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# CENTRING THE SUBALTERN: INTERPRETING MAINSTREAM MEDIA MESSAGES IN A FRACTURED COUNTRY

## ABSTRACT

*This article reports on a study that examined the interpretation of mainstream media messages by young people living in Joza, Grahamstown, South Africa. The investigation was prompted by the failure of mainstream media to predict the ANC retaining its electoral dominance in the 2014 national general elections. Instead of falling to the margins as anticipated, the ANC, in areas such as Joza, outstripped its previous share of the vote. The study asked why people living in the township had diverged so drastically from mainstream media predictions. As a theoretical departure point, the study considered that the variation of a black South African township voice is missed by mainstream media because of the sector's subscription to the idea of a unitary public, which conceals the multiplicity of publics in a fractured country. Through a combination of interviews and participant observation, one of the major findings is that young people in the township of Joza demonstrated that they chose to ignore the messages about the corruption of the ANC. The data suggests that they did so not because of overt racial solidarity, but due to the fact that in a context of high inequality and continued limitations on economic emancipation, the party shone brightly as a vehicle for economic development.*

**Keywords:** media messages; unitary public; multiplicity of publics; ethnography; representation; subaltern

## INTRODUCTION

The so-called Nkandla scandal is arguably one of the biggest political scandals in recent South African history. This article reports on a study that investigated how young people (South African delineation) in the township of Joza, Grahamstown interpreted the Nkandla scandal. The choice of a young township audience was prompted because the voting patterns of this group (and the broader black majority) baffled mainstream media when this group opted to keep the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in government (Grootes 2014). Similar cases of unexpected election results worldwide tie this study to a current trend. Media commentators

across the globe have been confounded by the outcome of popular elections. In 2016, the world media and various punters failed to predict, or accurately depict, what majority populations had to say about the running of their respective democracies. Most notable are Britain voting to leave the European Union, Donald Trump's shock election as the President of the United States of America, and Jeremy Corbyn's remarkable electoral gains (Younge 2017).

In 2014, pundits in South Africa also failed to discern the outcome of an election and were astounded by the direction taken by a majority. In the run-up to the 2014 general elections, mainstream media outlets and commentators were convinced that the numerous political scandals, Nkandla chief amongst these, which beset the ruling ANC would threaten its majority (Calland 2014; Holmes 2013). According to the popular media narrative, the multitude of scandals were an albatross that would lead to the ANC's unravelling at the polls (Munasamy 2014). There was a sense that there would be a significant backlash from voters who regularly took to the streets to demand the delivery of basic services (Alexander 2010). Grahamstown, for example, where the research was conducted, presents a good case study. The city was awash with protest action with organisations such as the Unemployed People's Movement keeping the local ANC-led municipality busy (Mali *et al.* 2011).

The sentiment expressed in media discourse at the time was that the ANC was running the country to the ground and the party would be made to pay by the electorate (Munasamy 2014). However convincing this argument, the elections disproved the sentiment. The ANC retained its majority in parliament, and suffered a less than expected decrease at the polls. Despite the Nkandla scandal's centrality to the election news coverage, when the final results were tallied, the ruling party suffered a less than four percentage point decrease from 65.9% in 2009 to 62.1% in 2014 (IEC 2014). Interestingly, in the Eastern Cape, despite the much-publicised scandals, the ruling party improved its margin from 68% in 2009 to 70% in 2014 (*ibid.*). In the Makana Municipality, which includes Grahamstown, despite many service delivery problems, the ANC improved from 65% in 2009 to 68% in 2014 (*ibid.*).

The mismatch between what was predicted or purported and the outcome sets up the primary question: Why had mainstream media gotten the 2014 election outcome so wrong? To answer, the research drew inspiration from Robins *et al.*'s (2008: 1069) insistence that an analysis of post-apartheid society should centre on the "perspectives of citizens themselves". It is in this respect that the researcher focused on the perspective of black voters in South Africa's townships who had apparently been misinterpreted. This line of enquiry led to the more pointed research question: If the group in question did not follow the mainstream media's prescription, how did they interpret events as reported by the media? How was this silent majority interpreting dominant messages?

## CONTEXT

As an examination of the responses of marginalised township dwellers to a scandal and a detailed exploration of the everyday practice that influences those decisions, the context of the research focuses on insights that maintain that mainstream media has been accused of a narrow focus on a select group (Friedman 2011). This article argues that, intentionally or otherwise, the urban poor living in South African townships is marginalised by the mainstream media industry that targets an elite audience for the purpose of revenue from advertisers (Duncan 2000; Jacobs 2002; Wasserman 2011; Glenn & Mattes 2011). Critics contend that the commercial logic of mainstream news production marginalises the poor in two respects: through institutional operations that privilege the views of the powerful (Hall *et al.* 1978), and a market orientation that sells the audience as a commodity (Ang 1996; Duncan 2003).

Such a configuration of big organisations producing media focused on an audience in a high-income bracket creates an elite bias, or a media that functions for the interest of the middle class (Friedman 2011; Wasserman & Jacobs 2012). Glenn and Mattes (2011) maintain that in a society with a commercial media system that reinforces an elite national discourse, certain sections of the South African population are often omitted as participants from the media sphere due to any combination of education, income, language and place of residence. Due to the above, two decades into democracy, South African media still constitute an elite public sphere. The unemployed have little voice in the media, except as social problems (such as violent protestors) or as victims (Msimang 2016). Women and young people continue to be marginalised, and the overall effect is that media discourses can be inherently unbalanced or skewed to favour particular worldviews (*ibid.*).

It is argued that mainstream media practitioners take little account of the meanings marginalised groups make of dominant news messages that circulate in the mediated public sphere (Jacobs 2002; Wasserman 2011; Duncan 2013). It must be noted that the exclusion of marginalised groups from participating in the mainstream media system encompasses the South African Broadcasting Corporation, which working-class groups have access to (Jacobs 2002; Duncan 2003; Glenn & Mattes 2011; Oelofsen 2017). In recent times, mainstream media producers' prioritisation of middle-class stories, evidenced by the coverage of the Reeva Steenkamp and Jayde Panayiotou murder cases (Duncan 2013; Allison 2015; Davis 2015) over working-class issues has been critiqued as a "crisis of voice" (Couldry 2010: 13).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By focusing on everyday practice, which is intended to enable readers to obtain a better insight into the reasoning of the marginalised, the study sought to understand why the majority continues to support the ANC; an action that is oftentimes thought to hinge on stupidity rather than a rational and reasoned action (Nobaza 2014; Schutte 2014). In so doing, the theoretical starting point of this research is subaltern scholarship, which takes from Orientalism the insight that the Oriental, or Other, is never a free subject of thought or action but contained and represented by dominating frameworks

(Said 1978). Applying this understanding to the interpretation of mainstream media, the argument made is that subalterns, to the detriment of rounded analysis, have long been considered passive or unsavvy political actors (Guha 1984).

What is worth noting is the dual issue of subaltern actors being afforded little space to self-signify (Duncan 2013), and the power of civic institutions such as the media to use historical and racial bias to negatively represent subaltern groups involved (Said 1978). When applied to media study, subalternity is useful in observing how social structures silence marginalised people. A picture of this scenario is vividly painted by Duncan's (2013) study of the Marikana massacre, which found that only 3% of all the articles written at the time of the massacre consulted workers. Business sources, politicians and other expert groups dominated coverage of the tragic mine wage dispute resulting in subordinate groups being predominantly represented by those deemed more authoritative. In this regard, Spivak (1988) argues that subalterns seldom get the opportunity to self-signify because they are not seen to have the ability to do so. Such a narrow and elite focused vantage point denies the subaltern a voice because they are ideologically interpellated into a continued position of subjugation and marginality (*ibid.*).

Given the above, the motivation behind the perceived marginalisation of township people in coverage of the 2014 general elections (and their subsequent misreading) could be due to the fact that their inferior rank puts them in a position where they are scarcely considered, or if they are, they are given pre-existing roles as dupes and voting fodder. Subaltern scholarship was, therefore, useful for this study because it upended the thinking that the marginalised are duped by arguing that it is a grave limitation not to adequately consider the active role subalterns play in social action (Guha 1982). Adherents note that contrary to views of passivity, subalterns are active participants in a parallel domain of politics, which exists alongside the mainstream (Chatterjee 2003). Consequently, Chatterjee (*ibid.*) argues, subalterns are active and political in a way different from that of the elite.

To further our understanding of the behaviour of marginalised people, and their understanding of mainstream media messages, audience theory and interpretation also come into play. The study employed qualitative audience reception theory, which emphasises individual agency and the ability to independently make sense of messages in "determinate conditions of invisibility" (Morley 1991). Similar to the discussion on subalternity, the insight that emerged from this theory points to the fact that, despite the marginality, when considered in their own right, audiences are active and measured in their everyday decision-making. The point made is that when audience groups are ascribed value, and are seen as active participants, it is clear to see that messages are not linear but subject to variant interpretation. Such insights enabled the researcher to contemplate the fact that the subaltern township public under review could have understood mainstream news about a black president in a variety of ways.

## METHODOLOGY

Morley (1992) argues that media consumption is an intricate process that cannot be reduced to isolated units that can be measured by quantitative analysis. To further the point, his contemporaries have pointed out that due to its inherently complex nature – its intrinsic link to a range of other domestic practices – media consumption can only be properly understood within context (Ang 1996). In this regard, the argument proffered is that the necessary requirement of analysing the imbedded complexities of media consumption is to use anthropological and broadly ethnographic approaches (*ibid.*). These methods provide the adequately “thick” description (Geertz 1973) required to carry out the necessary contextualisation that makes such multifarious study of everyday life possible (Ang 1996). To this end, Morley (1992) posits that the interview and participant observation are fundamentally appropriate ways to understand the relation of audiences to media that is consumed in context-specific environments.

Observation and interview, two methods that work well with the narrative enquiry, an offshoot of ethnography, which prizes the process of gathering information through story-telling, were designed to fit narrative enquiry (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). The narrative technique was a good fit for the study because it entails understanding the world through the eyes of those studied, providing a description of contextualised observation and interview responses (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2008). The narrative interview is concerned with reconstructing social events from the perspective of informants (Bauer 1996) and how events, actions and happenings in the surrounding are woven into the narrated story (Trahar 2009). The method was also useful because of its ability to understand everyday communicative interaction, namely storytelling and listening, as “sense-making mechanisms” used by people to make meaning of the world (Connelly & Clandinin 1990).

The interview questions were structured in such a way as to allow respondents to narrate their life history and interaction with media materials. The data collected was also collated into narrative interviews, which are presented in the findings section. The data was collected over a four-month period (one month for acclimatisation and interview, and three months for observation). This length of time was, arguably, sufficient to find and observe respondents.

The sample group identified is a cohort that has come under scrutiny by researchers concerned with a population of young people termed Neets: “not in education, employment or training” (StatsSA 2013; Cloete & Butler-Adam 2012). This study focused on this group for two reasons. Firstly, despite international reports citing young populations as a potential for economic growth, young people in South Africa have been labelled in contradictory potentialities (Mattes & Richmond 2014; Das Gupta 2014; Lefko-Everett 2012). They are described both as a possible societal menace or a “ticking time bomb”, and optimistically as “born frees” who are better off than the previous struggle generation “despite the fact that this generation suffers as much from low levels of education, schooling completion and unemployment” (Malila 2013: 16). Statistics provide evidence that it might be more difficult to realise the more optimistic prospects, with only 33% of 17 million young people aged 18 to 35 having obtained

a matric certificate (StatsSA 2013). Furthermore, youth unemployment, which at the time of this study sat at 45%, was 20% higher than the adult rate (StatsSA 2014). Secondly, this group has demonstrated relatively high levels of trust in the media, yet continue to feel alienated by mainstream media and express the view that the information they receive is not relevant to their lives (Malila 2013; Lefko-Everett 2012).

The participants sought for this study were both male and female youths aged 18 to 24 (later expanded to 35) and who reside in Joza. It has to be noted that in conducting the research, the terms “youth” and “young adults” were used in the broadest sense. This is because it was difficult for the researcher to isolate the target group from their friendship circles in an ethnographic research project. Thus, although the focus and core concern is youth aged 18-24, the researched also considered insights from 25-35 year olds, as permitted by the South African definition of youth. Fifteen interview were conducted; however, due to space limitations, only the first three are presented here for analysis.

## FINDINGS

### Zoleka, 25

Zoleka was born in Grahamstown. She completed her senior primary school (grade four to grade seven) in Pedi, before matriculating at one of the township schools. The qualification makes her one of only a few participants to have completed high school. However, like so many of the young people encountered in the township, she stated that finances were the biggest hurdle preventing her from further study. She mentioned that government sponsored scholarship programmes were not readily available when she matriculated in 2008. What would become a familiar sentiment shared by most respondents, Zoleka shared that, had she had access to funds, she would have studied further. Instead, after finishing matric, she wandered – trying to find opportunity. She went to live in Port Elizabeth (a popular destination for Grahamstown locals looking for greener pastures) for two years before moving with her cousin to Johannesburg, lasting only six months before deciding to go back home.

Zoleka and many other respondents repeated the point that jobs are extremely scarce in Grahamstown. She was not formally employed during the time of the study. Regardless, she was no stranger to the world of work. She started working when she was still in high school, when she was living with her unemployed mother. Her father lived out of Grahamstown and did not support the family. The family had to find alternative means. “What we lived on mostly is the income I generate from doing hair. What I did was to make sure that after everyday school I do hair, so that I can get a bit of something. That is what sustained me. This is the money that also had to help my mother and my younger brother.”

To further supplement the income she made as a teenager, Zoleka also worked seasonally for the annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in the “front of house” department. Additionally, Zoleka has also worked in salons, and at Spur [a restaurant]. “I worked long-term at the salon, I stayed there for a while. At Spur, they would call me to work during the Festival most of the time. I also think that during that time I was focused

on rugby (a non-paying extramural activity) because we were playing provincial games. But now that I'm not working I'm always busy doing hair, almost every day."

When asked about the Nkandla scandal, Zoleka said that the fact that Zuma built his house and renovated parts of Nkandla, his home town, was not fair. She asked: "Why are they going to build something in his area? I think that what Zuma did is unfair. He thought only about himself and those closest to him and it seems that he is not concerned about the people. He doesn't care about us. If he was developing people, it would be understandable. If he was developing the whole of KZN, and then he moves on from there so that it is equal, it would be fine. The way that he has done it is unsatisfying."

She was adamant that when you become president, you cannot start with yourself because that is not going to make people happy. "You have to start by satisfying the people. You must take care of people before you get to yourself and those close to you. What he did was extreme. What he did was also unfair. You can never be a public servant and start with yourself, and not think about people. He fixed himself up so that he can live comfortably. What does he want us to do? There are people on the street; till this day, there are hungry people who eat from dustbins. But Zuma never thinks to build something for people without homes. What does he say when he sleeps, having had a meal, while there are people who go to bed hungry?"

"So it really affected me that he spent all this money on himself. I mean you have to ask what all that money could have done for people. Most of us could have been satisfied in many things. He could have built houses for the homeless or created so many jobs, or built orphanages or schools. As it stands, I do not think that anything worthwhile or major was achieved. Many of us are not working, our parents are not working, where does he think we will get the money for things that we need, when he spends so much money on himself and his home? He could have started by listening to the people, to see if we agree with the project. We could have told him to start with job creation first. The story really makes me mad. What is more is that Zuma, with all these things, his many wives, his lingering charges, our dissatisfaction with him, we still voted for the same Zuma."

Zoleka ended by pointing out that she gave Zuma a "second chance" in the 2014 elections because she wanted to see if they [the ANC] could correct themselves. "When someone does wrong, they deserve a second chance. I wanted to see what he would do when given a second chance." In giving the ANC a second chance, what Zoleka made clear was the fact that they were not giving Zuma a vote of confidence but standing by the political party. "We voted for the ANC. We did not vote for Zuma, we voted for the ANC, and Zuma is part of that structure. People here subscribe to the thinking that they are not voting for Zuma but the ANC – Zuma can be voted out any time. When the ANC first came into power, it was led by Mandela and they are voting for him. So I do not think they will ever abandon the ANC. I do not think that people will change their vote. People are not going to say that I am the ANC but I hate Zuma. They do not care about Zuma. Yes, Zuma does do what he does, but the name, the ANC, is important – because it was the party of Mandela."

## Noxolo, 32

The nuanced nature of the loyalty that the ANC enjoys was captured by another participant, Noxolo, who stated that it is not easy to just abandon the ANC because she loves the party. Furthermore, she also noted that the ANC is the dominant party in Joza, stating that the ANC “is our party here in Grahamstown, and all the other ones follow”. Noxolo pointed out that the dominance of the party due to this wide allegiance in the area can also take the form of exclusion and bullying. The fact that the ANC is in power means that the projects that are run in the community are controlled by the ANC. “So if I am going to cross over to the DA that will be detrimental for me because people in the community know me and I might lose out on employment. Even though the projects are supposed to be for all community members, I know that if you are not an ANC member, you are not going to be included in ANC-controlled projects. So, it’s difficult for us to leave the ANC because a lot of jobs come through the party. The voice of a person that is outside of the ANC is not heard.”

Regardless, she admitted that even though she loves the party, she also has “doubts”, but those are allayed by the history of the movement. “I sometimes think about leaving but then again you think that the world today has changed because of the party. We are free because of the ANC. We can do things now because of the ANC. We can get free social services now because of the ANC. These are some of the things that make it very difficult for me to say that I am abandoning the ANC. We are free because of the party. We now have access to places that we previously had no access. Our allegiance to the party is so strong that even when Zuma was facing rape charges in 2008, the vote increased, it did not decrease. We got freedom through the efforts of Nelson Mandela. So some of us are not voting for Zuma but the ANC because the person who was in charge of the party before led the nation in a good way. I think that I will be happy with the party if they would change this leader who is embroiled in so many scandals. The party as it stands is fine.”

Noxolo was born in Grahamstown and attended a township school. She did not obtain matric, leaving school when she failed grade 12. “I wanted to finish school but the problem that I had is that I was informed that you cannot go back to full-time classes after you have failed a supplementary exam.” Noxolo did not attend education institutions that provided for the finalisation of matric because the required tuition fees were out of reach. Had she had the opportunity to further her education, she says she “would have loved to be a social worker because there are many things that I see and realise I would help if I could. There are people out there who are really poverty stricken that I would love to help.”

When furthering her education was no longer an option, Noxolo moved to Port Elizabeth in search of opportunities. She came back three years later. She now lives in an area called Old Age Home. “I lived at home, at my mother’s house, but there was an argument, family politics, and it was decided that I could no longer live at home. This was also due to the fact that I have two children. I had to look for my own place. I informed the ward councillor because I noticed that there is sometimes space created at Old Age Home when people obtain houses in the government housing

developments like Extension 10. What you have to do is go to the councillor with your story, and if you are lucky, they will allocate a house, which has been vacated by the person that has received government housing.” She now shares a one-bedroom house with her two kids and their father.

To help support the family (the father of her children is also unemployed), she is a part-time street sweeper. As a way of explanation, she told me that jobs are scarce for young people in Grahamstown. “You find that even old people are getting jobs and working. There are so many young people who are sitting in the township without jobs. Some people are lucky because they are getting something. Some people receive grant money for children, which helps them at least.” Her desperation and willingness to endure any job is expressed by the fact that 2016 marked the tenth year she had worked as a street sweeper. And, as long term as the job seemed to be, she complained that the employer did not pay well. “You find that when you need to get paid this month, they postpone that to the next month. We are often not paid for January, we just work in January and only get paid in February. Even then you only get paid around the 20-something, not on the 15th, even though the contractors get paid on the 15th, which is also our contracted day of payment.”

The job that she does is for a contractor from Port Elizabeth, who is contracted by the Makana Municipality to clean the streets in Grahamstown. The project also doubles up as a social development scheme. The contracts are on an annual basis and are renewed every year. “What does not change or rise is the money. We get R630 a month, and you work eight days a month. You have to report for work at seven in the morning and knock off at four in the afternoon. I work there because I cannot do otherwise, because I have to feed my kids. Most of the time I think about quitting the job but I think of the many years that I have worked there, and so I might be first in line if there are full-time positions. So I keep working there just so that I am on the register, however difficult the situation is.”

## Ncamisa, 32

Ncamisa is an unemployed Grahamstown native. She dropped out of school in the middle of grade nine. She was forced to do so as her father passed away at the end of her grade eight. The many financial difficulties she encountered after her father’s passing led her to leave school. “I was in standard seven [grade nine] and I had many problems. I had to go to my brother to ask for school fees, and they would tell me to come back another time. Sometimes I would not have school shoes, and you would find that I could not attend school for weeks on end. So that affected my performance at school. All those problems convinced me that it was best for me to drop out.”

Ncamisa now lives in Joza in a house that belonged to her parents, who have both since passed. She is left with two brothers (although she does not specify the number, she says that some passed away) and two sisters – who all have their own houses elsewhere. She shares the house with her two children. Ncamisa told me she tries her best to look for avenues of income so that she can take care of her children. She said that jobs are scarce in Grahamstown and as such, she was desperate for any kind of work. So far, the only opportunities she has had to work are part-time in kitchens (as a domestic worker) and

also as a security guard for Hi-tec (a local security company) – but that job was a short part-time stint during the Festival. Despite the challenges or the scarcity of work, she said that one has to try because the R300 child grant is very little. “It’s meant for your child. I don’t think that it makes much of a difference in my life. The way that I am living, I do not see a difference because you have to buy porridge for your child, there is electricity, clothes, school fees. It is better that you find a job because the grant money just is not enough to sustain you. It just helps the child so they do not go to bed hungry.”

Ncamisa is adamant that the money “looted” by Zuma could have helped create jobs for unemployed people. “The story angered me so much that I thought about leaving the party because of Zuma’s many scandals. With that considered I guess that the corruption exposed does influence the way that I vote, because sometimes you are swayed by Malema. He is honest and exposes the truth. But at the same time, when they are doing all those antics in Parliament you realise that you are only awed by the antics. There is not much substance to the claims made by all those against the ANC. So you remain loyal to the ANC because you think that it’s the party of Mandela. You think back to the fact that your grandfather was in the ANC, so you must also follow suit.”

Even though Ncamisa stated that the corruption scandals are distracting and the corruption exposed makes her doubt the party, she maintained that she has remained loyal to the ANC. “We loved Nelson Mandela because we attained freedom through his efforts. We are now free. There was apartheid before, where you could not do certain things or hold certain jobs. We could not share the same public spaces with white people. If I am honest with you, I will never leave the ANC. I still trust the party to deliver and to make things happen for me. Houses have been built here in Grahamstown, in areas like Section 10. They have built toilets in places like Vukani. So I can see that at least the party does do certain things. I have to trust the party more than the news. The ANC works for us, even though it has its faults here and there. Even if it deceives us sometimes by offering food parcels close to elections. At least they are providing something. You vote because you want to benefit at the end of the day. Unlike other parties, and we’ve seen this with the DA in the Coloured area, when the ANC promises something, like houses, they deliver. They bring projects and jobs here and there. Believe me that is better than not having anything at all.”

## DISCUSSION

An analysis of the interviews demonstrates that black South Africans in this specific locale continued to support the ANC, not because of racial solidarity, but due to the fact that the party offered the best ticket out of the depravity of their condition. The insights show that in order to understand the responses provided, and why people continued to vote for the ANC despite the corruption exposed, it is important to consider socioeconomic context and history. One of South Africa’s defining features is the social heterogeneity engineered by the apartheid state to secure industrial growth (Chipkin 2007). Rather than invest in a homogeneous culture, the history of industrialisation in South Africa is a story of the creation of a modern economy for white inhabitants by reproducing a parallel agro-tribal order, which tied black South Africans to poverty stricken subsistence-agricultural enclaves (Mamdani 1996).

This reality was expressed hypothetically by South African Marxists who theorised that apartheid can be understood as “colonialism of a special type”, which is to say that non-white South Africa was the colony of white South Africa (SACP 1962). The theory suggested that on the one hand, South Africa invested in an advanced capitalist state and industrial society, with highly developed industrial monopolies and finance capital (*ibid.*). On the other hand, non-white South Africa had all the features of a colony with the indigenous black populations subjected to extreme national oppression, poverty and exploitation, as well as a lack of democratic and political rights (*ibid.*).

In a postcolonial vein that emphasises the continued inequalities of the past, critical scholars such as Gqola (2010) have argued that South Africans are free but not entirely free of apartheid. In this regard, critical analysis should strive to shift between apartheid and post-apartheid realities, and to see the two not only in terms of rapture, but in terms of association. Such scholarship touches on the concept of elite continuity in South African society; the fact that the post-apartheid transition is characterised by a narrow absorption of black people into the elite and a continuation of deprivation for a large majority. Sen (2000) writes that this is a global phenomenon, where unprecedented opulence and prosperity, democratic and participatory governance live alongside remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression. What this discussion comes down to is that post-apartheid South Africa still exhibits features of old, which limits the freedoms of impoverished black people (Mamdani 1996).

The desperation for employment in Grahamstown is reflected by events around the country. As South Africa enters its third decade of democracy, the socio-political environment is becoming increasingly volatile as inequality deepens (Runciman 2017). The country has high unemployment rates, and protests against a lack of basic services are almost a daily occurrence (Runciman 2017). This means that the politics of the National Democratic Revolution, which promised the overhaul of an alienating and exclusive system, remains highly appealing to a class of people at the very bottom of South African society (Chipkin 2007).

In such a context of high inequality and continued limitations on economic emancipation, what the responses from participants have revealed is that people use whatever resources available to advance themselves. As such, we have to understand that people will possibly ignore mainstream media prescriptions and continue to vote for the ANC, because the party offers the promise of development programmes and a historical legacy of advancing black people. Chipkin (2007) explains that the dependency on political movements to uplift the majority is not surprising. This is because the birth of the South African democracy in 1994 came with the idea of freedom being intimately linked to political, social and economic transformation. In a country built on racial segregation, to countervail the effects of colonialism, the politics of the National Democratic Revolution and nationalist politics became a popular solution (Chipkin 2007).

The imagery conjured up by this political philosophy imagined the liberation of the oppressed majority could only be achieved through the establishment of an inclusive state. After the seizure of political power, or negotiations that facilitated its transfer, the

ANC, as the liberator, was charged with leading the complete socio-economic rebirth of society through transferring wealth from the rich to the poor (Mkhabela 2016). To this end, a developmental state was created to actively guide economic development to meet the needs of the people – the previously marginalised in particular (Kotze & Du Toit 1995). Such an understanding of South African history makes clear that the development and change that the previously oppressed required was both sustained and substantive, as they sought development that goes over and beyond the extension of civic rights (Sen 2000). Two decades in, after successful efforts to gain political emancipation, the ANC remains the vehicle for social change in which millions of people are invested to improve their lives (Mkhabela 2016).

What the interview responses make clear is that after the sustained “unfreedom” that was apartheid, their hopes for liberation (economic and otherwise) lie with the liberation movement (Sen 2000). These are the calculations that have to be factored into any analysis of the relationship between the ANC and unemployed people living in the township and who view support for the party as a ticket out of poverty (Mkhabela 2016). In this regard, Sen (2000) writes that although people cannot change the past, they can shape the future by making reasonable choices that will benefit them. This means that people’s conception of their life world when it comes to development has a lot to do with not only political participation, but also economic emancipation. The freedoms people have, or the freedoms they are denied, are important to understanding a fuller picture of postcolonial subjectivity. Therefore, in order to further comprehend the interpretation of mainstream media by constrained individuals, we have to understand that they are people recently liberated, and are living in historically underdeveloped areas.

## CONCLUSION

In all, the perspectives adopted by the study argued for the importance of understanding people within the structures or parameters of their lives. This was an important point because this insider perspective on subaltern lives provided valuable information about the gap between mainstream media and marginalised groupings. Centring the experiences of this subaltern counter public enabled the people involved to be understood from their point of view. This meant that the researcher could attain greater insight into the reasons subaltern groups supported a political party that was roundly criticised by mainstream observers. A key advantage of this ethnographic approach thus was that it provided, as argued by Willems (2014), a more dynamic process of communication when compared to more static understandings that centre on institutions or textual analysis. In this respect, the reception analysis adopted by the study explored the understanding that meanings come from human action, and in order to grasp meaning one has to understand actions undertaken within a context.

A significant finding from this study is that a shift is observed – from seeing the people who voted for the ANC as “clowns” (Schutte 2014), to seeing them as intelligent beings who make smart decisions when their set of circumstances are considered. To imagine them any differently is to fail to understand the full impact of their decisions on their lives and it is to deny them any modicum of intelligence or agency. By diverting from the

mainstream media perspective of downplaying subaltern action, such a perspective enables us to see that those at the bottom persevere with the ANC because this is where they see their lot improving. In this regard, the study argues that the decision to continue to vote for the ANC was not taken by simple minds or people blinded by a historical legacy, but it was a weighty decision taken by people with a very small margin for error. In all, this is to contend that a good way to see human beings – even subaltern human beings – is as capable agents.

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