

ABSTRACT

DEEPENING DEMOCRACY OR WIDENING THE RIFT? THE POLITICAL ROLE OF MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NAMIBIA

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South Africa and Namibia counted among the sub-Saharan African countries that became democracies in the “Third Wave of Democratization”, which brought about unprecedented political pluralism and media liberalisation. While the media in the democratic era have enjoyed the freedom to play an increasingly central role in mainstream politics in these countries, clashes between the media and the respective governments and political actors suggest that notions of “media freedom” and “media responsibility” are understood differently by various roleplayers, and that the media’s role in meeting developmental goals, the redress of inequalities and reconciliation in post-conflict societies is disputed. While attention has been paid to structural changes to the media industry in both these countries after democratization, the dynamics of interaction between actors in the political communication process – journalists, politicians and intermediaries – have not yet been studied adequately. Attention to these cultural aspects of political communication in new African democracies is very important to gain an understanding of the attitudes, expectations and values that these actors base their interaction on. This paper draws on interviews conducted with journalists, politicians and intermediaries (e.g. political spokespeople) in both these countries undertaken as part of an international comparative study on political communication in new democracies. Interviewees were asked to report their perceptions of the political communication process, including their view of normative concepts like media freedom and responsibility, levels of trust in their counterparts and the relationship between politicians, intermediaries and journalists.

By exploring themes emerging from these responses, the contours of the political communication culture in these two sub-Saharan countries may be drawn in an attempt to establish how the mediation of politics is related to the deepening of democracy in Africa.