technocrats and in South Africa’s case this include heads of Chapter 9 institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the influences were informed by the prevailing sentiments in the country, especially considering Ramaphosa took over following a period of state capture. An Independent News journalist (A3) said the following:

Reporting on President Cyril Ramaphosa was the opposite of how one covered Zuma. Again, there were several external factors that shaped and continue to shape how one reports on Ramaphosa. Unlike Zuma, Ramaphosa came on a ticket of wanting to fight corruption, something which would later appear to be a mammoth task. Ramaphosa was seen by many as a savior from nine years under Zuma. But he was still presiding over the same ANC government that had been found wanting. So, reporting on him was far more complex than reporting on Zuma. The markets rallied behind Ramaphosa, and this external factor played a huge role in how he was seen by capital and the international community. Because of his posture in wanting to fight corruption, there was push back from some within the ANC, so the media appeared to be on the side of Ramaphosa and in some instances were found wanting.

The positive coverage Zuma receives from Independent News and Media should not come as a surprise considering that, during his tenure as president, AYO Technology which is the holding company with stake in Independent News and Media received financial support through the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) to the tune of more than four billion rand (R4.7 billion) (Ashley et al., 2023). As Wasko (2005, p. 39) argued, “interrelationships between media and communication industries and sites of power in society are necessary for the complete analysis of communications.” This view confirms the power of political and economic interests in determining news coverage. Therefore, it is plausible to ascertain that the positive coverage Zuma received from the Independent News and Media was a result of financial favors’ the holding company with a controlling stake in the media company received from the government during Zuma’s presidency. Publications under the company were less critical to the former president, which compromises the prospects of the media as a watchdog or fourth estate. Subsequent theorists have assessed these relations in a more consensual mode by asserting that those who fund the press often co-opt it to produce narratives which select and interpret events in their favor (Hearns-Branaman, 2009).

### *Influences on the Coverage and Framing of Political Actors*

This paper also sought to establish what influenced journalists in their coverage and framing of Zuma and Ramaphosa. The media’s ability to set the political agenda and to frame debate gives them the power to influence the decisions and actions of the general populace (Hassell et al., 2022). It is this “influence” that we believe the media wields that we sought to understand how it is exercised across media entities from a journalistic perspective. While newsrooms have a duty to report on politicians and political developments, they often use that reportage to convey their own bias (Lazaridou & Krestel, 2016). This is so because newsrooms can select what is worth

reporting on and what is not. This could present a bias based on the editorial direction taken by the publications. McChesney (2003) also argues that journalism cannot be objective or neutral since newsrooms consider certain values before deciding what becomes news, and what does not, which amply supports one of our findings that the publications sampled often took a partisan position in the way in which they reported on the two political figures. Journalists admit that in their coverage of the two politicians, there was editorial interference, but they often depended on their own research in their reporting. Independent Media's Journalist (A10) alludes to that:

The agenda was set by the editors, and that in turn shaped the questions I'd ask, in order not to deviate from the assignment (I'd like to believe my questions didn't reflect any bias but were designed to get certain responses). But also, how the analysts responded played a big role where writing the article is concerned. What was widely reported in other media also had some level of influence, for the obvious reason that "reliable" media is a source of information, and many other journalists had more access to certain information than I did.

The sentiment of the journalist underscores the need to respect objectivity in journalism and not allow editorial bias to affect reporting. Studies have found that newsrooms often use their editorial voice to influence politics indirectly by targeting some politicians (Firmstone, 2019). According to a Journalist (A3) from Independent Media, objectivity is always something they consider when reporting on politicians. The interviewee added:

As a journalist it is important for me not to allow internal and external influences to influence the coverage of any politician, it is best for me to strive to maintain objectivity. Internal influences such as editorial policies or independence and newsroom values guided the framing of most of the stories I reported about these politicians.

The issue of editorial interference corrodes the quality of news output and distorts social, political, and economic and other realities. As Firmstone (2019) puts it, by selecting what issues should be published, newspapers carry the power to determine what issues will form part of public discourse and thus take on an active role in public deliberations of political issues. The journalist, however, demonstrates that they never allowed that to affect their own objectivity in their reporting

There are factors that always influence the direction of a news story. Thankfully we have always been guided by the principle of public interest. Our coverage is not influenced by individuals but by the direction we think our readers would be more interested in.

Notwithstanding what the journalist (A10) from Independent Media says above, it is possible that any media can present news bias by reporting on political events in a selective or incomplete manner to meet the specific needs or demands of their audience. According to Ress and Twedt (2022, p. 7), in theory, "media bias suggests that media

slant reflects the preferences, incentives, and personal biases of journalists, editors, and owners of the media outlet.” Beyond that, because consumers display traits of confirmation bias, they subconsciously become a target market for such content because editors cater to their content demands. The journalist also posits that while newsrooms or their holding companies have their own agenda, it’s important to consider the media’s normative role. Researchers agree that newsrooms hold an important role since they bear the responsibility to shape beliefs in society (Chen et al., 2020). According to a journalist (A4) from Media24, even with newsrooms defining themselves as primarily objective institutions which are politically neutral, they are partisan actors who also present their own agenda. The interviewee said, “while biases exist within media institutions, the primary responsibility is to serve the public interest by scrutinising those in power, exposing wrongdoing, and fostering informed debate.”

The Journalist (A4) above believes that the media has a responsibility to present a complete view of political events without promoting a single narrative. Indeed, the print media plays a central role in providing information which is necessary for democracy, but such information could be manipulated to present the bias of those reporting. It is for that reason that de Arruda et al., (2020) find that newsrooms are ideologically embedded and biased. Based on the journalists interviewed, the extent to which editorial bias exists is different in the newsroom, but all agree that newsrooms present a bias in the way in which they expect their journalists to cover political stories.

There absolutely were internal factors in covering these politicians only because of newsroom discussions about the approach and angles we pursue when covering stories. However, this has not led to any inaccurate reporting. I have never been influenced by any external factor even when people share their own opinions about these politicians. I always stick to the facts as I know them.

The above remarks by the journalist (A2) from Media24 show that news is a social construct, which is sometimes a function of selection. In all the responses from the journalists, it is prevalent that editorial bias is rife in many newsrooms with an intention to control narratives on reporting. This is despite whether those voices have had an impact on the way in which the journalists reported on the two political figures. Academic inquiries in the field of editorial bias in news reporting have generally found that newsrooms present news that is laden based on their posture in politics (de Arruda et al., 2020; Morris, 2007). Media24’s journalist (A1) below attests to the prevalence of bias in the newsroom they worked for:

I acknowledge that internal biases can sometimes occur and could compromise my objectivity. External influences which are public sentiments, the political climate and what the audience expect sometimes drove my objectivity or my research when it comes to the coverage of Zuma and Ramaphosa. I have realized that issue and made efforts to separate these factors from the factual basis of my work to ensure that I maintain fact-based content or coverage.

While external and internal influences may not always be intentional, there was a clear understanding of how different newsrooms perceived these two political figures. Reporters and editors, consciously or subconsciously, often reflect their own ideological leanings in their coverage. Journalists are shaped by their experiences, backgrounds, and the ethos of their newsrooms. On the issue of the ethos of ownership, McChesney (2003, p. 319) is of the view that “journalists, and certainly those who rise to the top of the profession, tend to internalize the values of those who own and control the enterprise.” Whether intended or unintended, there’s a chance that the news articles will reflect the posture of the author or the news organization they work for will be reflected in the way they are telling the story (Baly et al., 2020). Therefore, that could affect the way consumers perceive those being reported on. These developments also trigger a belief that the media is a political actor. On the role of the media, Santos and Ndhlovu (2016) are of the view that the media often persuade citizens using rhetoric to support some political positions in the political arena.

### *Journalistic Perceptions on Editorial Bias*

Editorial bias or slant often plays a key role in how political actors are framed by the media. As Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010, p. 35) note “news content has a powerful impact on politics, with ideologically diverse content producing socially desirable outcomes” and in most cases these outcomes are political or economic. Editorial bias is largely a product of business and political interests. This view was supported by an interviewee from Media24 (A4) who said “journalists are shaped by their experiences, backgrounds, and the ethos of their newsrooms. Even when striving for balance, personal and institutional biases can influence angles and framing.” The above quote demonstrates how journalists actively play a role in writing articles believed to align with newsroom editorial bias. This view was further corroborated by another journalist (A2) from the same media stable, sharing personal reflections, who noted that:

I’m of the opinion that Zuma is bad news for the country as its leader and that he mostly serves his own interests in the political sphere. Initially, I had high hopes (but not too deep because politics is a game) and probably misplaced faith in Ramaphosa as a person and as a president, but I’m currently jaded. My knowledge of the intricacies of politics is also not that great so my position may be slightly uneducated and more of a layman’s take. I believe they are both flawed in their work, but in different ways. The former appears cocky and unapologetic in his shady dealings and the consequences for the country, while the latter appears softer—I don’t know about remorseful. But Ramaphosa also seems protected by actors who have something to gain from his leadership.

However, some journalists indicated they did not allow personal opinions to affect how they have been covering the two political actors. One such sentiment came from an Independent News interviewee (A10) who said,

I do not have an opinion or bias towards either Jacob Zuma or Cyril Ramaphosa. As a young journalist I aim to avoid personal biases or editorial positions on political actors. My role is to inform the public by reporting accurately and unbiased reporting. By doing so, I allow the audience to have their own opinions based on the facts I presented. As much as it is challenging to ensure that the coverage is fair and balanced, I still report on both politicians' achievements and controversies.

Another interviewee from Media24 (A4) confirmed that the media appeared to be soft on Ramaphosa when reporting about corruption in comparison to Zuma. The interviewee added that "reporting on any President would be informed by various internal and external factors. It is almost impossible to report without considering these factors. The trick is to not allow those factors to overshadow your objectivity." Reiterating this point, the interviewee (A4) says:

The main contributing factor to this type of reporting, in my own opinion, is the fact that, unlike Zuma, Ramaphosa was not found to be complicit in the corruption. Then there was the Phala Phala matter. A very complex, yet important matter. When I was reporting on this, my focus area was whether any crime had been committed OR it was a matter of ethics. The lines were blurred in this regard and therefore, to avoid any risk of being subjective, I chose to report on the facts as they were presented by various role players in the matter. This route was safer because one relied on the evidence/facts that were at their disposal. Anything outside of that would have been hearsay.

An interviewee (A4) who worked for both of our case studies conceded that the editorial biases were not manifest in both cases but also added:

However, coverage often reflected public sentiment and political realities—Zuma's administration was marked by scandal, while a reformist narrative has shaped Ramaphosa's tenure. While biases exist within media institutions, the primary responsibility is to serve the public interest by scrutinising those in power, exposing wrongdoing, and fostering informed debate.

Even when striving for balance, personal and institutional biases can influence angles and framing. While some news organizations explicitly advocate for political positions, others maintain an appearance of neutrality while still shaping narratives through editorial choices and emphasis. This selective highlighting of stories demonstrates the editorial slant, for example, de-emphasizing coverage of corruption around Ramaphosa while over-emphasising coverage of corruption on Zuma. This demonstrates bias in the reporting, which Chong (2019, p. 430) warns can lead to distortions if journalists use their individual opinions, rather than facts, as a "lens" through which to make sense of and report on issues. The effects of this on journalism have arguably been negative. According to McChesney (2003), factional journalism has led to a compromise of the professional standards of fair and objective journalism.

## **Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

This study examined the concept of factional journalism in South Africa's privately owned print media landscape, where journalists navigate between professional objectivity and institutional influences. Through interviews with journalists from Media24 and Independent News and Media, our research found that while journalists strive for objectivity in their coverage of political figures like Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa, their reporting is shaped by subtle institutional biases, ownership structures, and editorial policies. These findings contribute to broader discussions about media capture and editorial independence in developing democracies, suggesting that even in relatively independent media environments like South Africa, factional tendencies persist through complex interactions between ownership, editorial direction, and institutional bias.

Some scholars (Firmstone, 2019) suggest that, due to their power to shape public discourse and pursue their own political interests through bias, newspapers should be considered as political actors. This theorization is because they choose to present some events and people as more important than others and further impact the public sphere. This study finds that, whether latent or plain, newspapers always present their own bias when covering political actors and related developments. This view finds support in the work of Santos and Ndhlovu (2016), who submit that, intentionally or not, the mass media often plays a key role in political processes. The authors (Santos and Ndhlovu, 2016, p. 26) further argue that "it does so from the premise that in spite of their dependence on politicians and other social players for information, the media can also, to some degree, be political players themselves." There's no standard determination for objectivity or whether something is topical, and publications could make a call based on common journalistic perceptions of news values. Firmstone (2019) however details that the following could determine why newsrooms cover an issue; (1) the collective interest of the leader-writing group, (2) the interests of individual journalists within the group, (3) the interests of the editor, and (4) editorial policies such as relationship to the subject under scrutiny.

The distinct coverage patterns observed—with Zuma often framed negatively in relation to corruption while Ramaphosa received generally more favorable coverage—demonstrate how South African print media exhibits a nuanced form of factional journalism where commercial interests and political alignments influence content while maintaining professional standards. We also argue that because the Zuma name has been associated with controversy in the political sphere and broadly public discourse, commercial pressures could have played a role in the way in which journalists needed to cover the former president, the way they did with an assumption that his name sells. Chong (2019) also finds that balancing public interest and self-interest is a difficult exercise for the new generation of journalists who might pick an interest in certain political actors over others. We believe that the political economy of the media is a helpful framework to help us understand not only journalistic practices but also how commercial interests play a role in the norms of objective journalism.

While scholars (Chong, 2019; Firmstone, 2019) have problematized the issue of editorial bias and subjectivity in modern journalistic practices, we take this forward, arguing that political and commercial interests are often the driving force behind the framing of political actors in commercial publications.

The ownership and orientation of the publications or the holding companies of the publication play a role in their editorial directions. For instance, journalist (A8) who worked for both Media24 and Independent Media highlighted that there was to a certain extent an editorial bias by *IOL* in giving favorable coverage to Jacob Zuma and went on to say that “One cannot deny that *IOL* has been more sympathetic towards former President Jacob Zuma, whereas *Daily Maverick* and *News24* have generally aligned more favourably with President Cyril Ramaphosa.” As already discussed in the paper, during Zuma’s tenure, AYO Technology, which is the holding company for Independent News and Media, received handsome financial support through the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) to the tune of more than R4.7 billion (Ashley et al., 2023). This explains the favorable coverage Zuma got from Independent Media publications. The participants in this study underscore that objectivity is a cornerstone of journalism, but in recent years, editorial interference and bias have had a dire negative effect on objectivity, an issue which continues to be a source of scholarship among researchers. We argue that with journalism becoming explicitly directed by political and market concerns, its strength to hold power accountable is lessened, and it loses on its duty to be society’s watchdog. This therefore calls for a multistakeholder intervention approach that calls on media to return to the basics of ensuring neutrality and balance in the print media landscape. Voluntary media councils and press ombuds should play a more active role in keeping the media in check, especially where manifest factional coverage is on display.

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### **Notes**

1. Jacob Zuma was elected South Africa’s 3rd president in 2009 after he won the ANC’s presidency in 2007 against Mbeki. Zuma served almost two terms, until he resigned from the presidency on 14 February 2018.

2. Before being elected the 5th democratically elected president in 2019, Cyril Ramaphosa was a caretaker president after the resignation of Jacob Zuma in February 2018. Ramaphosa has positioned himself as a saviour following Zuma's failed leadership, thus he termed his era as 'the new dawn' (Mashau and Kgatle, 2021).
3. Chapter 9 - institutions are independent state institutions established through the constitution to support constitutional democracy (Murray, 2006).

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