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Weaving into the Mediascape: An Institutional Ethnography of NGO Media Activism in South Africa

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Abstract: *Media Monitoring Africa* (hereafter MMA), is a Johannesburg-based non-governmental organization (NGO) with the goals to increase media quality, refocus media ethics, foster media diversity, and advance media democracy. Via an institutional ethnography, conducted during six weeks of fieldwork, I take up MMA's particular case to investigate how the NGO has become understood as "part" of the South African mediascape, rather than an auxiliary agent. Through participant observation of the NGO's daily routines, in-depth interviews with MMA members and local media professionals, as well as textual analysis of organizational documents, I found that MMA has managed to weave into the organizational fabric of the South African mediascape. The ethnographic data reveals that MMA is commonly perceived as a necessary element of the South African mediascape—a status that moves beyond the often strictly interventionist role of activist NGOs. I argue that MMA has achieved this unique social position in the mediascape through four central organizational-activist practices: 1. consistent intervention on the same sets of issues; 2. activist innovation around the mode of their intervention(s); 3. multilateral activism (political economy, media policy, media content); and 4. successful curation of relationships with media stakeholders.

Keywords: media activism, media monitoring, non-governmental organizations, South African media, South African media system

The first time I traveled to South Africa was in the spring of 2015. I helped lead a student visit to the Johannesburg area with the aim to introduce our "World Media Systems" students to the local mediascape. We had already visited the public broadcaster, attended an editorial meeting at a tabloid paper, explored two community radio stations, and done some general sightseeing. It was not until the latter half of our stay that we visited Media Monitoring Africa, a non-governmental organization located in a somewhat dilapidated corner building in Parkhurst. Throughout our time in South Africa, our group had become increasingly intrigued with the organization and our anticipation to learn more was building. Everywhere we had been, everyone we had talked to—from television executives at the public broadcaster to news editors in the most profitable private publishing houses—we heard about "the MMA."

Introduction

Within the broader scope of the Global South, South Africa is often lauded as a very progressive nation. In 1994, South Africa enacted a constitution that enshrines racial, cultural, and gender equality like none other in the world, while also recognizing the importance of media and information in the pursuit for democratization (Brand, 2011). In discussions around social justice and democracy, media are routinely offered as vehicles to distribute pro-social ideals, foster equality, and help overcome social divisiveness. A country with complex histories and competing identity politics, such as South Africa, needs equitable media content to grant representation to all audiences. Thus, it should be the role of a democratized mediascape to help circulate ideals such as participation, diversity, and inclusion. In the South African context, however, the democratic intent of the media and their actual performance continue to stand at odds. While making efforts to democratize and reform, South Africa's media continue to operate within a struggling political economy that facilitates marginalization through unequitable content and undemocratic industry structures.

Given the often-contradictory pressures of mediascapes to center national interest while globalizing and commercializing, problematic issues arise that become visible in media coverage, newsroom politics, and media policy. Across South Africa, various groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have responded to the call for civil society participation in cultural institutions. Some of those NGOs have specifically dedicated themselves to advocate for democratization in the local mediascape, among them the *Freedom of Expression Institute* (FXI) and the *Save Our SABC* (SOS) Coalition. While FXI and the SOS Coalition mainly target the public broadcaster as a key player in the mediascape, media activist organizing should also advance representational aspects in media content. At present, there is only one media NGO in South Africa that engages both content-based and structure-based media activism in equal scope.

Media Monitoring Africa (hereafter MMA), is a Johannesburg-based NGO with the aims to “promote the development of a free, fair, ethical and critical media culture in South Africa” (<https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/about-us/>). Based in a human rights advocacy approach, MMA targets four central goals—to increase media quality, refocus media ethics, foster media diversity, and advance media democracy. To fulfill this mission, MMA employs media monitoring as an activist strategy. On a day-to-day basis, the organization has monitors who read and listen to media content in all eleven of South Africa's official languages, amounting to well over 200 monitored media texts per day. The NGO has developed its own online-based analysis tool, called “Dexter” that allows them to categorize data and run analyses as soon as data is input. With the help of Dexter, MMA formulates media monitoring reports on topics such as election news coverage or gender representations in dominant media outlets.

Through my previous experience of visiting media organization in South Africa, MMA appeared to occupy a unique space in the local mediascape. MMA enjoys good rapport with stakeholders and is known to the wider public as a type of “supervisory” body for South African media. After my initial visit in 2015, I traveled back to Johannesburg to work with MMA during the summer of 2016. In this project, I take up MMA’s particular activist case to investigate the following central research question:

RQ: What organizational-activist practices secure MMA’s social position as part of the South African mediascape?

To address this question, I conducted a six-week long institutional ethnography of MMA’s organizing. This particular methodology allowed me to trace MMA’s network of social relations around their engagements with media stakeholders, making it possible to assess the NGO’s specific social position in the South African media system. The ethnographic data reveals that MMA is commonly understood as “part” of the local mediascape—a status that moves beyond the often strictly interventionist role of activist NGOs. I argue that MMA has achieved this unique social position in the mediascape by employing four central organizational-activist practices: 1. consistent intervention on the same sets of issues; 2. activist innovation around the mode of their intervention(s); 3. multilateral activism (political economy, media policy, media content); and 4. successful curation of relationships with media stakeholders. At the same time, my fieldwork also revealed some of the limitations to MMA’s media activist work in South Africa—most crucially, the shortcomings of donor-based funding as well as the ethical considerations around the pressures to commercialize their monitoring and training services. Nevertheless, MMA emerges as a valuable case to illustrate NGO media activist organizing with a unique record of influence.

Using media systems theory, the first portion of this paper charts the history of the South African mediascape to highlight the main sets of issues that warrant media activism. The methods section explains institutional ethnography’s methodology and highlights some of the key informants of the study. This paper then offers an NGO stakeholder analysis of MMA’s network of social relations across four central groups: media stakeholders, regulatory bodies, other civil society groups, and the public. Next, this paper renders the key organizational-activist practices that assert MMA’s social position in the South African mediascape. Finally, this paper closes with a critical discussion of MMA’s activist work and offers directions for future research.

South Africa’s Media System: History, Issues, and Stakeholders

South Africa’s media industry emerged in the context of oppression. From 1923 to 1994, South Africa suffered pervasive human rights violations at the hands of the

Afrikaner-led National Party (NP), which created and maintained the system of “apartheid.” A linguistic term to mark racial segregation, the administration employed apartheid as an ideological and legal tool to keep the white supremacist hegemony in place. This included the media. For 70 years, the NP controlled the South African mediascape, leading to an economy dominated by white ownership that centered and protected the needs of the white population (Brand, 2011). This included broadcast media with its public radio and television stations, as well as the newspaper industry. During the apartheid regime, South Africa fell into the “authoritarian” media systems paradigm (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956), allowing a top-down media system in which political ruler(s) control the privatization of the press with the right to direct media censorship. Under the main objective to serve the state and fortify existing ideological landscape, the press became an active agent in maintaining the status quo. In an effort to regulate the press system, the NP made offenses by newspapers or individual journalists punishable by law. During the apartheid-era, press reporting was generally racist, while depoliticizing current events and shunning oppositional views (Tomaselli, 2002). The legacies of the apartheid system continue to this day, as South Africa still struggles to fully democratize its institutions, including the media.

After long-term activism brought an end to apartheid in 1994, the South African government began restructuring the local mediascape. The first democratically-elected administration under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) recognized the pivotal role of media and information and repealed the discriminatory South African Broadcasting Act (SABA) of 1976. The SABA of 1999 highlights diversity, development, and democratic ideals; it enshrines the provision of heterogeneous media ownership and diverse programming in order to better reflect the myriad of South African cultures and languages. The revised SABA also included a new mandate for the state-funded South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to become a public broadcaster for the people that shall remain free from government control and intervention.

According to Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), this type of media regulation pushes South African mediascape into the “libertarian” paradigm, where the media hold a pivotal role in maintaining a critical political and cultural environment. While the democratized SABA paved the way for more equitable media ownership and participation by diverse individuals, South Africa never quite made the transition from authoritarianism to libertarianism. In fact, Hadlan (2012) states that the contemporary system shares more characteristics with the “polarized pluralist” paradigm developed by Hallin and Mancini, though this match is not perfect either. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the characteristics of polarized pluralism are ties between media outlets and political parties (political parallelism) and an interventionist role by the state in print and broadcasting—in spite of freedom of expression clauses. To date, the South African mediascape continues to undergo complex changes in the very structure of the industry, while simultaneously becoming entrenched in neoliberal global dynamics (De Beer, Malila, Beckett

& Wassermann, 2016). Since 2014, the public broadcaster SABC has been in crisis, with unstable leadership and intentional government-intervention in areas such as governance and news coverage.

As this overview critically illustrates, democratically-oriented legislation and public mandates do not automatically produce an equitable mediascape. Media activism in South Africa is still needed—to address structural failures as well as representational issues. This type of multilateral activism is characteristic of MMA's agenda as an NGO. In order to become familiarized with the stakeholders in the South African mediascape, and to understand who MMA engages with, I include a brief overview of the media system.

South Africa's Three-Tier Mediascape

The current organization of the South African mediascape can be described as a three-tier model, which includes public media, private/commercial media, and community media (see also Fourie, 2007). MMA engages with media organizations across these three categories, though a major focus remains the public broadcaster and the print tabloids as they share the majority of overall media consumption. The SABC functions as the constitutionally mandated public broadcaster, tasked to provide “significant news and public affairs programming which meets the highest standards of journalism, as well as fair and unbiased coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government, commercial and other interests” (SABA, 1999, Part 3: Public Service). As the key player in South Africa's audiovisual broadcasting sector, the SABC is internally split into three core areas: SABC TV (five main news and entertainment networks), SABC Radio (three major channels), and SABC Online (one prominent website that cross-promotes and churns content from SABC's stations, while offering online exclusive content). Since most South Africans can only afford public media, the SABC becomes a critical mediator for sociocultural and political knowledge (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

The three major conglomerates that dominate the private for-profit media sector are Naspers, Times Media, and Independent News & Media. Between these three conglomerates, Naspers holds the largest market and consumer share. Naspers owns the very profitable Media24, a print media group with over 60 newspaper and magazine titles and a large share in online journalism. Media24 owns the most widely read and tabloid circulated newspaper, The Daily Sun. It also houses The Beeld, the largest Afrikaans newspaper in the country, which used to be considered the mouthpiece of the National Party during the apartheid era (Tomaselli, 2002). Naspers is the only one of the three conglomerates that owns an internet provider service, Mweb, that is currently South Africa's second largest. Naspers also owns and operates the Digital Satellite Television (DST) payTV platform MultiChoice, which offers premium television content and imported media titles.

The two smaller conglomerates Independent News & Media and Times Media Group own a few of the most circulated newspapers in the country. Independent News & Media owns 14 newspapers, among them the widely read legacy morning newspapers *The Star* and *Cape Times*, as well as the tabloid *Daily Voice*. The conglomerate also publishes three Condé Nast international magazines, including *GQ* and *Glamour*. In the online space, Independent News & Media runs Independent Online, or IOL, an aggregation-based news and media platform that churns stories written for the print newspapers and magazines. IOL also offers links to an online store called Loot and a realty website, called IOL Property. Times Media Group is known for its 12 newspapers, including the *The Sowetan*—now a tabloid—but which used to be an independent alternative black newspaper during the apartheid struggle (Tomaselli, 2002). Times Media Group also owns the *Sunday Times*, South Africa's biggest Sunday newspaper. The conglomerate is unique in that it owns stakes in the South African music industry, a sector that Independent News & Media and Naspers have not invested in: Times Media Group manages Gallo Record Company, South Africa's largest record label.

South Africa's community media flourishes mainly in the radio sector, while there are also a few community newspapers that offer alternative media content. Community radio continues as an important pillar for the dissemination of information and offers a space for critical dialogue. For example, JoziFM, an urban-contemporary radio station in Soweto (a poor, mainly black area just outside of Johannesburg), serves as a community medium for music and news, but also fulfills many other social needs. JoziFM collects money for school uniforms and supplies, organizes food drives for the ill and poor, and serves as a copy shop/internet café for those who do not have access to technology. This instance illustrates that community radio becomes much more than an information source, which is why Teer-Tomaselli (2015) asserts that radio will remain Africa's broadcast medium of choice. Overall though, community media remain critically underfunded and many struggle to maintain their operations.

Beyond media production companies, such as broadcasting stations and newspapers, the South African mediascape also holds auxiliary entities that play an important role in the media system. This includes a set of regulatory bodies, specifically mandated to oversee, guide, and control the mediascape. In South Africa, there are two independent regulatory bodies that focus on media regulation, licensing, and conduct—the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) and the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA). BCCSA is a self-regulatory body in the form of an “independent judicial tribunal,” established in 1995, whose role is to adjudicate complaints from the public about broadcasts by members of the National Association of Broadcasters—including the SABC, all commercial broadcasters, and the majority of community radio stations. ICASA is the independent regulatory body established in 2000 to regulate telecommunications, broadcasting and licensing. The Broadcasting Act specifies that any alleged breach of license or content conditions must be brought to ICASA (see

also Brand, 2011). Another agency that affects South African media policy and regulation is the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS). The GCIS is the official agency for government media, it centralizes government communication to the public and is chaired by the sitting Minister of Communications.

It is important to underscore here that the various “tiers” of the South African mediascape do not exist in a vacuum—media stakeholders interact, sometimes even cooperate, even though they might hold diverging views on their specific roles or the state of South African media at large. At the same time, media NGOs are often not considered to belong as a part of a local mediascape, they mostly occupy a primary ancillary space and remain largely ignored if they do not produce their own media content. Looking out from the perspective of NGO media organizing, my prime interest in this project was to find out what organizational-activist practices let MMA become part of the South African mediascape. In order to derive such practices, I selected a qualitative research approach that allowed me to study the culture at MMA, to look into their organizational network, and to identify specific activities that structure their position within the South African mediascape—*institutional ethnography* (Smith, 1974).

Understanding MMA through Institutional Ethnography

As a critical-qualitative media scholar, I was interested in studying MMA’s particular activist case by understanding how the NGO figures into the larger media system in South Africa. An ethnographic approach that allows researchers to study a culture-sharing group, such as MMA, seemed most appropriate to address my research goals. A traditional or realist ethnography would have allowed me to study the rituals and everyday culture at MMA; perhaps even provided phenomenological insights into the lived experience of MMA members and their organizing. However, such an ethnography would not have permitted me to locate the institutional (or ruling) structures that mitigate MMA’s activist work and situate the NGO in the South African mediascape. In order to go beyond charting the ‘everyday’ at MMA, I selected *institutional ethnography* as the guiding methodology¹ for this project.

Institutional ethnography emerges from a larger feminist intervention on the androcentric doctrines that guided scholarly inquiry in the 1970s. Coined by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith, *institutional ethnographies* allow researchers to unveil the overarching ruling relations that organize social experiences, create certain social positions, and foster institutionalized social relations. Smith (1987) explains that experiences, events, and practices become mediated by multiple axes of power, making them “organized as social relations” (p. 151). Using the *institutional ethnography* framework, the researcher is able to understand how phenomena and activities “are organized and how they are articulated to the social relations of the

¹ I echo Harding’s (1987) distinction between methodology (philosophical assumptions and research approach) and method (data gathering and data analysis techniques).

larger social and economic process” (p. 152). Thus, institutional ethnographies “seek to reveal the extended bureaucratic, professional, legislative, and economic, as well as other social relations involved in the production of local events and activities” (Smith, Mykhalovskiy & Weatherbee, 2005, p. 172).

According to Smith (2005), an institutional ethnography “begins by locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored.” (p. 32). Building on this initial standpoint, the researcher continues to study “how those actualities were embedded in social relations, both those of ruling and those of the economy” (p. 31). The methodology is ideal to study how a group (such as MMA) becomes situated in the larger governing context (such as the South African mediascape) around existing institutional structures (such as the government-mandated public broadcaster, the community media scene, or media oversight structures).

Locating the Standpoint

After my initial interaction with MMA during our study visit to South Africa in 2015, I traveled back to South Africa in July of 2016 to work with MMA for six weeks. The NGO had agreed to host me as a “visiting scholar.” I was authorized to participate in all activities, speak with every member of the NGO as well as their board, and was granted access to all organizational documents. The director also offered to connect me with important media professionals in the industry including broadcasting executives, journalists, and news editors. I arrived in Johannesburg on a sunny winter day and joined the NGO the following morning.

Monday Meeting, 9:34 a.m., July 4th, 2016: MMA Headquarters, Meeting Room

A small room with four tables that form one large square, a chalk board on one wall, a small sink, and a coffee maker. The blueish carpet is old and stained. None of the chairs match and the projector screen covers up most of the sunlight that comes in through the barred windows. People are beginning to walk into the tight meeting room. I am casually conversing with Tori, who had picked me up in the morning, when the director comes in to greet me with a handshake and a smile. Around me I hear what I think is IsiZulu. I also recognize that two young men are speaking with the distinctive clicking sounds of the Xhosa language. The director vigorously texts on his iPhone while talking to others; he seems to be doing fifty tasks at once. A few are looking at a Sunday paper with a particular interest on one article that features the picture of a child. Gerald gives the paper a disapproving look. He is quiet, observes. We need more chairs although the room will not fit many more—chairs or people. Judging from the seating arrangements, Wesley must be in some sort of supervisory role—Sadie and Mandy both ask him questions about the upcoming election report deadline. Tori is following up on a project with Patricia, who I am told is also new at MMA. Tori is well-liked, I can see it. Andrea tells me that Tori handles many of the organizational tasks that would otherwise fall through the cracks. She explains that Tori heads the policy department, George oversees the children’s project, and Wesley is head of the monitoring unit. They are among those who had been with MMA the longest, up to a decade. We begin the meeting. The director summarizes the discussion from last week and opens the agenda for additional items. There is still side-talk. I hear strange names—Tikka, Willa, Boots, Sharks, Bookshelf—and suddenly realize they all go

by nicknames at MMA. There is laughter. A member from a different, associated NGO located in the neighboring office suite comes in, makes himself a coffee, and ends up staying for the meeting. While the team discusses the upcoming municipal election and the monitoring work it comprises, I see a student worker sitting in the hallway connecting the meeting room with the director's office. He sits at a small desk, watching an SABC news program with headphones in his ear, while typing away into the laptop...

Data Gathering

During my time at MMA, I participated in their daily activities and observed the NGO's routines—from weekly meetings with all members, to smaller team meetings, to coalition events with other NGOs and activist groups. Diamond (2005) explains that participant-observation allows researchers to learn about “stories, authors, bodies, place, time, motion” as these practices that point to “how ruling relations work” and thus, let us see “the social organization in the local” (p. 58). I found participant-observation to be one of the most successful ways to capture the day-to-day operations at MMA, which gave me valuable insights into organizational dynamics of team members, as well as the organizational mission and specific activist projects.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with all MMA members while keeping field notes of more casual interactions. Interviewing is a classic technique in ethnographic research, as it allows participants to speak from their own perspective about things that matter to them. In preparation for my time in Johannesburg, I crafted a semi-structured interview guide, with ten major points that I hoped to discuss with each participant. The interview guide contained prompts about MMA's role in the South African mediascape, issues in the current political economy, and issues in media content. I also prompted discussion about MMA's specific activist projects that seek to address these issues. The guide allowed for elaboration, clarification, and cognitive meandering, rather than constraining conversations to a strict interview protocol. The order of prompts did not remain stagnant across interviews and I amended prompts along the way as I began picking up on themes. Smith explains this process in a personal interview in 1999: “You sometimes don't know what you're after until you hear people telling you things” (DeVault & McCoy, 2005, p. 24).

During my time in Johannesburg, I conducted 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which I recorded on my portable USB voice recorder. Seventeen of these interviews involved those directly involved with MMA: all MMA members, the director, the chairman of their board, and another board member. Additionally, I interviewed four media professionals and three activist NGO executives who have coalitional relationships to MMA. The 24 conversations lasted between 35 and 80 minutes, yielding around 1,000 minutes of analyzable data. The interviews were truly invaluable and provided nuanced insights into the stakes, mission, goals, and activist dimension of MMA's work. In addition to interviewing, I also conducted analyses of MMA's organizational and promotional documents.

In addition to fieldnotes and interviews, I analyzed a variety of MMA’s organizational documents. For institutional ethnographic research of organizations, Eastwood (2006) notes that “attending meetings does not necessarily give a sense of how . . . an organization works” (p. 183). She critically points to analyzing organizational documents as they provide valuable additional information about internal and external communications and supplement oral testimonies. I was fortunate that MMA granted me unobstructed access to all online and print publications, policy documents, media monitoring reports, and promotional materials. For my institutional ethnography of MMA, the organizational and promotional documents validated oral accounts of the NGO’s mission, organizational priorities, project angles, and activist gestures.

Data Analysis

While in Johannesburg, I began recording fieldnotes by typing up memos of events and conversations into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Upon my return, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo, where I began to highlight and cluster significant statements into nodes. I also scanned important organizational documents—such as meeting minutes, promotional materials, or published media monitoring reports—and imported them into the software. I decided for a more structured approach for data analysis because my goal was to understand the structure of the local mediascape, which necessitated parsing together a complex web of stakeholders, networks, and relationships. In the spirit of ethnographic fieldwork, the data analysis procedures unfolded inductively and iteratively in order to centering the views, experience, and practices of relevant partakers; i.e., the patterns needed to do justice to MMA’s organizational rituals, customs, and stories (see also Smith, 2006). The information generated through the three data-gathering techniques then formed the basis for two dominant nodes that emerged as most relevant to my research question—*network of social relations* and *social position*.

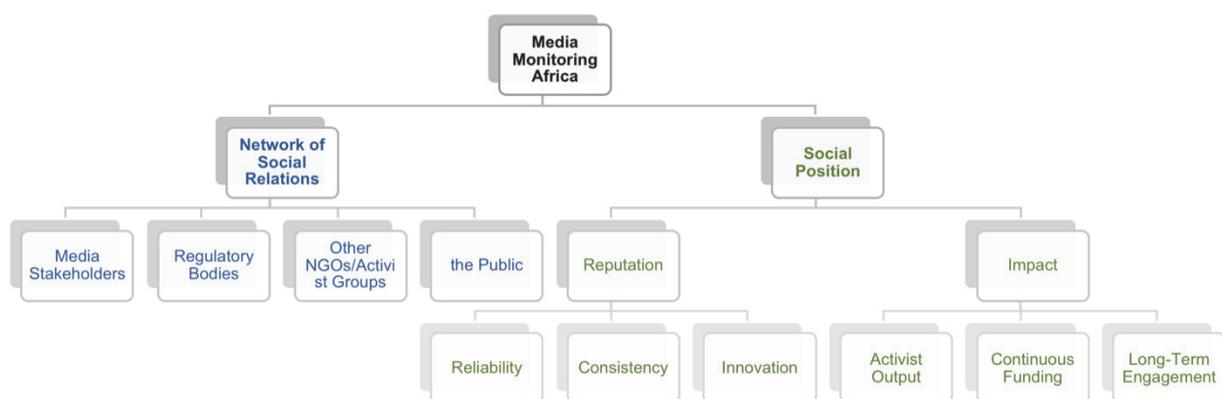


Figure 1: Hierarchical organization of nodes through NVivo coding process.

As Figure 1 displays, the first node, network of social relations, holds data relating to MMA's organizational relationships across four central groups: media stakeholders, regulatory bodies, other NGOs and activist groups, and the public. The second node, social position, divides up information about the NGO's location in the South African mediascape.

Mapping MMA's Network of Social Relations

Institutional ethnographies allow scholars to analyze an organization's relationships to hegemonic institutions (such as the government or powerful media organizations), other civil society actors (such as NGOs and citizen's initiatives), as well as the public in general. Smith (1987) calls this a network of social relations. MMA's network of social relations can be mapped across four central groups: the public, media stakeholders, regulatory bodies, and other civil society groups. For the purpose of explaining and analyzing the role of MMA within the South African mediascape, I begin by visually illustrating MMA's network of social relations.

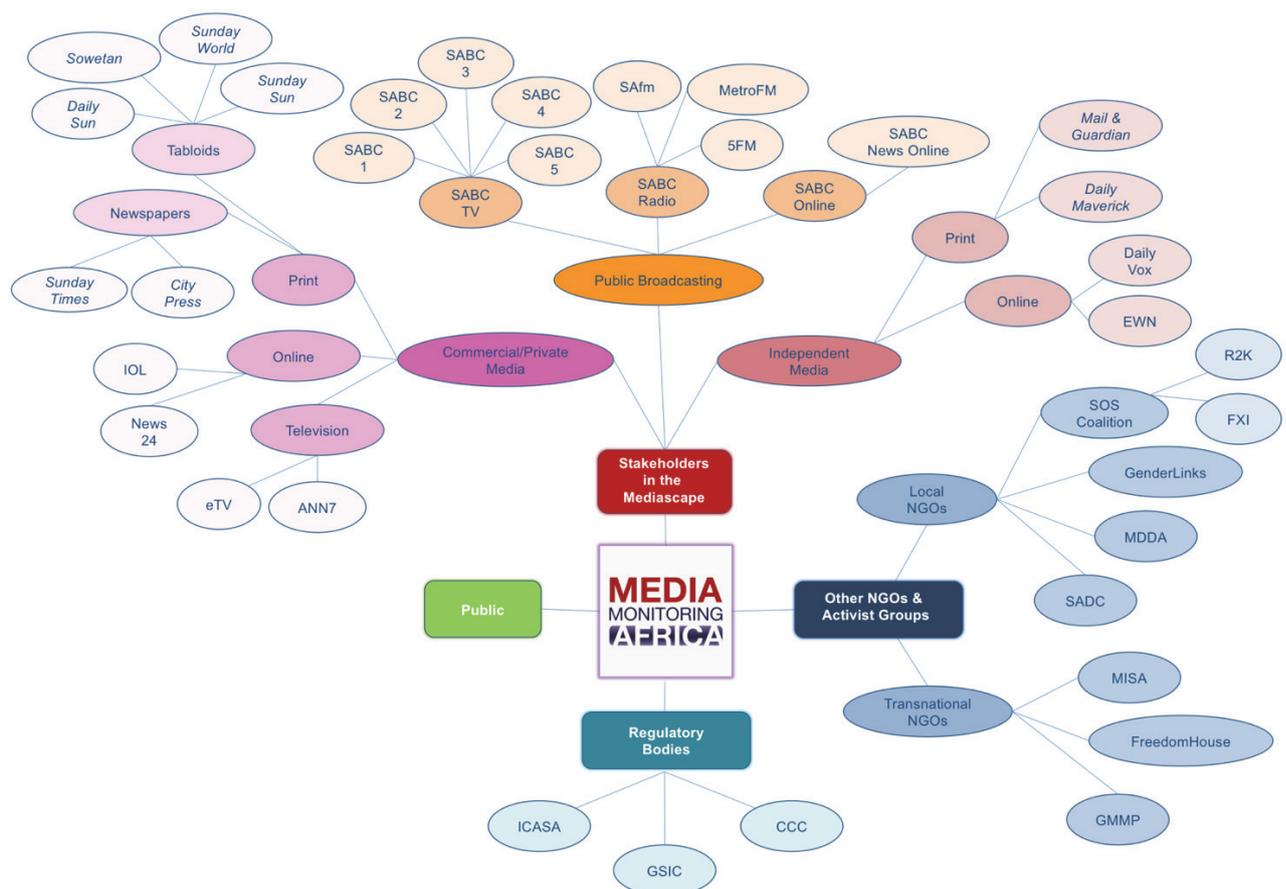


Figure 2: Sociogram of MMA's network of social relations.

Within the media stakeholder group, the sociogram details the three-tier organization of South African media around public broadcasting, commercial/private media, and independent media. The upper half of the sociogram includes the specific media and names of titles and stations with which MMA interacts. The organizational relationship also maps the local and transnational NGOs and activist groups among MMA's coalitions or alliances. MMA's relationships to regulatory bodies includes all important media regulation entities in South Africa, including ICASA, GSIC, and CCC. Lastly, MMA also interacts directly with the South African public through alternative media coverage, publication of media monitoring reports, social media, or one of their many digital tools and websites. The following section of this chapter explains MMA's relationships within the sociogram by drawing on interview data with MMA and representative members of the four groups.

MMA's Relationships with Media Stakeholders

I began my in-depth individual interviews with MMA members, the director, and members of the MMA board through a brainstorming activity that asked participants to identify the stakeholders in the South African mediascape and comment on a contemporary issue. During this activity, participants immediately noted the gulf between the intent of media regulation and its practice. The leader of MMA's media policy unit, Tori, who had been at MMA for six years, explains: "We are 'supposed' to have a three-tier model, but you can't really count the SABC in because they are becoming a government-controlled broadcaster." While the SABC ought to operate in the interest of the South African people by offering culturally relevant content to all ethnicities, executive decisions about programming and content suggest a stark departure from the mandate (see also Ciaglia, 2015; Ciaglia, 2016; Duncan, 2000; Fourie, 2003; Tomaselli, 2002).

MMA's relationship with the public broadcaster SABC is complex. While MMA members recognize the importance of the public broadcaster around issues of access and agenda-setting, they explain that interactions with the SABC require tenacity and precision. As Mitch explains: "We monitor and record all SABC outlets every day of the week, year-round. Many people only access the SABC so it's a big focus for us at MMA." Next to media monitoring of all SABC news pieces, MMA also interacts directly with SABC editors and journalists. Miles notes correspondingly: "I have been with MMA for seven years. Sometimes it takes months before we get to a point where they're [SABC] so stubborn that litigation is the only way to move forward." Because of the SABC's instable governance, contact persons in the various departments change frequently, making it difficult to direct complaints to the appropriate person.

Litigation involves the formal submission of a complaint to one of the regulatory bodies—in the SABC's case, ICASA. As Miles explains, the SABC is constitutionally mandated to respond to ICASA inquiries, so MMA makes submissions to the regulatory body in cases where the SABC fails to respond to urgent complaints. Be-

tween 2015 and 2017, MMA was involved in collective action against the SABC with the SOS Coalition and the Right 2 Know Campaign (R2K). This specific suit targeted the 2015 SABA amendment by then Minister of Communications Faith Muthambi that put control over the SABC's Executive Boards into her own hands. The vetting of Board members across party lines was brought to ICASA and then to the ad hoc committee in Parliament, where Muthambi's amendment was declared unconstitutional. MMA members actively recall the divergence of the SABC's mandate and actual organizational practices, which constitutes a major concern for media diversity, quality, ethics, and democracy.

Bill explains the relationship between MMA and the SABC from his own experience. He notes: "I used to work as a broadcast journalist. I know how they [the SABC] run their business and I still know many executives from my time in the industry." He further notes the "pivotal" role the SABC plays in South African public opinion. Gerald explains: "We have a good working relationship with some of the executives and editors at the SABC. Some are really good at cooperating. Others won't react until we take them to court." Bill explains: "Look, journalists aren't bad people. They aren't out there to actively undermine our democracies . . . They do it because that's how they've been taught, which is the institutional culture."

MMA members describe the NGO's relationship with the SABC around both content and structural activism. For structural activism, Gerald explains: "My colleague Lewis has done great work on workplace culture in newsrooms, including the SABC, and while they have more women than other media companies, the decisions about content come from the top." Structural inequalities often lead to content misrepresentation (see also Byerly & Ross, 2006). As Tori notes: "When the public broadcaster isn't governed right, it emits messages that only cater to the social elite or over-represent the male perspective." Structural activism continues as a key element of MMA's relationship toward the public broadcaster. Bill explains that the SABC has tried to shape up its image as a citizen-centered public broadcaster through "news content planning workshops," during which viewers, listeners, and users could provide input about content. He notes: "They did this because of pressure from civil society organizations like us but the outcome of these meetings left much to be desired." Banda (2007) similarly argues that the SABC implemented some suggestions for entertainment programming, while ignoring critical questions about media policy and reporting.

In the commercial media sector, MMA has curated relationships with editors and media executives in print, television, and online news media. Though the public broadcaster SABC shares the largest viewership, commercial broadcasting media have increasingly privatized and merged. Wesley explains the effects of media conglomeration as follows:

"If you look at that, you then realize that we don't have as many media as we think we do. We seem to have a diversity of titles but owned by few key people . . . then among their titles, they share their content, so you don't get a diversity of content either."

Wesley's testimony alludes to the content and structural inequalities in an increasingly converging mediascape (see also De Beer, Malila, Beckett & Wassermann, 2016). MMA's interactions are often concerning media content and violations around media ethics and reporting.

An example of MMA's weekly engagements with media professionals are their "MADs" and "GLADs," which are part of the "Children's Program" and are a firm agenda item during Monday Meetings. Throughout the week, MMA members aggregate news stories about children and bring them to the meeting. The GLAD pieces offer journalistic integrity by protecting the identity of the child and reporting ethically on the issue. The MAD pieces often reveal a child's identity, without needing to, or include a child's picture in a vulnerable situation. One MMA member then volunteers to contact the journalists and editors of the news pieces. The journalist or editor in question then has an opportunity to respond to the inquiry. MADs/GLADs are a good way to perpetually engage with media professionals to ensure they are upholding their ethical reporting standards. Due to MMA's rapport and consistency, journalists typically respond to email inquiries promptly, mostly offering to issue immediate correction or withdrawal.

For example, MMA issued a MAD to *The Sowetan* on September 22, 2016 for identifying a child by name, revealing the child's home address, and including a picture of the child in a vulnerable situation, visibly in pain and bloody. An exchange occurred between MMA and a *Sowetan* journalist in the following days, resulting in a withdrawal of the story from *The Sowetan Live*, the tabloid's online presence. These interactions are not limited to the MADs/GLADs of the "Children's Program" but rather, symbolize MMA's stakeholder relationships with the commercial media sector as a whole. The editor of *The Daily Sun* explains jokingly: "MMA, yes, we know them well . . . We do interact with the MMA when they have concerns about how we cover children . . . When they call I know we are in trouble. [Laughter]." A former journalist at *The Sowetan* critically notes: "MMA has friends in good places . . . Many times, all it takes is an email." Similarly, a journalist for IOL online news recounts: "We try to deal with MMA complaints swiftly . . . They are well-respected . . . Always good to avoid further steps and stay in their good graces." As these testimonies illustrate, MMA has built a strong reputation with commercial media stakeholders.

The organizational and social relationships between MMA and the print sector of South African independent media is characterized by cooperation and integration. Bill is a frequent contributor to *The Mail & Guardian* and *The Daily Maverick*, both known for their non-partisan and critical media coverage of politics and social issues. Andrea explains: "Bill has this recurring column in the *Maverick*, where he is . . . shall we say 'very blunt' about what is happening in the media." Bill was offered a column in the mid 2010s because of his reputation as a media expert. Waltz (2005) notes that activists oftentimes "strive for mainstream appeal, and to try to reach a very broad audience . . . their intention is to make activism main-

stream” (p. 4). Though the production of their own media content is not a focus at MMA, and the outlets for MMA commentary are independent, not commercial, Bill recognizes the importance of contributing to media discourse. He explains: “You can’t try to influence what is covered and how by just critiquing, cuz you have to give them alternative representations, too.”

Across MMA’s interactions with stakeholders in the South African mediascape—public broadcasting, commercial media, and independent media—MMA was able to establish relationships that facilitate its activism. The relationships toward stakeholders are characterized by two-fold activism that seeks more equitable representation in media content and more democratic industry structures. As part of MMA’s four central goals—media quality, ethics, diversity, and democracy—the NGO frequently interacts with regulatory bodies in the mediascape.

MMA’s Relationship with Media Regulatory Bodies

MMA has a reciprocal relationship with the BCCSA and ICASA. This means that MMA brings cases to these regulatory bodies while also serving the regulatory bodies in various capacities. For instance, MMA members routinely serve as media experts during complaints hearings and legal proceedings. Wesley explains: “Cathy sat on the BCCSA committee for print media for nearly a decade . . . and now Tori gets called into ICASA hearings as an expert in media all the time.” In addition, the both regulatory bodies seek out MMA’s opinion when revising media policy. Tori explains:

“So the press council [at BCCSA] . . . every few years updates their press code. They would say, ‘Hey we are revising our press code. We’re calling for input’ and ask MMA because of its objective position and ability to analyze the media in a way that keeps the interest of the public and the consumer in the center . . . The larger issue in 2016 was that if you’re a news outlet or news room that signs on to the press code for your print publications, your online content . . . could get away with anything, pretty much. So we helped them revise the press code for online journalism so the news media, even if they’re completely online, have to adhere to our press code.”

Though not a regulatory body like BCCSA or ICASA, the policies at GCIS have influence on the public broadcaster SABC. Wesley describes MMA’s advocacy on behalf of others with respect to a current project with GCIS, where MMA is responsible for the drafting of new broadcasting policy. Wesley explains: “They approached us and said, ‘Look, we want you to do research that informs our policy on media diversity and transformation.’ Based on our research we can actually advocate for certain entities and try to foster change.” Though MMA has sued the SABC and former Communications Minister Muthambi for misconduct, the GCIS seems to continue to hold the NGO in high regard. Cathy explains that she thinks it is possible that the GCIS might even try to headhunt MMA members in the future.

As these selected instances of MMA interaction with media regulatory bodies illustrates, the NGO has partially become a component of the regulatory processes by

virtue of its policy work and expert depositions. MMA both brings cases to ICASA and BCCSA for litigation as well as serves these regulatory bodies in various capacities. Many times, litigation projects and media activism occur in conjunction with other civil society groups, NGOs, and activist groups.

MMA's Relationships with other Civil Society Organizations

Over the years, MMA has cultivated relationships, alliances, and coalitions with various other activist groups, civil society organizations, and NGOs in South Africa. These relationships are mutually strategic and facilitate inter-organizational support. For media monitoring initiatives, Hoynes (2005) illustrates: "Media monitoring is often issue-specific, and this can provide a substantive basis for coalition building between media activists and organizations focused on other policy domains" (p. 105). Inter-organizational collaborations and alliances also bolster MMA's own organizational impact, as MMA has an opportunity to become involved in additional activist projects.

For some South African civil society organizations, it is beneficial to have an established and reputable NGO such as MMA become part of their activism. Chairman of the MMA Board, Thatcher, explains: "The MMA get invited into many boats. Just like I have to apportion my time carefully, they have to see how it benefits their mission and what impact it will bring." Upon the formalization of the R2K campaign, for instance, MMA advised the founding members on media activist strategies surrounding the constitutionality of the SABC. MMA researcher Sadie illustrates: "We have a great relationship with FXI . . . we also work with R2K through the SOS Coalition." A member of FXI similarly notes: "We can mutually broaden our reach by supporting each other . . . FXI is part of the SOS Coalition, which was founded by MMA." Tori explains correspondingly: "We are officially part of the SOS Coalition but we also collaborate with others outside of the coalition . . . for example DemocracyWorks. They're not media-specific but we share interests."

Though MMA's relationship with FXI has been stable over two decades, other relationships have subsided, including that with R2K. Sadie and her colleagues deemed R2K "too radical" because the group formalized very quickly, drawing media attention through aggressive activism. She recounts: "They started chaining themselves to the SABC gates. We [at MMA] also protest but we try to do more with research and litigation." As R2K's activism is primarily geared at the public broadcaster SABC, converging activist interests fostered inter-organizational collaboration between R2K and the SOS Coalition, while diverging with MMA. MMA members also report on the difficulty of collaborating with *GenderLinks* (GL), though the NGO remains in alliance. Bill explains: "We used to do more work with GL but the issue is that all they do anymore is critique gender inequality without offering solutions." This critique has also been articulated by Geertsema's (2010) ethnographic study of GL, where she articulated the difficulty of fostering change

on gender-based issues through their current activist strategies. Though inter-organizational relationships are dynamic and change, they do provide opportunity to engage with South African media consumers more frequently.

MMA's Relationships with the Public

MMA demonstrates the importance for activist organizations to be visible to the public. This includes building relationships with audiences and making civil society feel engaged and included in their mission. Wesley explains: "You see, we don't do this for the powerful. We do this for the person turning on the telly in rural South Africa, not seeing any representation of themselves." In many cases, MMA communicates directly with the South African media consumer.

MMA facilitates relationships with their audiences through both technologically-mediated as well as interpersonal communication. The mediated ways in which MMA directly engages with South African media consumers is through op-ed pieces in newspapers, television appearances, and posts on social media. MMA also gives South Africans the opportunity to participate when using one of their many digital media tools. Beyond these mediated interactions, MMA members also speak to South African media consumers directly in physical, interpersonal settings, such as workshops. Mandy explains:

"I coordinate a rural media literacy program in Limpopo. We at MMA recognize that it's important to speak to the people directly, to find out what matters to them, where they think the issues lie."

Mandy's workshop includes teaching children how and where to locate quality information online, while informing them on the issues MMA targets in their activism. Along the same lines, Wesley further explains: "We try to do our part in building an engaged and critical citizenry for South Africa's future."

In addition to workshops and focus groups, MMA also tries to directly intervene in South Africans' media consumption habits. Bill explains: "The tools are important in two ways: They let us aggregate data about user preferences and they let us tell users which media outlet offers more credible information." MMA accomplishes this by advertising the use of their online tools. Patricia succinctly notes: "I manage one of our social media accounts and I try to post numerous times a day, so we are always present in the minds of users." Overall, MMA recognizes the central route to organizing for social change involves the mobilization of the public.

As this analysis of MMA's network of social relations illustrates, MMA has developed crucial relationships in the South African mediascape, with hegemonic media stakeholder such as the SABC, regulatory bodies such as ICASA, a variety of civil society groups, as well as the general public. Upon establishing an entity's network of social relations, institutional ethnographies then allow scholars to analyze the particular activities, interactional patterns, and strategies that lead to its

social positioning. The following section details how MMA has achieved its status in the South African mediascape and how the NGO maintains it.

MMA's Social Position in the South African Mediascape

According to Smith (2005) an institutional ethnographic analysis of social relations seeks to further unveil the underlying ideological and organizational factors that establish an entity in relation to others. For individuals, she calls this the “subject[‘s] position in the public sphere” (p. 9). For organizations, it is their social position within their networks of social relations. In an institutional ethnography of an activist organizations such as MMA, scholars unveil the key conditions that undergird an organization’s social position. For MMA, reputation and impact help create and maintain their social position in the South African mediascape. Across the relationships between MMA and various groups and entities, stakeholders continuously illustrate that MMA’s reputation has helped the NGO secure its social positioning. MMA has achieved this through its reputation as a reliable, consistent, and innovative NGO.

MMA's Reputation

From the interview data with MMA members, journalists, media executives, and other civil society organizers, it becomes evident that MMA was able to curate its reputation through three central techniques: Reliable and credible research, consistent intervention, and organizational innovation. MMA’s name carries the word “monitoring,” and the research is a key element of MMA’s organizational identification. MMA has been able to build and maintain its reputation because the NGO has become a household name in South Africa for quality media research. MMA’s high-quality research is a first and very important aspect of MMA’s overall social standing.

MMA’s media monitoring serves as a two-fold purpose: first, media content monitoring is an analytic tool to challenge representation; second, policy and governance monitoring is an analytic tool to challenge structural inequalities in the political economy. As Hoynes (2005) suggests “media monitoring became valuable to media activists precisely because research produces knowledge that has a cultural authority that activism lacks” (p. 107). Similarly, Gallagher (2001) notes that quality empirical research is needed to back up critiques. MMA makes use of quantitative content analyses as well as qualitative focus group research, often creating mixed-methods approaches to adequately ground media critiques and activist strategies. Gallagher explains: “For . . . monitoring groups, a sound research design is essential to ensure that the audience data they present have credibility” (p. 135).

Activist groups and NGOs, more so than other types of groups, need to manage their reputation and credibility in the eye of the public and the stakeholders.

Hoynes (2005) cautions that journalists and citizens will “dismiss media critics” and activism if not properly grounded and publicized (p. 100). MMA’s research expertise is the main reason why transnational NGOs such as the Global Media Monitoring Project or FreedomHouse contract them for their services. In turn, these large-scale contractual engagements bolster reputation and validate the quality of MMA’s research. The editor of *The Daily Sun*, South Africa’s leading tabloid, has received many inquiries from MMA during his tenure. He explains: “We respect their research, they do it well, yes.”

Secondly, MMA develops its reputation as a credible and influential NGO through its consistent intervention. I understand “consistency” as a sub-category of reputation in two central terms: sticking to goals and keeping a firm mission over time. In other words, activist NGOs need a clear and sustained activist identity. As Fassin (2009) explains, activist organizations often advocate goals and then diverge from them, thus undermining their credibility and impact. Mitchell (2015) surveyed 150 transnational NGOs and similarly found “singleness of focus” an attribute of effectiveness. In the case of MMA, all media professionals identified MMA’s goals as monitoring and activism to improve policy and actual media content. MMA has a clear organizational identity and there is little ambiguity about their work.

Another aspect of reputation around consistency is ensuring that activism occurs long-term. Bill explains: “We have been doing this for a long time and have not wavered from our initial premise . . . Some critics gave us a year, five years. Twenty-two years later, we’re still here—with the same message.” Tori similarly notes: “I have been with MMA for over half a decade and we have not changed our mission once.” A journalist at *City Press* explains: “I actually learned about MMA in a journo seminar . . . When I entered the profession, they were right there, doing the same work I read about in my class.” Bunnage (2014) identifies long-term commitment to the same goals as a key factor for activist success and retention.

A third way in which MMA secures its reputation with stakeholders is through innovation. Bill explains why innovation is pivotal through the case of MMPZ, which MMA helped set up in 1996. He explains:

“I think they’re still going just barely cuz they just didn’t innovate, you know. They kept doing the same thing . . . and when the politics wasn’t changing, you can’t—you’ve got to offer things, even if it’s presenting same things in slightly different ways, really meet people differently.”

Bill’s testimony explains that while consistency is important, activist NGOs must both adapt to the changing media industry, regulation, and politics and adjust activist strategies.

MMA has been able to stay relevant by creating their own activist tools and adapting activist strategies. Bill reaffirms that innovation has “ensured our existence.”

Gerald explains: “When online news media began to really become popular, we started doing work on digital rights . . . access to information.” A member of FXI notes at a SOS Coalition meeting that MMA is “on the pulse of technology.” Sadie explains: “Part of my job as researcher with MMA is to find out what technologies people are using to communicate and where they get their news from. This is obviously always changing.” MMA develops digital media tools catered to both South African media users and media professionals. For instance, “Twitter Diet” seeks to educate South Africans on the health of their news habit, “Wazimap” or “NewsTools” are designed to help journalists do their job with more integrity.

MMA adjusts methods for activism including specific tactics and broader strategies (Paquette, 2002) in order to stay relevant in the eyes of stakeholders. Tori explains: “I am with the policy unit and probably one of my favorite projects is when we moved our activism into the online space.” A contributor to *The Mail & Guardian* notes: “Bill has been writing op-ed pieces for us since we began. He knew the importance of online journalism before consumers knew it.”

As this overview of MMA’s reputation indicates, the organization asserts its space in the South African mediascape through its high-quality research, consistency, and innovation. Reputation links to impact in the sense that only reputable entities can truly influence their stakeholders. In the case of MMA, the NGO has forged a unique space for itself in the South African mediascape.

MMA’s Impact

MMA has been building its reputation as a monitoring and activism NGO since its inception in 1994. In their promotional documents and official website, MMA makes a statement about its impact around the use of their monitoring work and their invitations by media corporations as experts. MMA’s own description reads:

“Our impact cannot only be measured by what our partners say about us, but also by the usefulness of our work and how people engage with our work. The President and the Vice President of the Republic of South Africa have quoted our work on media related issues. Not only government see the value of our work. Media from the public broadcaster, SABC, to other independent broadcasters, print and online newspapers and community radio regularly invite us to comment on critical media issues.”

MMA has undoubtedly affected the current state of South Africa’s mediascape and impacted media representation in content as well as media policy and organizational practices in the overall political economic structure.

Yet, scholars and activists alike note that the impact of activism is difficult to determine and assess. Meyer (2005) critically explains that “most social movement organizations lack the resources to assess the[ir] impact” (p. 202). This is particularly difficult for activist NGOs in the Global South. Specifically with respect to analyzing MMA’s impact as a result of their activist projects, Bill explains:

“One of our organizational weaknesses is that we don’t have systematic M&E—monitoring and evaluation—for everything we do. In some of the projects where we get money . . . funding or contract work . . . consultants come in and see whether the campaign was effective, and how. We just don’t have the capacity to do that across all activities right now. We have some data, yeah, but nothing comprehensive.”

Though lacking empirical evidence in the form of numbers, MMA’s impact can be assessed in three ways: MMA’s impact can be seen through their high activist output, continuous funding, and their sustained engagement over time.

First, MMA’s impact can be assessed around their activist output. As of February 2017, MMA has produced over 100 monitoring reports and facilitated an equal amount of media policy submissions. Special programs include projects on gender, children, race, sexuality, and media freedom. Gallagher (2001) explains that activist output are specific achievements of media monitoring and advocacy, while the impact of these efforts, “the extent to which they have influenced practices and mentalities in an enduring way,” are more difficult to assess (p. 188). For MMA, Tori explains:

“It’s easy to measure output. We’ve got work, we’ve got activities, we’ve got things that we do, but the impact of that is often difficult [to measure]. I mean the number of reports that we publish, the monitoring results that we put out, the social media work that we do, the policy submissions, the tools that we build—those are very easy to define. They’re very easy to measure. They’re very easy to see.”

According to the Chairman of MMA’s Board of Trustees, visibility is also a key characteristic of MMA’s impact, commenting that MMA shows impact when their monitoring reports and publications become resources to others. He explains: “I think that one sees impact is when media organizations and other people cite the MMA as a source around how the media perform . . . then that fosters credibility, when you become a resource.” Citations foster reputation, and the visibility leads to more funding. MMA has been cited in media and government materials through GCIS.

A second way to assess MMA’s impact in the South African mediascape is their continuous funding. MMA has been able to sustain itself almost entirely on funding and donations since its inception in 1994. The longevity of the NGO on the basis of funding illustrates that institutions and private investors think their enterprise worthwhile. Thatcher explains that funding illustrates both rapport and impact. He explains: “I think that [donors] believe that it’s useful to have an organization like this and that it has a meaningful impact.” Wesley similarly notes: “We have become somewhat of a ‘epitome’ for media monitoring so many fund [us] on a continuous basis and are very happy with what we do.” In their promotional documents, MMA has gathered testimony by media experts and professionals who attest to the NGO’s impact.

Thirdly, MMA's impact can be assessed through its longevity, its sustained engagement over time. As Gallagher (2001) explains, assessing impact "requires retrospective study covering many years" (p. 188). Cathy summarizes MMA's impact over time and explains:

"If you look at particular policies, especially broadcasting, or even print policies that come out, had MMA not existed, we would have been further down the slope. Yes, we are on a downward slope, but we would have been further down the slope."

MMA has helped create a section in the SABA that specifies ethical reporting on children and has been working with ICASA on a digital rights and Internet governance policy. Both are examples of how MMA's existence and activism has shaped the mediascape in South Africa.

Though media activism impact is difficult to measure and determine (Gallagher, 2001; Hoynes, 2005), MMA's long and consistent intervention and credibility has undoubtedly affected the development and current status of South African media. MMA's reputation and track record has aided the NGO in becoming part of the South African mediascape.

MMA as "Part" of the South African Mediascape

In promotional documents, MMA calls media corporations "partners" and their relationships "partnerships." Among their four partners, they cite corporations in the media industry, oversight structures, civil society organizations, and citizens. This rhetorical shift indicates a less threat-oriented and more collaboratively oriented approach. Den Hond and de Bakker (2007) distinguish between radical groups—whose goal is to de-institutionalize stakeholders—and reformative groups, who aim to make existing institutions more democratic and citizen-centered. MMA falls into the reformative category since it monitors and advocates to make the South African mediascape more democratic. MMA board chairman goes as far as to pose that MMA has helped foster and stabilize South Africa's media democracy. He explains:

"Has the media environment changed because of Media Monitoring Africa? I can't claim empirically so, but I think the environment, while things are not good, would be significantly worse if an MMA didn't exist."

MMA acts as a watchdog, both in terms of media content and structure, and has cultivated partnerships with journalists, editors, and programming executives, who are stakeholders in the South African mediascape. Bill reflects on how they have affected policy, and journalistic practice and similarly explains: "Every now and then, we put together a report to track how coverage has changed over time." He highlights the improvement in journalistic coverage on matters related to children: "Slowly, we are seeing that journalists become better at protecting children's identity . . . not exposing them in vulnerable situations . . . ten years ago, it was a

different story.”

Patterson and Allen (1997) studied how stakeholders perceive the legitimacy of activist organizations via impression management theory. The authors found that activist organizations need to “necessitate” and “aestheticize.” “Necessitating” occurs when activist organizations support their activism by continuously articulating their motivations and their mission. Activist organizations “aestheticize” by reminding the public about the benefits of their existence. Both “necessitating” and “aestheticizing” fosters credibility and the need for their existence. MMA’s long-term engagement has situated the NGO as an important entity in the South African mediascape and journalists receive training that includes awareness about the existence of the NGO.

Relationships between activists and stakeholders are often characterized by animosity and confrontation. In the case of MMA, media professionals, journalists, and broadcasting executives actually appear to value the existence of the NGO. An example of this is MMA’s interaction with *The Daily Sun*, the leading tabloid. Despite having taken the paper to litigation at ICASA at numerous occasions, the editor still describes their relationship as follows: “There is a mutually acceptable relationship between us and the MMA.” The question to address here is how MMA develops and maintains relationships with stakeholders. Media professionals in South Africa are part of MMA’s media stakeholder relationships. Framed as a “partnership,” MMA needs to seek productive dialogues with media professionals and executives in this group. Burchell and Cook (2013) examine how NGO-stakeholder dialogue strategically transforms engagements. The authors found that dialogue frames and shapes relationships between NGO and larger stakeholders, underscoring the importance of frequent interactions.

MMA’s director analogizes MMA’s relationships with media stakeholders with an “open hand” and a “fist.” The “open hand” is friendly, provides monitoring reports and information, offers training, and validates a job well done. The “fist” enforces media policy and regulation, holds media producers to their mandates, and involves the public through published opinion pieces and television appearances. When asked about another analogy, former MMA researcher Cathy explains: “I used to go on TV on matters related to media policy and coverage. I would say, ‘MMA is that friend, that even on your bad day will be there. We’ll help you get back on your feet.’” Bill further explains, “I would rather employ the ‘open hand’ to keep the SABC and the tabloids in check but the reality is that they break the rules all the time.” As the “open hand” and “fist” analogy demonstrates, MMA’s relationships with stakeholders in the South African mediascape is dynamic.

Meikle (2002) calls relationships between media activist organizations and stakeholders a “pragmatic symbiosis” (p. 19). Media activist organizations, such as MMA, openly criticize media while interweaving into the fabric of the mediascape, thus taking on a unique and indispensable role. MMA’s rapport and impact con-

tinuously affirmed through stakeholder actions—e.g., withdrawal of stories, issuing of corrections, acknowledging the role of MMA. MMA is also nimble in its tactical choices, activist strategies, and degrees of confrontational activism. Dreiling and Wolf (2001) note that one well-known strategy, used by both reformatory and radical groups, is to increase the legitimacy of their demand and to strengthen their position in the organizational field by seeking support from other powerful and legitimate actors. Bill explains: “We can afford to be critical and direct cuz luckily, we enjoy a lot of institutional backing.”

Though MMA members think passionately about activism, and characterize MMA as an activist organization, the NGO has learned more productive ways to work with stakeholders, thereby generating institutional backing through the local university, and forging a key role in the South African mediascape. Perceptions of MMA’s work are characterized by respect. Bill explained that it took years to learn how to speak to stakeholders in a way that would not alienate them but make them partners in the pursuit for media democracy, media equality, and media quality. He notes: “It’s a lot harder to say, ‘Okay, this isn’t good and here’s why and here’s an alternative.’” By overcoming frequent highly confrontational interactions, MMA was able to build more integrative relationships with stakeholders.

MMA’s integrative approach suggests a socially networked relationship akin to a symbiotic dependency. MMA seeks not to agitate unnecessarily, carefully grounds claims in media monitoring research and legal policy review, while remaining open to stakeholder input. Bill’s account of the backlash against MMA’s gender activism in one of their early engagements with media editors highlights that MMA has adjusted its approach. As Andrea notes, activist often denotes “agitator” and the agitative model media activism has its limitation, both for industry structure activism and content activism. Geertsema (2010) found a similar dilemma in her study of GL, an organization whose activism is characterized by quick critiques, loud activism, and declining rapport.

Once the opportunity to speak with media stakeholders and policy makers arises, it is important to keep the people-centered goals in mind and generate compromises that foster inter-organizational relationships. Carefully curated and sustained stakeholder relationships enable MMA to impact media content and policy more effectively. For MMA, this symbiotic dependency is characterized by their own stakeholder-level positioning in the mediascape; i.e., MMA has woven into the cultural fabric of the South African mediascape by asserting itself as important intermediary entity. As the editor of South Africa’s most-read tabloid, *The Daily Sun*, Reggy Moalusi, explains: “The MMA’s views and concerns are taken seriously by media organizations. The MMA does play a key role and their relationships with the media is very cordial and there is the reciprocation on both sides.”

As this analysis has demonstrated, MMA as an NGO has developed into a key player themselves. They are commonly understood as an element of the mediascape, a

status that is only feasible if an NGO has curated rapport and showcased impact among stakeholders. As Bill succinctly explains: “We value relationship to stakeholders where activist organizations are respected for their role in society . . . We have a competitive edge because MMA gets invited to the table, that’s what makes us different.”

Limitations of MMA’s Activist Work

Nevertheless, it is important to note that even MMA’s success story is underpinned by some limitations. As with any organization, there are shortcomings of MMA’s activism that must not be overlooked. For one, MMA is limited by its funding structure. As a non-profit, MMA is reliant on donor funding to sustain the organization, its members, and activist efforts. As Reith (2010) notes, power manifests through money in NGO-donor relationships. Some institutions donate to civil society organizations as a way to boost their own reputation, while others expect their funds to be allocated in such ways that may forestall an NGO’s goals and project needs. At MMA, donors have the power to direct projects through specific monetary allocations, thereby often constraining activist areas that might be most needed. Some MMA members spoke with great sadness about the lack of funding for gender or LGBTQIA issues in media, a monitoring section that they personally felt quite passionately about.

Fueled by the limitations of donor-based funding structures, MMA is increasingly motivated to commercialize. MMA can generate its own revenue by selling monitoring and training. Any media organization—including those stakeholders that MMA already monitors—could hire the NGO to generate monitoring reports on their performance. At the same time, any news room editor could hire MMA for training purposes; e.g., for workshops on how to cover stories involving minors with more integrity. This commercialization fundamentally stands at odds with their activist goals and it appears somewhat unethical that MMA offers monitoring and training to those very same media organizations that it “watches.” This dilemma represents both a conflict of interests as well as an important insight into the material limitations of media NGO work across the Global South.

Conclusion

In this institutional ethnography on NGO media activism in South Africa, I took up MMA’s particular activist case to investigate how MMA has managed to weave into the organizational fabric of the South African mediascape. While other media activists in the Global South can certainly learn from MMA’s strategies and practices, an obvious limitation of this study is that MMA’s rapport cannot be directly replicated or even generalized. The NGO itself, as well as its activist success, might very well remain a product of the specific South African cultural context. During my

time in Johannesburg, it became quite apparent that the specific cultural history around the apartheid era established democratic and participatory values that remain critical in the minds of the people. This notion is further supported by considering the case of similar media activist organizing across the larger Southern African setting, for example in Zimbabwe, Zambia, or Botswana. Several conversations with MMA members yielded that the South African NGO has tried to support the founding and development of similar NGOs in neighboring countries. For instance, MMPZ formalized with the support of MMA as almost a direct replica of their organizational profile. MMA retains good working relationships with the Zimbabwean organizers, yet laments that the sociocultural and political context in Zimbabwe has prohibited the MMPZ from yielding comparable success. As this case illustrates, civil society organizations with interdependent and useful relationships to stakeholders do not per default become part of any scape, media included.

Yet, the specific case of MMA critically illustrates that within the appropriate sociocultural and political conditions, media activist organizing can be quite successful. Within the emerging field of media activism research, it is important that scholars offer examples of successful organizing that detail the relevance of activist organizing for media democracy, quality, ethics, and diversity. Under this premise, MMA served as an ideal object of analysis. Future studies in the area of media activist organizing could apply the organizational-activist practices as a lens. Further, the key organizational-activist practices might enable scholars to develop comparative studies of media activist organizing across cultural context and engage in multi-sited comparisons that might further reveal elements of successful media intervention projects.

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