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Trust, Truth and the Media

2015 South African Reconciliation Barometer

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SOUTH AFRICAN RECONCILIATION BAROMETER |
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BACKGROUND

Over the past year, the role of the media in shaping the public agenda has come into sharp focus in South Africa and abroad. In South Africa, the South Africa Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC) – as a public broadcaster - has a constitutional duty to uphold freedom of expression, and act in the best interest of the South African public. Its Editorial Policy states that the SABC aims to provide those residing in South Africa with the information needed to participate in the building of democracy.[1] The SABC's ability to fulfill its public service mandate – following recent events, and allegations that is unable to remain financially stable and politically independent – is currently under investigation. Hlaudi Motsoeneng (SABC's former acting COO) came under scrutiny after driving a controversial policy at the SABC that banned footage of protest on the public broadcaster's channels. Some SABC journalists were suspended, fired and / or faced disciplinary action for publically opposing the policy, and later reinstated - following a court judgment[2]. Currently, an ad hoc Parliamentary committee is investigating the suitability of the SABC board to hold office. It is expected that the committee, which has until the end of February 2017 to finalise its report, will ratify an investigation into corruption and alleged mismanagement at the public broadcaster[3].

It is, however, not only the South African public broadcaster that came under the spotlight, but also private media companies and social media campaigns – with controversies surrounding allegations of a "white-controlled" media, "Gupta-controlled" media, and so –called #PaidTwitter accounts, spreading information through fake news sources allegedly serving specific political narratives. In addition, social media platforms increasingly warrant attention in terms of the role it plays in sharing political information and news, as well as in driving political narratives. Nearing the end of 2016, suspicious Twitter accounts were identified as part of a "sock-puppet web"[4]. In addition, closely mimicking legitimate social media accounts of formal media institutions – including Radio 702, The Huffington Post, the Sunday Times and the Daily Maverick – spoof accounts surfaced during January 2017[5]. "Spoofing" furthermore seems to be evolving from social media accounts driving a particular political narrative, to "spoofing" various news sources and allegedly producing fake news.

All of this matters, as "the Media" is seen as a vital institution as part of democracy. It has the potential to enhance or diminish political trust and engagement, and can have an impact on citizens' orientations towards (and understanding of) their own agency as political actors. Furthermore, given the persistence of geographic patterns of separation – a legacy of the apartheid era – many South Africans form their opinions and impressions of other groups based on their representation in the media. In a way it can be

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[1] Sibanda, R. 2016. "Understanding the role of the SABC", *IOL Opinion*, 11 July 2016. Online; http://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/understanding-the-role-of-the-sabc-2044221

[2] Herman, P. 2016. "SABC 8 want ConCourt to order Parliament to probe its decisions on the broadcaster", *Mail and Guardian*. 17 October 2016. Online: http://mg.co.za/article/2016-10-17-sabc-8-want-concourt-to-order-parliament-to-probe-its-decisions-on-the-broadcaster

[3] Davis, G. 2017. "Parliamentary Inquiry into SABC nears submission deadline", *EWN*. Online: http://ewn.co.za/2017/01/14/parliamentary-inquiry-into-sabc-nears-submission-deadline

[4] "Sock-puppets" refer to instances where a person in control of an account disguises him/herself as someone else. Often, one account will operate a number of other accounts. When this account "tweets" or "retweets", the others follow.

[5] Le Roux, J. 2017. "Hidden hand drives social media smears", Mail and Guardian. 27 January 2017. Online": http://mg.co.za/article/2017-01-27-00-hidden-hand-drives-social-media-smears

said that the media 'mediates' our own views and perceptions of others. The findings of the 2015 SARB have strongly alluded to high levels of social polarization and low levels of trust among South Africans. For example, 67,3 % of South African indicated that they have little or no trust in people from race groups other than their own[6]. Given its possible role in "mediating perceptions of others" in South African society, and in political trust and agency, the media has an important role to play in the social and political life in South Africa.

South African media, however, faces multiple challenge, including: political factions trying to push their agenda through media channels; declining revenue and the limited to moderate success in migrating from print news sources to online sources; budgets cuts and retrenchments; and, companies forming large conglomerates that share media and news platforms. This latter trend can limit the diversity of news made available to South African audiences, and may lead to "cutting jobs" in the industry[7].

Given the above, and amidst a turbulent political and economic environment, it is worthwhile to consider perceptions surrounding the role of the media in South Africa, the capacity of various media types to fulfill its mandate, and the relationships of South Africans with the media and media content.

Media in Democracies

The role of the media in South Africa is captured in the code of ethics and conduct for South African print and online media. In the preamble of this document, it is stated that "The media exists to serve society. Their freedom provides for independent scrutiny of the forces that that shape society and is essential to realising the promise of democracy. It enables citizens to make informed judgements on the issues of the day, a role whose centrality is recognized in the Constitution. [8]" South African media thus plays a pivotal role in South Africa's democratic society, and its independence remains essential for it to fulfil this role responsibly.

Discourse on the role of the media in democracies (in general), particularly in terms of sustaining and promoting political culture and civic orientation, have led to two main schools of thought which aim to explain this interaction. The one asserts that mass media (will) cause political detachment of citizens from institutions – in particular by fueling citizens' cynicism; the other postulates that "the media" contributes to the levels of political interest, knowledge, participation, efficacy and learning of citizens (in democracies). These are not necessarily at odds with each other, as it can be that citizens' engagement with media content can foster political trust and engagement in some instances, diminish this in some circumstances[9], and in some instances do not have an effect in this regard at all.

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[6] Hofmeyr, J., Govender, R. 2016. "National reconciliation, race relations, and social inclusion", *South African Reconciliation Barometer, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*. Online: http://www.dac.gov.za/sites/default/files/reconciliation-barometer.pdf

[7] Fontyn, Y. 2017. "Media is in the crucible of change and conflict", *Business Day*. 1 February 2017.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Camaj, L. 2014. "Media use and Political Trust in and Emerging Democracy: Setting the Institutional Trust Agenda in Kosovo", *International Journal of Communications*, nr 8, pages 187 -209.

Criticism of media – in particular as role-player in political discourse – has been prevalent for decades, with detractors asserting that media reflects "…angst about the vitality of democracy at a time of widespread cynicism about political leaders and government institutions… "[10]. On the other hand, some assert that too much is expected of media as it increasingly find itself having to compensate for the shortcomings of other political institutions – such as political parties and other representative institutions. In addition to having to inform citizens and playing a "watchdog" role, expectations are that media will be involved in (and is used for) setting public agendas, organizing public discussions, and offering guidance on values relating to policy problems and issues – without necessarily having the time and capacity to fulfil these various roles[11].

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the relationship between political attitudes of citizens and engagement with media content is influenced by characteristics of both the media and the citizens engaging with media content. Media content and engagement is thus not deterministic[12]. Individuals do not all interpret media content and messages in the same way. Other sources of information – such as interpersonal sources (family, friends) and other institutions (such as churches, unions, CSOs) - provides a broader context in which individuals interpret the messages they receive from media. In addition, citizens' political attitudes, political interest, political education, political socialisation, and levels of trust in media also have an impact on the way in (and extent to) which citizens relate to, and understand, the messages from various media sources. It is in this regard that the 2015 SARB provides some insight on the relationship between South African media and its audiences.

SARB: SOUTH AFRICANS AND THE MEDIA

The 2015 South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) asked respondents how often they use various media forms for political information, how much they trust political information from various media forms, and the confidence respondents have in certain media institutions. We consider these findings in light of the recent media-related controversies as briefly mentioned above, keeping in mind that the survey was conducted during 2015. The data presented thus reflects broadly the attitudes towards media, and the frequency, with which South Africans might have engaged with the media prior – and likely when – the above mentioned events occurred. The possible impact of these events will only reflect in future SARB rounds.

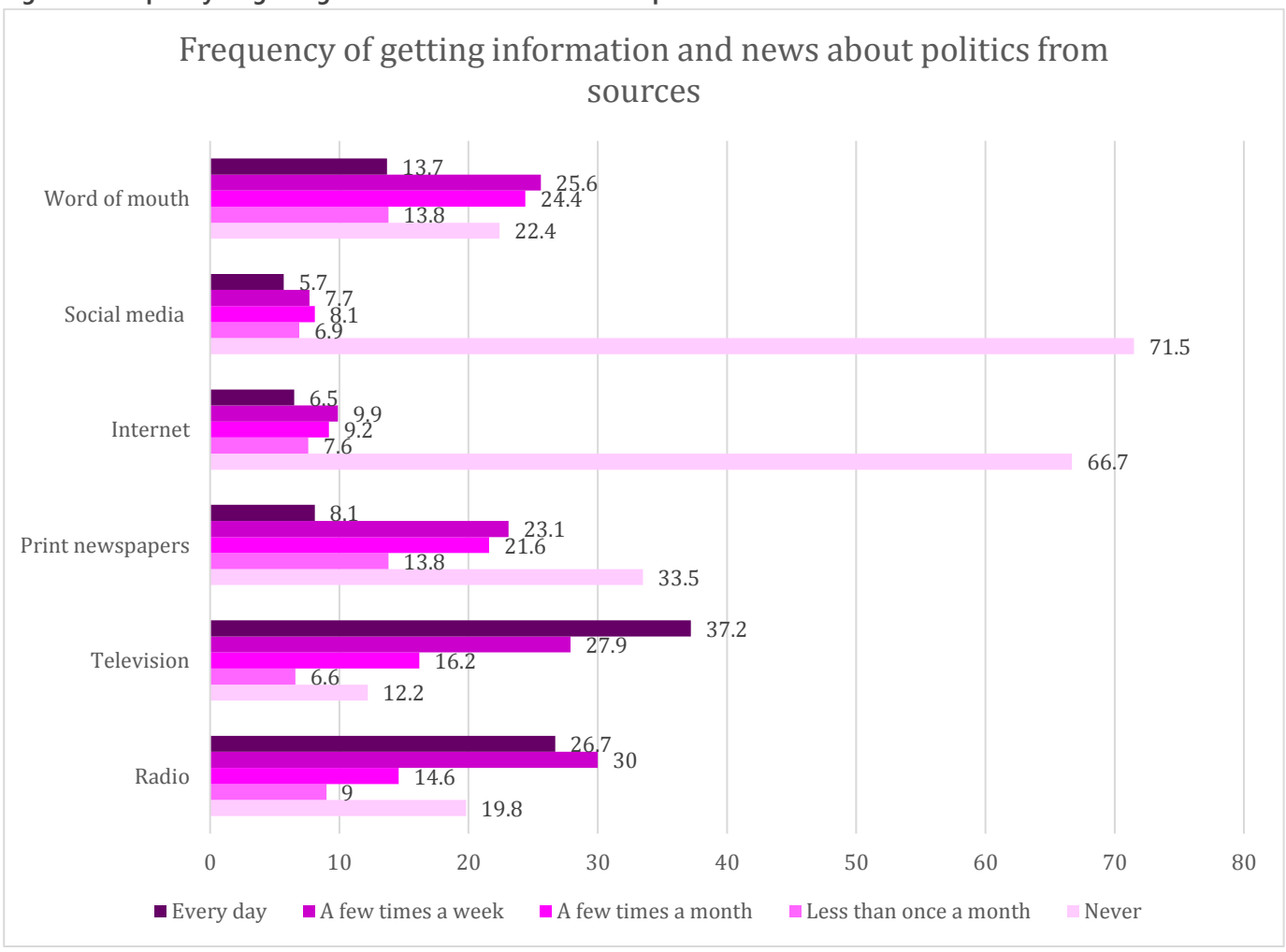
[10] Norris, P. 2000. "A virtuous circle: Political communications in post-industrial democracies". Cambridge: Cambridge University press. In Mesquita, N.C. 2012. "Political Engagement and Democratic Quality: The Role of the Media in Brazil", *NUPPs*. Paper presented in the Political Communication Research Committee (RC22) – of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), at the Faculty of Social Science Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. 8-9 November 2012.

[11] Mesquita, N.C. 2012. "Political Engagement and Democratic Quality: The Role of the Media in Brazil", *NUPPs*. Paper presented in the Political Communication Research Committee (RC22) – of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), at the Faculty of Social Science Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. 8-9 November 2012.

[12] *Ibid.*

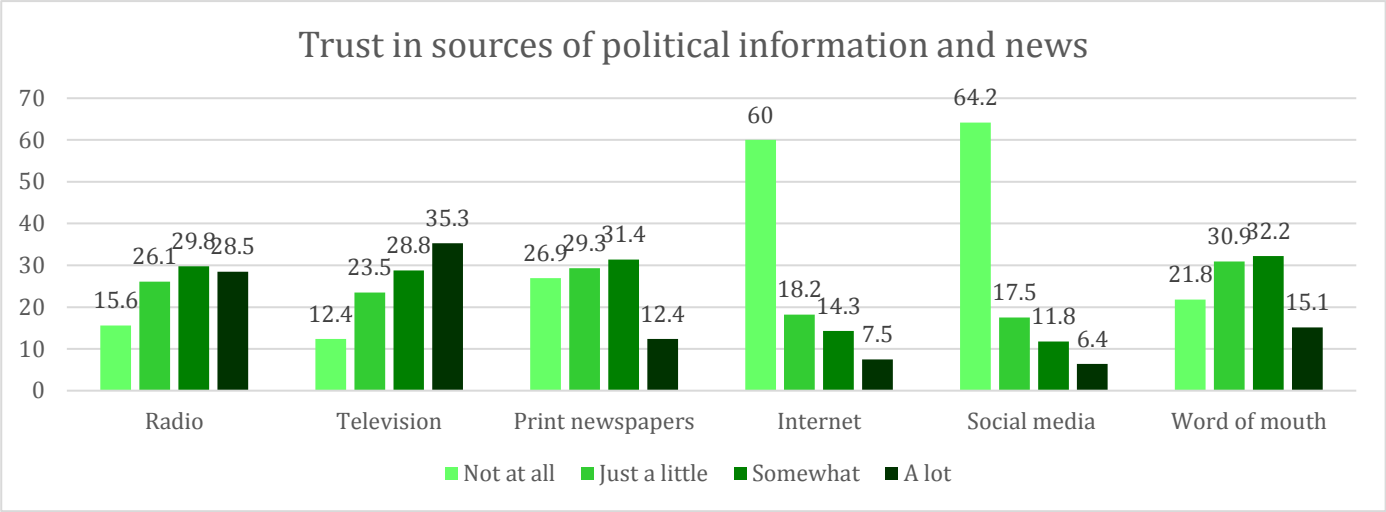
Respondents to the 2015 SARB survey were asked "How often do you get information and news about politics from the following sources?" Figure 1 shows that the Internet and Social Media sources are the least accessed (66,7% and 71,5% "Never" respectively) for political information and news, while Radio and TV are the most accessed sources (56,7% and 65,1% "Few times a week"/ "Every day" respectively) for these purposes.

Figure 1: Frequency of getting information and news about politics from sources



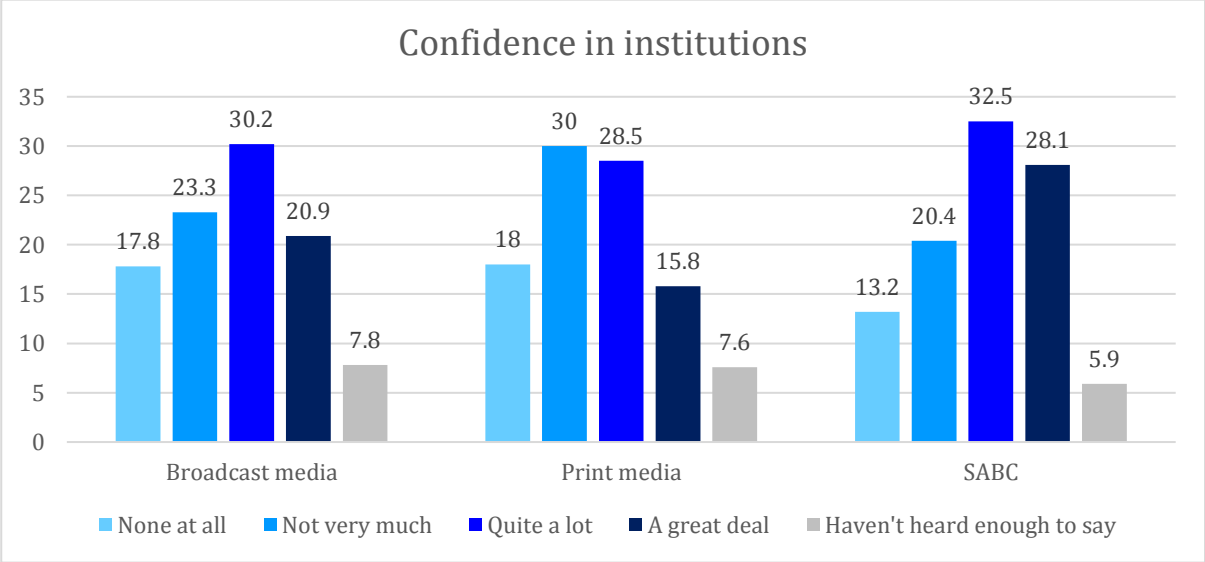
Respondents were then asked "How much do you trust the following sources of political information and news?" Respondents had the least trust in the Internet and Social Media (with 60% and 64,2% of respondents indicating they do "Not at all" trust the sources respectively), while respondents had the most trust in Radio and Television sources for political information and news (58,3% and 64,1% "Somewhat" and "A lot" combined, respectively).

Figure 2: Levels of trust in various sources of political information and news



In addition, respondents were asked how much confidence in general they have in a number of media institutions, namely Broadcast media, Print media and the SABC. Respondents had the most trust in the SABC, with 32,5% indicating they have "Quite a lot" of confidence, and 28,1% "A great deal" of confidence in the SABC (combined 60,6%). Confidence was lower in Broadcast media (51,1% combined) and Print media (44,3% combined) at the time.

Figure 3: Confidence in media institutions



SUMMARY

From the 2015 SARB data, it can be stated that most South Africans do not engage with social media and the internet for political information on a daily basis. However, most South Africans do engage with radio and television media forms for political news and information frequently. Radio and television is also the most trusted media sources accessed for political content. Furthermore, more South Africans trust the SABC than they trust broadcast or print media in general. Considering the possible impact of media content on political trust and agency of citizens as political actors, and on perspectives shaped in society, it is imperative that concerns regarding corruption and management at the SABC (with services available across the country) revealed during the parliamentary enquiry, are addressed. The Parliamentary Committee's work in this regard is thus of vital importance to ensure the credibility of the SABC, for our society and for our democracy.

At the same time, the implications of discrediting media and government institutions, organs of state, spreading false news and sharing information selectively with citizens, cannot be taken lightly. Although most South Africans do not engage with social media and the internet for political information and news on a daily basis, and trust in these forms of media was low prior to the recent controversies, the concern lies with the possibility of fake news and certain political narratives entering trusted media forms via social media driven narratives. The role of responsible journalism in such an environment becomes increasingly important. However, the agency of South Africans to engage with media content and make decisions around the narratives presented should not be under-estimated. The role of accountability, and critically engaging with information, does not only lie at the door of the media. This capacity is also something to be fostered and developed in the broader public, to ensure that citizens critically engage with media content and political information presented. Finally, the capacity and independence of the media to serve the public independently should be guarded and supported in a transparent manner.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) was launched in 2000 by officials who worked in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the aim of ensuring that lessons learnt from South Africa´s transition from apartheid to democracy are taken into account and utilised in advancing the interests of national reconciliation across Africa. IJR works with partner organisations across Africa to promote reconciliation and socio-economic justice in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing democratic transition. IJR is based in Cape Town, South Africa. For more information, visit http://www.ijr.org.za, and for comments or enquiries contact info@ijr.org.za.

ABOUT THE 2015 SOUTH AFRICAN RECONCILIATION BAROMETER (SARB)

The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) is a public opinion survey conducted by the IJR. Since its launch in 2003, the SARB has provided a nationally representative measure of citizens' attitudes to national reconciliation, social cohesion, transformation and democratic governance. The SARB is the only survey dedicated to critical measurement of reconciliation and the broader processes of social cohesion, and is the largest longitudinal data source of its kind globally. The SARB survey was conducted annually between 2003 and 2013 through face-to-face interviews and using a structured questionnaire. In 2013 and 2014, the SARB survey instrument underwent extensive review in order to improve the survey questionnaire in both its conceptualisation and measurement. This process was concluded in 2015 and the new survey was fielded during August and September 2015 by international market research company TNS. The survey employed a multi stage cluster design, whereby enumerator areas (EAs) were randomly selected and, within each of these, households were randomly selected for visitation. At each household a systematic grid system was employed to select the specific respondent for an interview. The final obtained sample of 2 219 respondents was then weighted to represent the adult population of South Africa adequately.

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