

Article

The uses and abuses of political economy: the ANC's media policy

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the African National Congress' (ANC) media policy, with specific emphasis on policy developed for the party's 2002 and 2007 national conferences. It considers how the ANC has used critical political economy arguments to justify its media policy, and concludes that the party has shifted recently towards appropriating these arguments selectively to justify positions that are deeply inimical to media freedom: an approach that was not evident in its earlier policy-making. This shift in emphasis suggests an elite drift in the ANC's policy, where the shielding of its leaders from criticism becomes the party's overriding concern. While the ANC's policy has much to offer in helping South Africa to confront the deficiencies in the post-apartheid media system – which is characterised by highly uneven development – the party demonstrates a lack of vision on media diversity questions. The major academic analyses of post-apartheid media transformation have not helped to chart a way forward either, owing in part to the academy's theoretical flight from critical political economy with its emphasis on concepts like class, determination and totality. The failure to analyse transformation of the media system as a whole has meant that media theorists failed to predict the uneven nature of media transformation. In the absence of a radical counter-discourse on media transformation, the way is clear for the ANC to mobilise popular discontent with the elite nature of much media, which may bolster arguments for more media controls.

Introduction

In 1996, Vincent Mosco called for a renewal of critical political economy perspectives¹ in communication theory,² perspectives which he considered to form a major perspective in communication research (Mosco 1996: 1). He felt that this renewal was necessary in the light of what he characterised as the theory's growing crisis of credibility since the collapse of Stalinism in

the 1990s. A key feature of political economy – namely class analysis – has become more suspect, and the development of a unipolar world dominated by the United States has led to a sense that there is no alternative, theoretically or practically, to the capitalist system (Mosco and Reddick 1997:12). Post-structuralist and some postcolonial arguments against totalising theories have also reduced the influence of critical political economy, given that, according to Mosco, the theory ‘...[is characterised by] an interest in examining the social whole or the totality of social relations that constitute the economic, political, social, and cultural fields’ (Mosco 1996:13).

The relevance of critical political economy has also been challenged by some cultural studies theorists,³ who have criticised the theory for determinism. They have argued for a recognition of the relative autonomy of media institutions, which also meant recognising the social agency of producers and consumers of media to resist social determination and make their own meanings (Fenton 2007:7). These critiques of critical political economy perspectives have been very influential in South African media studies, and have been buoyed by the influence of postmodern arguments in social theory generally (Vally and Motala 2008) that have tended to downplay the relevance of categories of analysis such as class.⁴ In fact, it seems fair to say that terms like class, determination, and totality became theoretical swearwords, associated with a form of Marxism that lost its relevance with the collapse of the Berlin wall.

Yet, in spite of these theoretical challenges, South Africa’s ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), has embraced critical political economy of the media as the basis for its media policy. This article analyses when, how and why this embrace happened, and what the implications are for the South African media. It is hardly coincidental that the ANC would be attracted to the theory as a means of explaining the transformation challenges facing the media: as Mosco has argued, more than any other theoretical position, critical political economy has attempted to understand the processes of social change, in order to develop theoretically informed strategies for social transformation. According to the ANC, the organisation was formed to spearhead the struggle for fundamental political, social and economic change, and realise a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa (ANC 2008a:1): so transformation, broadly defined, is at the heart of both perspectives. But the relationship between critical political economy and the ANC is by no means a perfect fit.

The article focuses on the media policies developed for its 2002 and 2007 national conferences, and analyses the shift in policy between these two conferences. This analysis focuses mainly on the ANC's approach towards transformation of the print media, as it is in relation to this sector that transformation has been the most heavily contested. It attempts to understand why there is growing hostility among the ANC's rank and file towards the print media, and what the possible implications are of this hostility.

The great media transformation debate: an assessment

The evolution of the ANC's media policy was closely linked to the transformation of South Africa's apartheid media. In the run-up to the first democratic elections in 1994, the ANC focused on the need to establish independent media institutions, rather than exerting its own control over media. Ruth Teer-Tomaselli (1994) has argued that the former approach – which she termed 'pragmatist' – was not a given in the ANC: it had to be argued for. Teer-Tomaselli could not have predicted that the pragmatists in the ANC would find themselves having to reassert their position 13 years later.

After the 1994 elections, the ANC's interest in media policy seemed to wane somewhat, with no specific pronouncements being made in their conferences in the late 1990s. Tensions between the ANC-led government and black journalists were apparent from time to time (Barret 2006:56-60), but they were not discussed at the ANC's 49th and 50th conferences in 1994 and 1997 respectively, suggesting that media transformation was not considered to be a serious enough issue to warrant a dedicated policy focus. Rather the key debates around the extent of media transformation raged in academia.

Ruth Teer-Tomaselli and Keyan Tomaselli (2001) surveyed media transformation from 1994 to 2000, and argued that while significant changes had taken place in the racial composition of media ownership, class continuity was also evident. In response, Guy Berger argued (2002) that the changes to media ownership between 1994 and 2000 were, in fact, much more significant than the Tomasellis were willing to admit, and that greater racial representivity in media institutions was an indicator of significant transformation. Rather than privileging the economic as the determining realm of transformation – leading to economic reductionism – Berger argued that economic, racial and political transformation needed to be assessed 'within each realm in its own right' (Berger 2002:175), while acknowledging simultaneously the interrelatedness but semi-autonomy of each realm. He

further likened media transformation to a glass of water, which could be considered ‘admirably half-full’ or ‘disappointing half-empty’, depending on whether one looks at the past or the future. But it indisputably contains a lot more liquid than it did before 1994’ (Berger 2002:164).

The value of Berger’s intervention was that it warned against simplistic dismissals of changes in media institutions. Also, Berger’s argument echoed concerns in media theory globally about the deterministic turn in critical political economy, where the relationship between the economy as the ‘base’ and the media as the ‘superstructure’ is one where the superstructure is a mere reflection of the base (Mosco 1997:162). However, it could be argued that Berger – drawing on the turn against determinism in media theory – threw the baby of determination out with the bathwater of determinism. As far back as the 1970s, Raymond Williams argued that many critics of Marx’s economic determinism misunderstood what he meant by determination, which involved economic relations setting limits, exerting pressures and closing off options, rather than the base determining a predicted, prefigured and controlled content in the superstructure (Williams 1973:6).

Drawing on Williams, Graham Murdock and Peter Golding also identified numerous misreadings of Marx’s work in media theory, flowing from the confusion of Marxist theory with its Soviet version, and leading to misplaced assumptions that he was deterministic in his view of the relationship between ideas and the economic base. Rather, they argued, Marx used the notion of determination in a broad sense, where capitalism structures the overall framework for ideas and actions, while recognising the semi-autonomous nature of intellectual work (Murdock and Golding 1977:16-17). More recently, Paul Wetherly has supported this interpretation from an economic theory perspective, by arguing that the relative autonomy of superstructural institutions comes about as a result of their own institutional logics, capacities and resources, and as a result of non-economic determinations; so while there may be multiple determinants, including economic and non-economic, class and non-class factors, in how these institutions function, this does not invalidate economic determination per se (Wetherly 2001). The caricaturing of classical Marxism as deterministic has been highly influential in South African media scholarship, and has also created conditions for an unfair de-legitimisation of classical Marxism, and a conflation of Marxism with Stalinism.

This de-legitimisation of determination in critical political economy theory, coupled with the shift towards cultural studies, has led to a turn away from

studies on media ownership and control and towards studies on the social and cultural impact of media. For instance, Sonja Laden (2001) used a cultural economy approach, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu and James Carrier, to examine the popularity of consumer magazines amongst black readers. While expressing broad alignment with political economy, Lynette Steenveld (2004:1) argued for a more nuanced approach towards media transformation, which recognised 'cultural and discursive factors as equally important in the determination of the relationship between media and society'. The turn away from political economy has also created space for arguments to recognise media institutions as autonomous power structures with their own internal logics (Jacobs 2003:48), or as fields requiring institution-level sociological studies that resist generalising and essentialising about media ownership and political economy on a grand scale (Glenn and Knaggs 2008).

The analysis of media institutions as autonomous power structures inevitably drives analyses away from the construction of general theories and towards the study of specific institutions: itself an approach that elevates indeterminacy to the level of a general theory. Even arguments for the semi-autonomy of different realms can lapse into a form of pluralism that fails to entertain the possibility that historical conditions may lead to particular realms assuming inordinate weight. Given the shift away from critical political economy approaches in the academy, it is hardly surprising that major attempts to map media transformation in its totality, and in the context of broader social transformation, began to dry up.

The contradictions of the half-full glass

Given the above mentioned shift in academia, it is unsurprising that media transformation critiques have neglected advances in political economy theory and social theory generally. Recently, social theorists have attempted to theorise the contradictions of post-apartheid society without falling into false notions of duality, where South Africa is supposedly characterised by 'two economies' (Africanus 2008).

As a way of addressing the deficiencies in the two economies analysis, Patrick Bond and Ashwin Desai have revived the Marxist notion of uneven and combined development⁵ to explain the differential growth of sectors, geographical processes, classes and regions (Bond and Desai 2006:28). Guy Mhone has argued further that South African society has come to be characterised by uneven development, with pockets of the system developing into discrete enclave sectors, which reproduce and even reinforce

enclivity in South African society generally (Mhone in Bond 2007:3-6).

While these analyses point to the relational nature of development and underdevelopment (namely that development has taken place in some sectors *because of*, rather than *in spite of*, underdevelopment in others), they do not explain sufficiently the interplay of race and class in these relations. Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Natrass have attempted to understand, from a social democratic perspective, why class inequality has grown in post-apartheid South Africa, and argued that as the economic distributional system matured under apartheid, the system became less reliant on racial discrimination to ensure upward distribution of wealth. This meant that, in time, the apartheid government could relinquish racial discrimination as an organising principle in South Africa, as it had served its purpose (Seekings and Natrass 2005:34).

Seekings and Natrass have also drawn attention to differentiation within classes, and specifically between what they call the 'core working class' and the 'marginal working class'. They argue that post-apartheid economic restructuring has intensified this stratification, with interracial inequality increasing relative to intraracial inequality. The upper class has become deracialised and better off, the semi-professional class, the intermediate class and the core working class have shrunk, but become better off, while the marginal working class has grown and is worse off and has largely fallen through the social safety net (Seekings and Natrass 2005:337). This analysis suggests that class is a more enduring determinant than race (with the caveat that class stratification must be recognised).

Largely, media transformation was premised on the dominance of commercial media models; while some public funding was made available for public broadcasting and community media (through the Media Development and Diversity Agency, or MDDA), most media continued to rely on commercial sources of funding. This meant that the media's transformation was heavily tied to the transformation of the economy. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the segmentation of media markets according to living standards bears some resemblance to Seekings and Natrass' class stratification. According to the Living Standards Measurement (LSM), LSM 1 and 2, which according to the SA Advertising Research Foundation comprise 18.3 per cent of the population, rely largely on SABC radio. LSM 3 and 4, which comprise 27.5 per cent of the population, rely on SABC radio and television, with some relying on e.tv (although e.tv's target market is LSM 5.5). It is only LSM 5 and 6, which comprise 27.9 per cent of the

population, that begin to enjoy diverse media, including SABC, e.tv, daily and weekly newspapers, magazines and outdoor media. LSM 7 and above command the lion's share of media. In fact, most commercial media (including the tabloids) tend not to identify LSM 4 and below as being part of their target audiences. While radio tends to have the largest penetration, television and print media (including the tabloids) tend to prioritise LSM 5 and above, which accounts for 54.1 percent of the population. So the distribution of media goods developed the character of a funnel, with more media being clustered further up the funnel, while media access tapers off drastically towards the lower end of the funnel: hardly a justifiable situation for a media system aiming for universality and diversity.

What is noteworthy, however, is that the number of people located in LSM 5 and below is decreasing over time.⁶ These statistics suggest that poverty is declining, and imply that commercial media audiences will grow in time as more people migrate into the higher LSMs. Yet, it is important not to arrive at premature conclusions, based on suspect methodological assumptions, as this could lead to misguided media policy prescriptions (such as an argument to leave the media to grow unhindered, without state intervention to redistribute media goods). Bond and Meth have expressed reservations about the LSM as a measurement of poverty (Bond 2008, Meth 2007). While they have argued that the drop in LSM 1 could be attributed to social grants, they suspect that the extent of the shift towards higher LSMs may be overstated, owing to the high levels of consumer overindebtedness: a methodological lacuna that consumption-based measurements of wealth are notoriously susceptible to.

These arguments provide the conceptual tools to re-engage Berger's argument that 'race matters' and 'class matters', and that transformation in relation to both must be given equal weight without according different explanatory weight to either. This argument for the relative autonomy of different realms is ahistorical, as it fails to account for the ways in which race and class have articulated to shape a media that has achieved significant levels of de-racialisation and class recomposition, but that has failed to transcend the stratification within the working class. The LSM statistics suggest that commercial media expansion has been concentrated in the semi-professional, intermediate and core working classes, with scant expansion in the marginal working class. The distributional rewards of post-apartheid media transformation have been highly unequal. This reality will probably not change fundamentally for as long as South Africa's media system is

premised overwhelmingly on the commercial media model. Also, the political economy of the country has determined (in its proper sense) the political economy of the media. The theoretical flight from determination prevents recognition of this basic fact.

Undoubtedly, the mid-1990s was a 'golden season' of media diversification in South Africa. However, since the adoption of the controversial plan to stabilise the economy – the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Plan (GEAR) – in the late 1990s, a number of the empowerment deals mentioned by Berger unwound, as they were financed by debt rather than equity. The rise in interest rates following the adoption of GEAR made the cost of credit unsustainable and commercial media reconsolidated into four big interlocking groups: Independent Newspapers, Johnnic (now Avusa), Caxton and Media 24.

In spite of its highly consolidated and commercial nature, the print media have often exercised relative autonomy from the ruling elite, and broken some significant stories about elite misconduct. The investigative teams in the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian* followed story leads in *Nosweek* on corruption in the arms deal and other government tenders. Thabo Mbeki's attitude to HIV/Aids and Zimbabwe came in for especially severe criticism. Reports that were highly critical of Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang also persisted, and focused especially on her questionable hostility to HIV/AIDS antiretroviral treatment and her promotion of natural medicines to treat the pandemic (earning her the title 'Dr. Beetroot'). These stories created questions about the integrity of some senior ANC leaders, and in some cases elicited strong negative reactions on their part.

The print media had their own lacunae in exercising their watchdog role, though. While they did not eschew a patriotic role entirely, the print media tended to confine their watchdog role to the black elite – involving, as Berger has observed, investigating state corruption, anti-democratic practices, and sometimes racist practices – but generally neglected the white economic elite (Wasserman 2006:266). Thus, the print media exhibited a tendency to focus on stories that critiqued the exercise of political power, and especially the misuse of power, but within a framework that assumed the normative nature of ANC rule within a post-apartheid capitalist framework.

A newer generation of media scholars has investigated the ways in which the media constructed an elite consensus on the 'success' of post-apartheid transformation, within the normative framework mentioned above. In turn, they contributed to the development of what Ray Hartley has called a 'one-

policy state' (Gumede 2005:20). For instance, in a quantitative analysis of articles on privatisation over a four-and-a-half-year period (2000 – 2004), David McDonald and Ann Mahyer (2007) found that the English language press 'solidified privatisation as a dominant discourse', and limited the possibilities for anti-privatisation debate. Sean Jacobs (2005) has researched how the media have played divide and rule amongst social movements, lauding the more politically acceptable activism of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), while vilifying the more politically radical Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) as criminals (Eveleth 2004:14).

This elite drift is not peculiar to South African media though: it is a phenomenon that Murdock and Golding (1977), and more recently Bagdikian (Bagdikian in Hadland 2007:60), have noted when they described the bracketing out of progressive views as a function of the need by media organisations to maximise audiences and revenues by focusing on the most widely legitimated views. In South Africa this 'tilt upwards'⁷ has particularly serious implications as it fosters a society that is unable to see itself, and understand fully the long term implication of continuing poverty combined with growing inequality. It also tends to place the media, in the eyes of the marginal working class, in the camp that supports policies that have not benefited them, irrespective of the 'trickle down' benefits of de-racialisation and limited class transformation.

William Gumede (2005) and Adrian Hadland (2007) represent two recent attempts to generalise about the extent of media transformation in South Africa. Gumede has warned of the dangers of the media's quasi-elite transformation, in that important opinions are shut out of the public debate, as those who hold them lack the economic muscle to make politicians or the media take them seriously.

Hadland's writings are more theoretically grounded, and represent an attempt to understand growing problems in the media as systemic features of (or variations from) media system models (2007). Based on his modification of Hallin and Mancini's model with political economy perspectives that analyse the impact of power shifts on media systems, Hadland predicts a print media characterised by declining standards – fuelled by media commercialisation – and more government control, rather than evolving towards more independence and professionalism. Hadland's research strongly suggests that the South African print media is characterised by pluralism, where media groups present 'more of the same',⁸ but not necessarily diversity.⁹

Gumede and Hadland point to the dangers of assuming that the ‘glass half full’ nature of the South Africa’s media system is sustainable in the long term. Berger was correct in arguing that the media transformation of the late 1990s was to lay a basis for the media to play an important watchdog role in the future for all South Africans, irrespective of class. But what he did not foresee was that it was also to place significant constraints on the media to develop a common space for deliberative discourse: a constraint that risked destabilising the whole media system in later years.

Globalisation and media: the ANC’s 2002 media policy

This article now attempts to situate the ANC’s media policy in relation to these observations. The reconsolidation of the media in the late 1990s led to key ANC leaders expressing growing concern about how deep the transformation of the media actually was: Thabo Mbeki, Pallo Jordan, and Joel Netshitenzhe all raised concerns about the growing commercialisation of the media, and the ways in which this trend frustrated media transformation. From 2000 onwards, they began to turn towards globalisation theory to explain recent developments in the media.

These ideas found their way into a discussion document produced for the ANC’s 51st National Conference in Stellenbosch in 2002, entitled ‘Media in a democratic South Africa’ (ANC 2002). This paper focused on the state of communications in South Africa, rather than just the media, and attempted to develop strategies to advance transformation in relation to all areas of communication.

In this document, the ANC nailed its theoretical colours firmly to the mast by stating that political economy arguments can be used to explain the phenomenon of an expanding media without diversity. It cited the section of Murdock and Golding’s 1977 essay ‘Capitalism, communications and class relations’, which states that the ‘logic of cost’ drives the media towards privileging powerful groups, while marginalising voices that are ‘likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth and power’ (ANC 2002:4). It then applied this argument to the South African situation, and noted that most media are heavily dependent on advertising as a source of revenue, which has placed ‘direct limitations on the ability of media to expand and reach the majority of South Africans’. This leads to media skewing ‘their attention towards well-off South Africans and consequently distorts the democratic process and debate’ (ANC 2002:4).

The ANC concluded that, ‘There needs to be a re-evaluation of our

approach to the political economy of the media with the view to ensure balance in the reflection of the needs and interests of the South Africans citizens [sic] and the projection of their voices on all major national developments' (ANC 2002:5).¹⁰ The ANC also noted, however, that the crowding out of voices that lack economic muscle is not a peculiarly South African problem.

While there is much to recommend the ANC's use of critical political economy of the media theory here, it is significant that the ANC focused on economic determinants of the media, not political determinants (contrary to a basic tenet of political economy). This allowed them to draw attention away from their own involvement in creating the conditions that allowed media globalisation and consolidation to flourish, through their endorsement of GEAR.¹¹ Also, the ANC was able to paint the market as the primary threat to media freedom, and not the government or the ANC. Yet a broader reading of the discipline suggests that media-state and media-capital relations should be of equal concern to critical political economists, if the realities of authoritarian states, or states that are attempting to transform from authoritarian dispensations to democratic dispensations, are to be understood (see discussions in Kit-wai Ma 2000:27, Lee 2000:124-5, Mosco 1996:204).

The ANC also anticipated accusations of 'media bashing' by stating that its critique 'should not be confused with the criticism that will be levelled against the media from time to time because it is intrusive, embarrassing, irresponsible, disruptive, vulgar, brash and uninformed' (ANC 2002:7). This type of behaviour may be evident in sections of the South African media some of the time, and had led to a decline in public respect for the media internationally: but such behaviour was not the principal concern of the ANC in its media policy, which remained the democratic need to create an inclusive public sphere.

The ANC argued for the need to respond to these challenges by establishing a publicly-funded media model by the year 2012. This model was necessary 'in order for the public and community media to serve as vehicles to articulate the needs of the poor, rural people, women, labour and other marginalised constituencies'. Furthermore, this model '...should accept the limitations of the advertising and commercially driven media' (ANC 2002:5), implying that the commercial media should be left to flourish largely untouched, although they should be targeted for black empowerment interventions.

At this time the ANC recognised the dangers of a highly unequal media system developing, but its thinking appeared to be locked into the logic of ‘two economies’, where the first economy media should be left untouched, while the state should intervene to provide media to the second economy. This aspect of the media policy could be described as reformist in nature, as it involved an adaptation to the commercial media system, with its highly concentrated ownership patterns, rather than an attempt to restructure it. In taking this approach, the ANC risked creating islands of public service programming in a sea of commercialisation. As with other public services (McDonald and Pape 2002), media may receive a grossly insufficient public service top up, with commercial services then kicking in as the main fare.

Tellingly, the document did not even suggest the possibility of ownership limitations as a means of addressing print media concentration, in line with arguments made by some critical political economists that the public good is not served by uncontrolled free markets (Williams 2001, McChesney 2003). While limitations on newspaper concentration are rare, at least one country has implemented a ‘30 per cent rule’, where no media institution is allowed to own more than 30 per cent of total circulation, and there are growing calls for newspaper concentration rules.¹² In effect, the ANC watered down critical political economy praxis with the selective adoption of a package of media reforms that could be understood as the ANC’s attempt to balance countervailing political tendencies in the party.

In spite of the (rather self-serving) gaps in the ANC’s use of critical political economy of the media, and while there were concerns expressed about media coverage as a political party, its use of critical political economy was an attempt to understand how public space was compromised by media commercialisation, rather than how it was affected as a party. The ANC’s advocacy for a publicly-funded media system was an important step in attempts to establish a public sphere, but this advocacy was to be overshadowed by growing frustration with the media.

Intrusive, irresponsible and disruptive: the ANC’s 2007 policy conference

Between the 2002 and 2007 conferences, the ANC exhibited increasing hostility to its critics. Black editors were also accused of undermining the ANC, and the media were linked to a ‘neo-conservative/neo-liberal’ agenda that attempted to undermine the party (ANC 2005). This intolerance was mirrored within the ANC, where centralisation led to the closing up of spaces

for internal debate (Butler 2007:45). At that stage, there was, however, little evidence of mass discontent with the print media on the part of ANC members (Hofmeyr 2003:17).

On the surface of things, the ANC leadership's hostility to the very media that supported its policies, broadly speaking, seemed mystifying. But the ANC's 2005 comments pointed to a mismatch between how the media seemed to understand the ANC's policies, and its own self-understanding. In fact, the ANC argued that its embrace of the neo-liberal GEAR was objectively necessary to achieve longer term, sustainable, job-creating growth (ANC 2007). An appreciation of its self-understanding as anti-neoliberal is necessary to grasp why the ANC was not charmed by much of the mainstream media's embrace of its economic policies; rightly or wrongly, the party simply did not consider itself subjectively committed to neo-liberalism. This self-understanding allowed the ANC to portray the media as being to the right of the party.

The year 2006 also saw an intensified effort on the part of Mbeki's supporters, such as Ronald Suresh Roberts and Christine Qunta, to secure him a third term in office as ANC president. Their efforts included the development of a systematic public discourse that blamed media criticisms of the Mbeki government on media commercialisation, and located the print media in a colonial paradigm where commercial media values are part of a foreign value system. Potentially, this characterisation could lead to the simplistic and self-serving portrayal of all commercial media content as being inherently corrupted by the commercial nature of their funding base.

The ANC's 2007 policy, developed in the run-up to and during its conference in Polokwane, marked a significant departure from its approach in 2002, in that its concerns about how it as a party and its leaders were being portrayed began to overshadow its concerns about media access. In fact, there are clear signs of discontinuity between the two policies, implying that the ANC had not undertaken a coherent process of policy development between the two conferences. The ANC developed a discussion document for its April policy conference, to consider the policy positions it would take forward to its national conference. Entitled 'Transformation of the media', the document reflected on progress in transforming the media since the 2002 conference. Significantly, the publicly funded media model, as set out in the 2002 document, did not feature prominently in the 2007 documents, although there were references to elements of this model (such as the need for public funding for the SABC).

The document eschewed the earlier concern with analysing the mass media as one medium of communication amongst many; rather it concerned itself exclusively with the media, and adopted a more combative tone towards them. It is difficult not to read this shift unkindly, as an attempt by the ANC to hone in on and ‘deal with’ an increasingly problematic media. In fact, the ANC argued that the media refused to admit that they were an interested party in what the ANC terms ‘the battle of ideas’. As has been argued above, this argument is not without its merits, given that much of the media was sucked towards the political centre, but the ANC failed to acknowledge the media’s semi-autonomy within these constraints.

The ANC’s diagnosis of the problem in 2007 (and hence recommendations of solutions) differed from its 2002 policy. They argued that the media’s ability to reflect a diversity of views and interests in society was constrained by the still-untransformed nature of much of the media, whose current ownership and control structures were shaped under apartheid. This characterisation also does not take into account that aspects of media reconsolidation were a post-apartheid phenomenon. So the problem with the media was recast as one that was within the ANC’s sphere of control (namely unreconstructed apartheid forces), rather than lying beyond the sphere of control (namely globalisation). This shift in the ANC’s characterisation of the problem from its 2002 policy was significant, in that it created the space for the ANC to argue for state interventions in commercial media content as a corrective measure. Significantly, advocacy of state control of media content is not apparent in any major critical political economy arguments.

Tipping points in media-ANC relations: the road to Polokwane and beyond

Between the ANC’s policy conference and its December national conference, various events unfolded that altered fundamentally relations between the party and the media, and that strengthened the party’s resentment towards the media. In July, the Eastern Cape-based *Daily Dispatch* ran a series of exposés about baby deaths at Mount Frere hospital, alleging that the deaths were owing to official negligence, and were therefore largely avoidable.

But it was the *Sunday Times*, and its editor Mondli Makhanya, that provoked outright rage from the ANC. Shortly after the dismissal of the Deputy Minister of Health, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, the *Sunday Times* ran two reports on the Health Minister. The first story, entitled ‘Manto’s hospital booze binge’ (Maker and Power 2007), bears some analysis as it

marked the tipping point in the media's relations with the ANC. The story described how Tshabalala-Msimang abused her authority during a stay in a Cape Town Medi-Clinic. The newspaper also quoted sources refuting the official reasons given for her liver transplant three months earlier (namely that she suffered from auto-immune hepatitis), and alleging that she did not qualify as her liver was damaged by alcohol abuse. Most controversially, the newspaper relied on Tshabalala-Msimang's medical records, which had been mysteriously stolen from the Medi-Clinic, and which had subsequently found their way into the possession of the journalists.

The right to privacy is constitutionally protected, and the National Health Act forbids the disclosure of confidential medical information without express, informed consent. However, with respect to public figures, it could be argued that their claims on the right to privacy may be outweighed by overriding considerations of public interest. The reaction to the articles was fierce. The Department of Health ran advertisements on the *Sunday Times*' report and subsequent judgement, Director General Thami Mseleku accused the *Sunday Times* of violating Tshabalala-Msimang's right to privacy for commercial motives, rather than for public interest reasons: an argument that was echoed by the ANC (Mseleku 2007). These arguments demonstrate starkly how (mis)readings of critical political economy were used to shield the Health Minister from criticism, and delegitimise the *Sunday Times*.

In terms of whether commercial considerations were the underlying motive in the *Sunday Times*' reporting on the Health Minister, the story could be contrasted usefully with a case that unfolded in the United States at the same time. As many as 40 doctors and other employees at a medical centre were suspended for leaking confidential medical information to the media about actor George Clooney's stay there after he was involved in a motorcycle accident (Standora 2007). It is difficult to see what public interest was served by leaking information about his medical condition; perhaps there was one, but undoubtedly it would not be as compelling as the one in the *Sunday Times* case, whose public interest argument remained irrespective of the newspaper's commercial motives.¹³ The *Sunday Times* and *Dispatch* articles were good examples of Berger's argument that elite transformation in the print media benefited all South Africans (but in these cases, users of the public health system), although both exposés were cast in the self-limiting 'watchdog of government abuses of power' mould.

These run-ins with the media led to the ANC becoming more concerned about media content, leading them to a revival of a reliance on seeing the

media in terms of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky 1988:1-2). For instance, ANC spokesperson Smuts Ngonyama (Ngonyama 2007:11) quoted Chomsky and Herman debunking the 'myth' that the media are independent and report without fear or favour in the United States, and argued that this argument holds true in South Africa as well, as the media actively participate in an ideological struggle that is hostile to the ANC. Ngonyama's reference to Herman and Chomsky's work – considered by many in the discipline to be a more deterministic example of critical political economy – paved the way for media owners to be blamed for attacks on the ANC.

Given the ANC's location of the ideological problem, it was hardly surprising that these critiques led to an attempted takeover bid of the *Sunday Times*' and *Daily Dispatch*'s owners, Avusa Communications (previously Johnnic Communications). In November 2007, a group with close links to the Presidency (Wessels 2007), Koni Media Holdings, made a bid for the newspaper group at higher than market value: a bid that was eventually turned down amid fears of a politically-inspired takeover to neutralise the Avusa titles (Piliso and Naidu 2007). Following this bid, Mazwai (2007) expressed consternation at the 'hysteria' surrounding the sale: a sentiment shared by senior ANC members, although the party denied any involvement in the bid. These commentators made the argument that Koni's pitch demonstrated much-needed progress in diversifying the ownership trends in media assets in South Africa, thereby equating diversification with black ownership. In fact, the replacement of Avusa's ownership complex share structure with a single owner would have resulted in a significant reduction in the diversity of ownership; but the ANC's shift in focus to media owners as enemies of the ANC had given legitimacy to such hostile takeover bids.

The argument that the commercial media were intent on violating rights represented a far more dangerous shift, though, as it sought to make a constitutional argument for the limitation of media freedom. The argument was also cast in racial terms, with the *Sunday Times* being labelled a 'white supremacist paper'¹⁴ intent on violating the rights of democratically-elected ANC leaders for commercial gain. Chief Executive Officer of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, Dali Mpofu (2007), made similar arguments to the South African National Editor's Forum (SANEF), accusing SANEF members of justifying a violation of the Health Minister's right to privacy – a basic tenet of African culture – using the 'foreign, frigid and feelingless freedom [of expression]' as justification for the pursuance of profit. As

Mangcu has observed (2007:136), the sort of race essentialism exhibited by Mpfu became the 'ready weapon of self-defence' under Mbeki's administration, and to portray freedom of expression as foreign, with dignity and privacy of leadership as an inherently African or black value, is an example of such essentialism.

The delegitimisation of freedom of expression continued in the ANC, and built on sentiments expressed at the ANC policy conference that were similar to Mpfu's. While the ANC denied that they intended to review the system of self-regulation in the buildup to the party's 52nd conference at Polokwane (Berger 2007), the subsequent events at Polokwane were not encouraging, and signalled an emptying out of some of the democratic content of the ANC's media policy. The Polokwane congress – which deposed Thabo Mbeki in favour of Jacob Zuma as the ANC's leader – adopted a resolution to investigate the 'necessity or otherwise' of the Media Appeals Tribunal. The resolution dismissed the existing system of self-regulation through an independent media ombudsman as 'not adequate to sufficiently protect the rights of the individual citizens, communities and society as a whole'. Significantly, it also stated that 'freedom of expression shall not be elevated above other equally important rights such as the right to privacy and *more important* rights and values such as human dignity' [emphasis added] (ANC 2007:46).

This resolution strongly implied that the ANC was no longer concerned with balancing rights, but with elevating dignity above freedom of expression. It is difficult not to read this concern as a reaction to the media's reporting on the ANC's new president, Jacob Zuma, who instituted a R64-million claim against the media for damages for injury to his dignity and reputation in the run-up to Polokwane (De Lange 2007:3). The resolution on the Media Tribunal reflected a shift in emphasis in the ANC's media policy towards those who are already represented (more specifically ANC leaders); as a result, the debate raised by the policy shifted away from one of facilitation of access to media to one of control of media. The resolution also directly contradicted the ANC's 1992 Draft Media Charter, which argued against the setting up of bodies to control what the public could see, hear or read (ANC 1992).

The resolution was unfortunate for another reason, in that it dismissed as ineffective an institution that had only just begun to function after having been relaunched in October 2007. The new council is a co-regulatory structure between the media and representatives of the public, and consists

of a Press Ombudsman and an Appeals Tribunal.¹⁵ Presumably the ANC considered the council to be toothless, as complainants are expected to forfeit their right to go to court for the institution to consider their complaint. In addition, the council does not levy fines, but rather expects the media to self-correct by publishing admissions of their own mistakes. Rather than proposing a statutory body, whose establishment would effectively collapse the system of co-regulation, the ANC could have tapped into important international debates about ways to improve media accountability. These debates have attempted to move beyond the notion of media councils being mere passive complaints receiving bodies, as such councils often do little to address structural problems in the media (Bertrand 2006).

Another sign of the ANC's frustration at its inability to intervene in the print media was the revival of the idea of establishing its own newspaper, to be run on a commercial basis. This emphasis on its commercial basis is telling, as it could lead to government advertising being sucked away from private commercial media, which may well threaten the commercial viability of these newspapers (which perhaps is the intention, given the government's threat of withdrawing advertising from the *Sunday Times* after its reports on the Health Minister). But the commercial emphasis may well lead to reporting and analysis being sucked towards the political centre within the ANC, reproducing on a smaller scale the very upward tilt the ANC has criticised the commercial print media for. The ANC could have made a convincing argument for the need for re-establishing advocacy media in South Africa, in an attempt to promote different models of journalism other than the professional model. But instead it reduced its focus to its own media, and in the process missed an opportunity to promote diversification of the media.

What does the future hold for the print media, post-Polokwane? In spite of the Polokwane resolution, there are signs already that the new leadership of the ANC lacks the will to see its Tribunal resolution through.¹⁶ Also, in February 2008, Zuma decided to abandon those aspects of his court case relating to his right to reputation, but is continuing to sue the media for his right to dignity. Certainly the media have done themselves no favours in reporting on Zuma, having misquoted Hilary Squires's judgment as saying that there was a 'generally corrupt relationship' between Zuma and Shaik. The fact that the SABC and much of the print media threw their lot in with Mbeki's economic policies, while having been so critical of Zuma, has not endeared the media to Zuma's supporters. As Harber has noted, much of the media failed to predict his victory at Polokwane largely because of their

failure to report on the rising sentiment against Mbeki at branch level (Harber 2007): a point made by Zuma as well after Polokwane (ANC 2008b).

Zuma rose to power in spite of, not because of, much media coverage.¹⁷ His rise is an indication of how audiences read media against the grain, in oppositional ways, or even simply ignore the media entirely. The chilling possibility the media need to entertain is that the growing antipathy to the media is not just held by the elites in the party, who may have a vested self-interest in dropping attempts to control media content when it is convenient for them. By now, this antipathy may well have a mass base, driven by resentment of the fact that much of the media backed the wrong horse in the succession battle. The cartoonist Zapiro has become a lightning rod for this antipathy in recent times, with ANC leaders as well as Zuma supporters reacting with fury to a cartoon in the *Sunday Times* of September 7, 2008, depicting the pending rape of the figure of justice by Zuma (Swart 2009). Zuma has instituted defamation proceedings against Zapiro. In view of these lacunae, the media need to consider the possibility that attempts to curtail their freedom may attract popular support, which will make these threats much more enduring.

Conclusion: revisiting determination in media theory

According to Ari Sitas, there are indications that the negotiated consensus of the early 1990s is in the process of collapse; as he has observed, ‘...we are definitely seeing something getting unhinged at the moment, and it does not even have a descriptive name because it lacks theorisation’ (Sitas 2007:43). The fact that ANC is now attempting to limit the very media freedom it fought so hard to attain is but one of a variety of morbid symptoms that all is not well in the media system.

The post-apartheid media consensus was premised on the assumption that transformation would be shaped by the opportunities and constraints offered by liberalisation. This form of transformation has led to a media system characterised by highly uneven development, where consumer choice has exploded for South Africans who participate in the country's mainstream economy. For them, media transformation has been a consumer success. Some of the most cutting-edge journalism has taken place in the most unregulated, concentrated tier of media, namely the commercial print media. But the growing layer of underemployed and unemployed still remain grossly underserved by media. For them, it may be easy to identify with the ANC adaptation of Herman and Chomsky's arguments that the media is not

a space of freedom, but rather a mechanism of social control.

From its inception, the party's policy was meant to be transformative in nature; yet, as has been argued here, the ANC has not really developed a truly transformative vision for the media, especially on the question of media diversity, and its most recent policy pronouncements exhibit a worrying shift to the right. In 1991, the ANC stated in its Draft Media Charter that 'all the people shall have the right to freely [sic] publish, broadcast and otherwise disseminate information and opinion, and shall have the right of free access to information and opinion' (ANC 1991:2). Its Charter spelt out measures to be followed to achieve this right. Since then there has been what could be described as a corporatisation of the ANC's media policy. The emphasis has shifted in the policy from the unrepresented or the underrepresented to the represented, principally the representation of ANC leaders.¹⁸

So, 15 years later, the ANC has become more preoccupied with controlling media content rather than with crafting measures to promote diversity. This preoccupation is fed by a growing chorus of voices in and around the ANC that equates freedom of expression with the defence of the right of commercial media to make profit at the expense of basic human rights, and in the service of a neo-liberal agenda. Lacking the breadth of vision to craft a policy that extends rather than curtails freedom in its deepest and most meaningful sense, the ANC lurches between the two positions. It betrays a poverty of strategy in dealing with the very problems it has raised: a poverty that becomes more pronounced as its policy develops.

What is particularly revealing is how the ANC has used critical political economy arguments in elaborating on its media policy. The ANC, especially in its later media policy, fails to draw on revisions of the more deterministic versions of the theory, which could help it to recognise why, in spite of its highly concentrated and commercialised nature, the print media has proved to be the locus of critical and independent reporting. Some commercial media have also made serious mistakes, but it is doubtful whether content controls are the cure for ethical lapses. The party and its supporting choir fail to appreciate how both roles could be possible at the same time, and therefore why the defence of the print media's freedom cannot be construed simply as an argument for the freedom to make profit. In South Africa's highly concentrated media context, print media content is both semi-autonomous and determined. A proper reading of critical political economy theory should enable an appreciation of both realities; to this extent, the party's policy

lacks complexity.

The question of how the academy and media freedom activists understand what ails the media is important, as it will shape their approach to the ANC's media policy. If the ailment comes from an attempt by the ANC to defend its leaders from attack, then little more than a classic liberal defence of media freedom is needed (that is, the defence of the freedom of the media to practice surveillance of political power). But if there is more at stake, in the form of a justified resentment against a media that is seen as being part of the distributional spoils that have been denied many people, then the media have a different order of (and more serious) problem on their hands.

Berger has failed to recognise that media systems characterised by uneven and combined development – or what he refers to as the 'half full glass' – cannot remain as they are for long. They are inherently unstable, and are ultimately unsustainable. This instability may precipitate progressive claims by those who feel that they have not benefited from media transformation, for greater media access, or conservative claims for greater state control of the media. There are elements of both in the ANC's media policy. It could be argued that the benefits of media transformation – although within the constraints of commercial principles – are being felt, and that those who have lost out should remain patient; this argument fails to acknowledge that the pot of frustration is already boiling over, whether media theorists like it or not. Regressive ethnic mobilisation is on the prowl in South Africa; this article is being written at a time when xenophobic attacks are gripping the country. The potential for a social explosion, including against the media, must not be underestimated. The direction the South African media take will be heavily influenced by the direction the ANC takes in its media policy, which is why it is important for media freedom theorists and activists to re-engage with the ANC's media policy.

In order to reclaim political economy from misappropriation of its conceptual apparatus, it is necessary to take up Mosco's challenge of disciplinary renewal (including epistemological renewal). In South Africa, this means drawing on local advances in political economy theory, while acknowledging the state of the discipline internationally. The media need to be understood in the context of regional development and underdevelopment, where the conditions for development in media-rich markets are the other side of the coin of conditions of underdevelopment; developments in the lower half of the market are not simply lagging behind developments in the upper half of the market. The fate of the media system as a whole is tied to

the state of development of its different enclaves. Without theoretical renewal, it will be very difficult to grasp the simple fact that the situation cannot continue for long, and the most appropriate policy interventions will not be forthcoming.

Most importantly, the academy needs to re-engage with society, and reinstate political economy's emphasis on praxis. Arguably, the academy's (theoretically contestable) retreat from political economy arguments has left the field wide open to appropriation by political organisations such as the ANC, which has led to its being used in some ways and abused in others. It has meant that the ANC has assumed the mantle of being *the* force for progressive change in the media. The academic retreat from political economy arguments makes it difficult to critique the ANC's misappropriation of political economy arguments, and to render such appropriation impossible. This is a sign of weakness in political economy scholarship, and an indication that the progressive academy has failed to maintain its relevance.

To eschew determination in favour of mutual constitution or even field theory, prevents a proper understanding of the South African media system as a totality. The political economy of South Africa's transformation *has* determined the political economy of the media – in the process setting limits, exerting pressures and closing off options for media transformation – but media theorists will not be willing to see this if they continue to treat determination as a political swear word. Unless the deficits of post-apartheid media transformation are recognised, and corrective action is taken, then those who have been alienated from its benefits may well form the shock troops of attempts to control the media. The media may then pay the price of society's exclusionary practices.

The academy needs a media theory that is orientated towards social change to be able to make the argument that significant aspects of the ANC's media policy are no longer about social change. If it is to rise to this challenge, then the academy needs to rebuild the confidence to generalise.

Notes

1. According to Charles Sackrey and Geoffrey Schneider, 'political economy' is a much broader field of study than mainstream economics, in that it is concerned with the relationships of the economic system and its institutions to the rest of society. By attempting to be scientific, mainstream economists elevate economics above politics, thereby preventing a true understanding of how economic systems work. Such economists are especially hostile to studies of social class as a legitimate category of study (Sackrey and Schneider 2000:1-3).

2. Needless to say, there are different definitions of critical political economy of the media. One of its foremost theorists, Vincent Mosco, has argued that the perspective adopts a critical epistemology orientated to social change. He has distinguished between what he terms a 'narrow' definition of critical political economy – involving the study of power relations that 'mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of ... communications resources' – and a more 'general and ambitious definition', involving 'the study of control and survival in social life'. Mosco proffered these two definitions in response to controversies about the theory, which has been accused of determinism and an obsession with structural determinants shaping communication (1997:12-13). Fenton has defined critical political economy as a theory that is concerned with structural inequalities of production of media (especially economic inequalities), and the consequences for representation and consumption of media (Fenton 2007:7). Fenton's definition differs somewhat from Mosco's in that it emphasises the economic as a structural determinant, rather than the political. Murdock and Golding have observed that critical political economy is concerned with the general interplay between economic organisation, and political, social and cultural life. This theory focuses heavily on the organisation of property and production, and the often-unequal social relations that structure 'the making and taking of meaning' in media institutions (Murdock and Golding 2005).
3. Cultural studies embraces social theory, cultural analysis and critique, and is concerned with a critique of culture and society, and with the politics of representation. Some cultural studies critiques have focused on studies of ideology, domination and resistance and the politics of culture, and showed how culture provided tools for domination and the resistance to domination. In media studies, some cultural studies theorists have tended to focus on the effects of media texts, and the way in which readers make sense of media. In this regard, readers tend not to be seen as passive consumers of texts whose content is determined by media owners or the social class they represent, but are active producers of meaning who have the agency to resist attempts to control them (Fenton 2007:16-17).
4. As Seekings and Natrass have observed, 'class appears to be in danger of falling off the map of South African studies' (Seekings and Natrass 2005:28-29).
5. Combined and uneven development describes the development of productive forces in nations within a world market dominated by imperialism. According to the *Dictionary of Marxists*, '...*The law of uneven development* states that once a world market has engulfed all countries in the world and comes under the domination of finance capital, the road of capitalist development, followed in the past by the old capitalist powers, is *blocked* for newcomers. The wealth and power of the great powers is maintained only by the exploitation and impoverishment of the colonies. In their search for sources of cheap labour and

raw materials, the imperialist powers distort and stunt the development of culture in the colonies. These colonies do not simply “lag behind”, but rather their development is the “other side of the coin” of the advanced conditions enjoyed in the great powers. *The law of combined development* flows directly from that of uneven development: while blocking their normal development, the imperialist powers introduce into the dominated countries the most advanced techniques and relations of production, side by side with the most primitive’ (Marxist internet archive 2008).

6. In 2004, 63.6 per cent of the population fell into LSM 5 and below, in 2005, 61.2 per cent, and in 2006, 59.3 per cent. LSM 1 has experienced the biggest drop (from 9.1 percent in 2004, to 6.1 per cent in 2006, and 2 and 3 have also declined, but less dramatically. LSM 4 and above have all increased (SAARF 2007). According to SAARF’s statistics for the first quarter of 2008, LSM 1 experienced a further drop to 3.5 per cent, and LSM 2 and 3 declined further as well. LSM 5 and above all grew. By this stage, a mere 51.6 per cent of the population fell into LSM 5 and below: a drop of 12 per cent since 2004 (SAARF 2009:46).
7. This term is used by Steenveld in her seminar paper on the ANC’s media policy (Steenveld 2007:5).
8. The existence of a pluralism of media outlets does not automatically translate into a diversity of content. This could be attributed partly to what has become known as the ‘hotelling’ effect, where competitors tend to imitate one another’s products in a context where there is non-price competition between advertiser-funded media (Atkinson 1999:2-3).
9. Media diversity includes diversity on all levels of media production and consumption. It should achieve a diversity of opinions, languages, styles and formats and a diversity of voices, including the voices of those who are generally marginalised by commercial media, such as workers, the unemployed, women, and the aged.
10. Free spaces in communication have been traditionally understood as the alternative press, public service and public access channels, and the protection of these spaces, as an information commons free from commercial influences, has become a central concern of critical political economists (Mosco 1997:170).
11. It is hardly surprising that the ANC turned to globalisation theory to explain the deficits in the media system, as it had exhibited a tendency to argue that it was a hostage to global forces, and therefore its scope for instituting politically progressive measures was constrained. Paul Hirst and Graham Thompson have suggested that the inevitability of economic globalisation can be overlaid by governments implementing politically unpopular measures, as it gives them the basis to make the contestable argument that globalisation is an unassailable reality that countries merely have to accept (Hirst and Thompson 1996).
12. In France, newspaper companies are not allowed to acquire a new newspaper

if the acquisition boosts their total daily circulation over 30 per cent, and non EU-investment is limited to 20 per cent share of a daily newspaper (McEwen 2007).

13. The medical records were used to show that she used alcohol simultaneously with sleeping medication on several occasions: a potentially extremely damaging combination. It is difficult to see how else the paper could have reported on the excessive use of alcohol and sleeping pills other than referring to medical records. Also, the fact that this information was contained in her medical records must have meant that her repeated, simultaneous intake of alcohol and sleeping medication was medically significant; it was not a mere behavioural quirk. This went to her sense of judgement as an individual and particularly a medical person, and her conduct while under medical treatment. It also went to the argument of whether she could be considered a priority recipient for a liver transplant. Her conduct also called into question whether she was the best person to drive a Ministry committed to the eradication of alcoholism, and to convey the message about the dangers of alcoholism. All of these factors contributed to the public interest nature of the article.
14. Accessed from <http://www.thetimes.co.za/PrintArticle.aspx?ID=543755> on 20/03/2008.
15. The Council's constitution provides for the appointment of eight members of the public and eight press positions. Public representation is meant to be a safeguard against the Council representing the interests purely of the press.
16. New ANC spokesperson Jessie Duarte has been quoted as saying that the ANC was only 'making a proposal', and that it should be subjected to public debate (SAPA 2008).
17. According to Mediatenor (Mediatenor 2008), after Mbeki, Zuma is the most reported-on person in South Africa. Before Polokwane, the media's focus on Zuma was driven mainly by negative events, such as corruption issues and relationships with controversial figures. In fact Mediatenor described him as 'the generally more criticised candidate for the ANC presidency' (Mediatenor 2008:13). However, his successful bid for the ANC presidency gave him more positive coverage.
18. For instance, Jessie Duarte has complained about the media coverage of the ANC's new National Executive Committee, elected by the Polokwane conference, stating that the media's emphasis has been on the number of NEC members with criminal records (Isaacson 2008:9). Duarte has also criticised the office of the Press Ombudsman as 'toothless' (Isaacson 2008:9).

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