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**Media Transformation and New Practices of Citizenship:  
The example of environmental activism in post-apartheid Durban**

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## **Media Transformation and New Practices of Citizenship:**

### **The example of environmental activism in post-apartheid Durban**

#### **Debating Media Transformation**

South African media and telecommunications have been fundamentally restructured in the last decade. Corporate unbundling and black economic empowerment have transformed the ownership of broadcasting, print media, publishing, and telecommunications; new radio and television services have been set-up; the SABC has been restructured as an independent public service broadcaster, and a new independent regulatory authority for broadcasting and telecommunications has been established. However, a once vibrant alternative press, closely associated with the mass mobilisation against apartheid of the 1980s and 1990s, has suffered severe decline. New technologies, such as satellite television, the Internet, mobile telephony, and digital media have all rapidly established a foothold in South African communications markets. All of these processes have gone hand in hand with a *re-scaling* of South African media economies and media cultures. Inward foreign investment in South African media and communications industries has been matched by a ‘continental drift’ of South African capital into African media and communications markets (Barnett 1999b, Tomaselli and Dunn 2001).

There is very little agreement amongst politicians, academics, policy makers, or commentators about the meaning of all of this change. The fraught relationship between the ANC in government, under both Mandela and Mbeki, and the press and broadcast media exemplifies the clash of different conceptions of media transformation. The furore surrounding the Human Rights Commission’s investigation of racism in the media in 1999-2000 illustrates the incommensurability between different understandings of the proper role of media in a post-apartheid democracy (Berger 2001). In large part, these disagreements over the meaning of media transformation are shaped by different

understandings of the responsibility of the mainstream print and broadcast media during the apartheid period. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings into the media during 1998 revealed starkly opposed images of the role of the media as either complicit handmaiden of the apartheid state, or worthy defender of liberal values squeezed between reaction and revolution (Krabill 2002). In these public debates, the extent to which the post-apartheid media is considered adequately transformed depends on whether the role of media is seen in terms of sustaining the legitimacy of a still fragile democracy, or in terms of critically scrutinising the activities of the state (and business) to an extent previously made impossible by authoritarian restrictions.

Academic debates about media transformation since 1994 have tended to focus upon empirically quantifiable criteria of change, such as patterns of ownership, or changes in the degree of 'representivity' in the demographic profiles of the workforce of news organisations (Goga 2001). The problem with both these forms of analysis is that, on their own, they tend to abstract particular elements of transformation from broader contexts. In turn, this abstracted form of analysis allows dramatically different interpretations of the same empirical developments. So, for example, the changes to media ownership, regulation, and staffing over the last decade can be read as marking unprecedented progress (Berger 1999), or just as easily interpreted as merely cosmetic changes that indicate a superficial racial substitution but mask continuing class domination (Tomaselli 1997, Boloka and Krabill 2000).

All of these debates, amongst academics and policy-makers alike, have tended to be *media-centric* in their analysis of the relationships between media, social change, and democratisation. They tend to assume that establishing the proper structure of ownership, or regulation, or staffing, is the key to establishing a democratic media system. In order to move beyond the impasse of all or nothing forms of evaluation of media transformation, I want to pick up on Guy Berger's suggestion that the guiding

question for assessing media transformation should focus on the implications of restructuring for “the role of the media in the social distribution of power in post-apartheid South Africa” (Berger 2000, 96). This question directs attention to the relationships between media, changing patterns of mobilisation, political discourse, and new forms of political conflict and political action characteristic of post-apartheid South Africa. The objective of this paper is therefore to use the example of South African media reform to address some broader issues concerning the conceptualisation of media and democratisation. In particular, the paper argues that the assessment of media change needs to be placed in the broader context of an analysis of political change since the end of apartheid. In turn, by placing the assessment of media reform in this wider context, the paper also explores normative questions concerning the meaning and nature of democratisation more broadly.

The relationship between media restructuring and patterns of political mobilisation has two related dimensions. Firstly, there is a set of questions concerning the ways in which media restructuring has itself been shaped by patterns of political organisation and interest group representation.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, there is the question of whether media restructuring has provided new opportunities for innovative forms of political action by various social actors. It is this second theme I want to address in the rest of this paper. It inevitably connects up to one of the most contentious of issues in public policy and academic debates about post-apartheid South Africa, namely the health and prospects of ‘civil society’. In one standard narrative, civil society has suffered a significant shrinkage from the high levels of mobilisation in the 1980s and early 1990s, due to a combination of explicit demobilisation by the ANC, the redirection of international donor funding, and the normalisation of politics with the establishment of a representative liberal democratic system (Seekings 1996). However, research suggests that the picture of public disengagement from politics is overstated (Klandermans *et al*

2001). In fact, one can hypothesise that the transition to formal democracy has involved a re-ordering of political opportunity structures. New policy areas have been opened up to extensive consultation; the introduction of a new Constitution opens up possibilities for a politics of competing rights-claims in both public discourse and through the courts; and the discourse of ‘delivery’ and ‘transformation’, combined with the establishment of new tiers of government at provincial and metropolitan levels, implies new opportunities for the scrutiny and holding to account of politicians and state agencies. In short, while certain forms of political mobilisation might be expected to be on the wane, one should also expect to see the emergence of new forms of mobilisation associated with the new structures and discourses of the post-apartheid political landscape, characterised perhaps by new forms of protest and campaigning, and new forms of identification within and between historically divided social groups.<sup>2</sup>

One of the ways in which political opportunity structures in South Africa might have been significantly reordered is the opening up to a broader range of actors of opportunities to organise, mobilise, and campaign through spatially distanced media and communications networks. In a democracy, access to media coverage is in principle a crucial means of bringing pressure to bear on powerful actors, obliging them to act in accord with publicly accepted norms rather than from narrow private interest. The public exposure of powerful institutions can serve as “an important means of breaking the cycle by which social and economic inequality reinforces political inequality” (Young 2000, 176). It is not necessary to idealise the democratic potential of media in order to acknowledge the possibility that media attention can be mobilised to act upon the conduct of powerful political and economic actors, especially in a context such as post-apartheid South Africa, where both public and private organisations have publicly committed to the objectives of constitutional government and to discourses of ‘delivery’ and ‘transformation’. However, the practical realisation of this potential depends not

simply on structures of media organisation, ownership, and use, but on the existence of a plurality of modes of public association in civil society. Amartya Sen's formulation of the relationship between democratic rights and citizenship practice might therefore be usefully applied to the analysis and evaluation of post-apartheid media transformation: "Democracy has to be seen as creating a set of opportunities, and the use of these opportunities calls for an analysis of a different kind, dealing with the *practice* of democratic and political rights" (Sen 1999, 155). This concern with the ways in which democracy is practised implies that the main focus for the analysis of media transformation needs to be upon both the *relations* within media organisations and the *relations* between media and other collective actors. It directs us towards two related questions: What sorts of new opportunities for media-oriented political action has the evolution of post-apartheid media systems opened up? And how have these potential opportunities been realised in practice by movements in civil society? These are the twin questions I want to explore in the rest of this paper.

### **Media, Movements and the Framing of Contention**

Conventional 'political economy of the media' approaches tend to deduce the health of media publics directly from observed patterns of ownership and control. On the other hand, normative theories of journalism are also conceptually limited as a guide to analysing the dynamics of media transformation. A dominant strand of journalism-studies rests on the assumption that journalists are the key actors in selecting who has access to the airwaves and front pages. The idea that journalists act as *gatekeepers* is an intuitively attractive theory, since it seems to identify an important locus of power. Gate-keeping theories of media power reduce the organisational complexity of media organisations to highly idealised model where journalists exercise the main agency in deciding what becomes news (cf. Gallagher 1982). The guiding assumption of the

gatekeeping model is that ‘news’ is just out there in the world, waiting to be filtered by journalists. The production of news is understood in positivist terms, assuming that the world is made up of a bundle of naturally existing newsworthy events just waiting to be reported, or not. A more complex picture of the production of news would focus upon two related sets of factors. Firstly, it requires a focus on the variety of actors involved in producing news, and in particular an acknowledgement of the high degree of dependence of journalists on information and knowledge produced by public relations companies, corporations, government ministers, social movements, NGO’s, and so on (Schlesinger 1990). Secondly, it requires an appreciation of the self-consciously strategic production of newsworthy ‘events’ by these same range of actors. News is constructed out of the complex mediation of knowledge, meanings, and performances produced and distributed by a variety of different actors with different interests.

Following work in political sociology and social movement theory, social movements are here understood as just one set of ‘signifying agents’ “that along with the media, governments and others engage in the struggle over how issues will be framed and understood by different groups” (Halcli 2000, 472; see also Klandermans and Goslinga (1996). Following Gamson (2001), there are three criteria that can be used to assess the contribution of media organisations in encouraging active democratic participation. Firstly, does news coverage routinely present *images of protes*? Secondly, are citizens presented as *agents* in such coverage, and is protest seen as legitimate or illegitimate? Thirdly, does news coverage connect up everyday *experiences* to *public policy discourses*? Accordingly, the research upon which this paper draws investigated the framing of urban and environmental issues in Durban during the post-1994 period.<sup>3</sup> While these questions are useful ways of approaching the analysis of the framing of protest, there are two revisions I want to make in adopting this analytical scheme. Firstly, Gamson’s mode of analysis remains at the level of media content, and presumes a fairly simple causal



relationship between positive news coverage and the triggering of citizen action. I want to get at the question of *how* media frames become stabilised, by moving behind the representations of protest and investigating the institutional dynamics of news production. Secondly, the simple assumption that positive media coverage triggers citizen mobilisation might not be appropriate in the South African context. Western-based models of the cultural and political significance of mass media, with their focus upon media-induced mass mobilisation or on identity-formation processes, presume social formations with very high ‘densities’ of mass media. This is an assumption that does not translate to the South African context (Berger 2002). As a form of political communication, print and electronic mass media are primarily important in targeting specific social groups and key political institutions (Jacobs (1999)). It follows that media-oriented activism needs to be thought of not so much in terms of a simple media-to-citizen circuit of communication, but rather as a means of attracting media attention as a means by which various collective actors attempt to act on each other’s activities.

Even if the potential of media coverage as a medium of democratic engagement and opposition is acknowledged in principle, it remains the case that the ability of movements to secure media attention is severely constrained. Following Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), media/movement interactions can be understood by assessing the ratio of the *value* to *need* in the interactions between these two sets of actors. Value refers to how much the other party needs the resources one holds; need refers to how much one needs the resources the other party holds. Normally speaking, this ratio might be expected to favour media over movements, since the latter need the resources of media (access to media publics) much more than the media need movements as sources. It is my suggestion, however that, in the specific conditions of political transformation in South Africa, the ratio of value to need might have shifted in a more favourable direction for movements, thereby increasing the potential value of movements to media

organisations at the same time as new political opportunities mean that movements' need for media coverage has been heightened.

The enhanced value of movements to news media organisations in the post-apartheid context needs is related to the dynamics of media restructuring. Media restructuring in South Africa over the last decade has seen a thoroughgoing commercialisation of operating procedures. In the newspaper sector in particular, the depoliticisation of ownership and control has meant that the pressures to operate on strictly commercial grounds have been heightened at the same time as readerships are declining amidst increased competition from 'new' media, including television, radio, and the Internet. The stagnation or decline in readerships squeezes advertising revenues, and has led to an imperative to establish new readerships by attempting to construct 'cross-community' audiences. This new marketing strategy has coincided with and further encouraged a shift in the norms of news journalism, encouraging the adoption of 'people-centred' journalism and 'storytelling' modes of address, all in an effort to both maintain existing readerships and to bridge divisions between historically segmented readerships.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of South Africa's media history, this commercialisation of news-making has had the unintended effect of broadening and democratising definitions of newsworthiness, not least by opening up new opportunities for certain sorts of political action to attract significant media coverage. Furthermore, if as noted above, news-production is shaped by a broad politics of knowledge, then this politics of knowledge has been fundamentally transformed by initiatives for open government, the restructuring of government communications, and changes to censorship laws. Therefore, the key relationship I want to focus upon is the extent to which source-strategies have altered in the course of democratic transition, and whether this might be in part related to the dynamics of media commercialisation. New actors (ordinary people,

community organisations, NGO's) have gained in credibility as valued and legitimate news sources. New technologies, such as the routinisation of the e-mailed press release, have changed the speed, frequency, and range of distribution that political actors can attain in accessing news organisations. And these same new technologies have enabled new forms of communication between activists at an international scale that have significantly altered the strategies adopted locally.

## **Framing Air Pollution in Durban and Beyond**

### ***i). Browning the Environment***

I want to develop some of these ideas through a discussion of the emergence of environmental activism amongst the communities of South Durban during the 1990s. From the 1950s, the area was the site of simultaneous industrial development and forced relocation of African, Indian, and Coloured communities under the Group Areas Act. The residential areas of South Durban suffer very high levels of industrial air, ground, and water pollution, not least because of their contiguity to two oil refineries and myriad petro-chemical related industries. Until very recently, environmentalism in Southern Africa has been associated with the historical legacy of a colonialist discourse of conservation that justified land appropriation in the name of wise stewardship. Environmental politics in the urban-industrial region of Durban-Pietermaritzburg has been the basis for the emergence of a national network of environmental activism that has increasingly influenced the agenda of national environmental policy. One key contribution of this network of environmental activism has been the discursive re-framing of 'the environment' during the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The first significant environmentalist political organisation in South Africa, *Earthlife Africa*, was formed in the late 80s, and out of it has emerged the Pietermaritzburg-based Environmental Justice Network Forum (EJNF). One of the most important contributions of these environmental NGO's in the

last decade has been the redefinition of the environment, not least through the appropriation of a largely US-sourced, highly flexible discourse of *environmental justice* and *environmental racism*.<sup>6</sup> Amongst both environmental activists and journalists there is widespread agreement that the environment has been effectively redefined from a ‘green’ issue to a ‘brown’ issue in the 1990s. The crucial turning point in this re-framing process was the case of the Thor Chemicals plant near Pietermaritzburg, which since 1986 had been importing radioactive mercury waste into South Africa. The Thor case was the occasion for a successful media campaign, led by *Earthlife Africa*, aimed at re-defining the politics of the environment in relation to the impact of unchecked, unregulated industrial and urban development on poor communities. The ‘browning’ of the environment thus has a double resonance. It implies a shift from “save the rhino” conservationism to a people-oriented focus on environmental issues understood in terms of pollution, sanitation, health, and working and living conditions. And in turn, this indicates a re-definition of the privileged subjects of environmental discourse away from a traditionally white audience towards the concerns of the poorest, non-white communities of urban and peri-urban areas for sustainable environmental development.

The re-framing of news discourse on the environment in the early 1990s coincided with the start of an almost exponential increase in news stories about environmental issues. There is widespread acknowledgement that this increase in coverage was facilitated by the emergence of community-based organisations and NGO’s able to provide journalists with information about industrial leaks, health impacts, illegal dumping, and so on. The politics of the environment in South Durban turns around a fundamental clash of discourses. On the one hand, there is a forty-year history of local knowledge of health problems, leaks, school evacuations. On the other hand, there is the tradition of state and corporate secrecy combined with the deployment of scientific expertise to de-legitimise these claims by industry. In this context, environmental activists

have explicitly pursued a strategy of gaining media attention for their concerns. This involves a two-fold strategy revolving around the politics of secrecy and disclosure in South Durban. Activists have aimed to get local industries to inform local communities of potential health risks and of hazardous emissions and leaks when they occur, rather than maintain a culture of denial; and they have also been concerned that the future development of the South Durban area, which is a key locus of national economic growth strategy, should not be stitched-up behind closed doors by industry and government, but opened up to participation, consultation and scrutiny from local communities. In the words of one of the environmental activists interviewed during my research, media coverage is crucial because they are involved in the “politics of shame”.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of environmental activism in South Durban indicates that structural and organisational shifts in media sectors have opened up new opportunities for locally embedded social movements to mobilise media attention as a means of applying pressure on local, provincial, and national political and policy elites.

### *ii). Performing Legitimacy, Gaining Standing*

For activists in South Durban, the attraction of a media-oriented strategy of campaigning against local environmental degradation derives from a combination of media attention being a relatively ‘low cost’ resource, and that post-1994 media restructuring has opened up new potential opportunities for gaining and maintaining such media attention.<sup>8</sup> If the *need* of movements for media coverage is clear-cut in this case, then this leaves us with the question of the changing *value* of movements to mainstream news media. My argument is that, in the context of a general political realignment in the post-apartheid period, the organisational and economic restructuring of print and broadcast media has meant that the value of certain sorts of community-based social movements to news organisations has been significantly enhanced. The Independent group dominates

Durban's commercial newspaper market. This includes the city's main 'quality' daily, *The Mercury*, the more 'populist' afternoon title the *Daily News*, and the *Sunday Tribune*. Since 1994, when the Argus newspaper group was unbundled by Anglo-American to the Irish-owned Independent group, there has been a determined effort to re-position the group's papers, to maintain and extend readerships in the face of increasing competition for revenue from other media. The internal restructuring of the group, with an increasingly assertive marketing-led strategy, has engendered a shift in the objectives of news making towards focussing on 'people-oriented' stories reflecting the changes in the 'new' South Africa. At the same time, affirmative action has altered the make-up of newsrooms, and there has been the introduction of programmes to promote 'developmental journalism' as part of professional development schemes. It is here that newsroom demographics are important, in so far as journalists from historically disadvantaged communities bring with them not only different news values, but more substantively, they are also likely to be connected to alternative social networks, with relationships to sources in previously marginalized communities as well as with actors who have moved into positions of social power in government and business.

These shifts in the norms and practices of routine news making have also been at work in the broadcast media. In addition to the already existing SABC, with television news and local and provincial radio stations based in Durban, there has been a proliferation of new broadcast outlets since 1996. It is these new, commercially oriented television and radio services that have been most receptive to the media-oriented strategies of environmental activists. The new province-wide commercial radio station, *East Coast Radio*, has provided regular coverage on its news bulletins, as well as providing regular op-ed slots for activists on its weekend talk-show programme. Since its inception in 1999, the new national commercial television service, *e-TV*, has also provided regular coverage of South Durban environmental issues through its Durban-based office, as has

*Carte Blanche*, the flagship current affairs programme of the subscription television service M-Net, which also has a Durban office. In both these latter cases, the active cultivation of the local representatives of national news media has been a means of attracting national news coverage for the concerns of local residents in South Durban. It is these new commercial stations in particular that have pioneered people-oriented human-interest news stories and storytelling modes of news presentation.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of changes in revenue streams, the targeting of new audiences, changing source strategies, and the introduction of innovative news formats, all add-up to a situation in which the sorts of information and knowledge that grassroots movements and organisations can provide has taken on enhanced value for news organisations. It is these actors that can provide up-to-date information on breaking events, and who in turn are the entry-point into local communities from whom stories will be built-up. Journalists interviewed during my research acknowledged that the presence or absence of community-based organisations and NGO's was a crucial factor in establishing the extent of coverage or non-coverage of particular issues. Therefore, the political potential of media and communications depends not simply on structures of ownership, diversity, and regulation, or on technological innovations, but also, and crucially, upon the capacity for communities for mobilisation, organisation, and self-representation. More specifically, it also depends on an awareness of the 'dramaturgical' dimensions of protest as a means of attracting media attention (McAdam 1996). If media is a low cost 'resource' for relatively poor communities, then it is still the case that successful mobilisation of media attention requires the adoption of protest strategies that have the appropriate 'value' to news organisations. This is illustrated by the starting point for the current case-study. In April 1995, President Nelson Mandela was scheduled to visit the Engen oil refinery in South Durban. This visit was used by activists to publicise local feeling against industrial pollution, by staging a protest at the gates of the plant. In

fact, Mandela stopped to talk to the protesters, and this episode in turn became an important event in legitimising the concerns of local communities.<sup>10</sup> The 1995 Engen protest was a means of dramatising the concerns of local residents, not least because the occasion of the protest provided an easy narrative ‘hook’ for news coverage. Mandela’s visiting an oil refinery that once represented the front-line in both sanctions campaigns and in the ANC’s guerrilla activities, and his own initiative in stopping to talk to protesters, encapsulated the contradictions, ironies, and promise of a ‘new’ South Africa still harbouring uncomfortable continuities with the ‘old’.<sup>11</sup> The frame of the persistence of the ‘old’ South Africa in the ‘new’ South Africa has in turn become one of the recurring discursive registers of news coverage of South Durban air pollution.

The further development of a sustained campaign against industrial pollution since 1995 has had two elements. Firstly, there has been an internal process of local mobilisation and organisational consolidation. The increase in news coverage of air pollution issues in South Durban has been primarily facilitated by the emergence of a single organisational ‘voice’ able to credibly represent the concerns of diverse communities. The most important development was the formation of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) in 1997, bringing together conservationists, environmentalists, and local political activists. The South Durban area is still in large part made up of socially and spatially separated communities, a historical product of racialised segregation-era and apartheid urban planning. Potentially, this legacy aggravates the problem of constructing a coherent movement around environmental issues. The significant point about SDCEA is that it is an *alliance* of pre-existing groups that remain embedded in local communities. This alliance structure is the key means of developing a genuinely cross-community front on environmental issues.<sup>12</sup> SDCEA has been the main vehicle through which a single, credible community ‘voice’ has been able to access media coverage.<sup>13</sup>



Secondly, there has been an external strategy of cultivating media contacts and establishing legitimacy amongst journalists. One of the things revealed in interviews with both activists and journalists is the importance of local activist being able to recursively *perform* their broader legitimacy. It is not enough for an organisation like SDCEA to be legitimate within the communities in which it draws its support, but essential *to be seen* to be legitimately representative and accountable by other actors, not least by media organisations. Attracting media coverage is thus a fundamental ‘need’ for this form of activism. It serves multiple objectives, including providing a means of validating the activities of activists back to a support base, or perhaps to validate activities to actual and potential funders. But in this case, attracting media attention is primarily a means of establishing a sense of public *legitimacy*, which in turn is an important stepping-stone to establishing *standing* in eyes of government and business. In both respects it is worth underlining that for this form of activism, the utilisation of new communications technologies does not mean that they can afford to forsake coverage in mainstream print and broadcast media (Downing 2000).

In the South Durban case, environmental activists have displayed a well developed understanding of the diverse forms of communication through which to mobilise support locally as a means of mobilising media coverage city-wide, and by extension upwards to provincial and national scales. One way that SDCEA mobilised attention in the early stages of its campaigning was by holding public meetings in local communities. This is obviously a basic element of SDCEA’s own internal relationships, in gaining the support and mandate of local communities. But it was also routine to invite journalists along to these meetings, not only so that the public meetings might themselves become the hook for a story, but also as part of a more long-term strategy of establishing the credibility of SDCEA as the legitimate representative of community interests. Another innovative way of staging air pollution as a political problem, for local

journalists and visiting activists and academics alike, is SDCEA's 'Toxic Tour'. This consist of a guided excursion of the South Durban basin led by activists, taking in a series of *sites* and *sights* of pollution, uncontrolled industrial development, hazardous chemical storage, habitat destruction, and much else. And there is an important international dimension to the performance of legitimacy. For example, in 1998, one of the leading activists involved in environmental campaigning, Bobby Peek, was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize, a prestigious US award, in recognition of campaigning work with EJNF and SDCEA against the South Durban refineries pollution. For local journalists, this was important in cementing the credibility of the SDCEA's activism. Peek went on to set-up Groundwork, an NGO dedicated to assisting community mobilisation around environmental issues, which has extended its campaigns beyond Durban and KZN to other localities in South Africa, and increasingly Southern Africa more widely.

These are examples of a creative communications strategy which combines 'old fashioned' face-to-face communication and mass meetings with 'new' forms, including networked internet communications, e-mailed press releases, and performative forms of protest and campaigning to publicise the problems of environmental pollution in South Durban. Between 1995 and 1999, SDCEA was remarkably successful in gaining standing as a credible and legitimate news source, and in turn in helping to shift the dominant frame for news coverage of South Durban. A major challenge for this sort of media-oriented activism is, however the maintenance of media attention once this initial work is done. This task has required the adoption of innovative campaigning strategies. An example of this was the organisation in 2000 of the 'Bucket Brigade' campaign, an idea borrowed from US environmental justice movements. Here, again, then, the importance of international connections between organisations like SDCEA and Groundwork, and US-based NGO's is well illustrated.<sup>14</sup> New communications technologies like the Internet mean that locally-embedded movements can maintain routine connections with broad

networks of support, thereby accessing various resources, including technical assistance and discursive framing strategies (cf. O’Lear 1999). The bucket brigade monitoring system is, at one level, a simple strategy for empowering local communities in the politics of knowledge surrounding environmental issues, by providing them with a basic capacity to monitor industrial pollution. However, at another level, this educational and empowering objective was explicitly launched as a media event. The launch of the Bucket Brigade was made into a rolling news story, organised as a national event, starting in Durban but moving on to pollution blackspots in other provinces, with the aim of publicising the inadequacy of both government and corporate monitoring of industrial pollution. The campaign attracted coverage in major metropolitan newspapers, but also in the main independent national news weekly, the *Mail and Guardian*,<sup>15</sup> and in turn becoming the subject of a slot on M-Net’s *Carte Blanche*. The success of the bucket brigade launch in terms of media exposure illustrates the importance for activists of establishing and maintaining trust relationships with journalists in newspapers, radio, and television. The ongoing development of a programme of community-based monitoring continues to combine an emphasis upon grassroots local education with the publication of regular reports to maintain media attention.<sup>16</sup>

### ***iii). Conflict and Reconciliation in News Discourse***

The high point of the South Durban environmental activism in terms of media coverage came in September 2000, with a week-long series of investigative news stories in Durban’s leading daily paper, *The Mercury*. This series of stories, entitled ‘Poison in Our Air’, provided unprecedented coverage of local community concerns in the mainstream media, not just at the metropolitan level, but also nationally, because of *The Mercury*’s status as one of the country’s leading ‘quality’ English-language dailies. The *Mercury* stories also attracted extensive national television coverage. The ‘Poison in Our Air’

stories illustrate the complexity of the politics of media-framing of contentious issues, involving as it does the negotiation of divergent organisational rationalities mediated by a variety of actors. Looked at in terms of the discourse deployed in the content of the pieces, the stories adopted a very particular mode of presentation and address, using a human-interest narrative that focussed upon the apparently unusually high incidence of cancer-related deaths in the South Durban area. The stories focussed in particular on the deaths and illnesses of children,<sup>17</sup> a universalising frame that enabled the plight of a specific set of poor black communities to be articulated with the concerns of a readership that is still predominantly white. However, this personalising focus and storytelling mode of narration was also connected to a discourse of uncertainty through which the issue of air pollution was presented.<sup>18</sup> This was also a feature of *e-TV's* news coverage the same week, which juxtaposed images of billowing refinery stacks over commentary concerning the unexplained deaths of infants and children. The stories did not therefore simply endorse the perspective of environmental activists (the series included a right-to-reply section for industry representatives).<sup>19</sup> Rather, they presented the relationship between industrial emissions and the occurrence of certain health problems as a *hypothesis* in need of further investigation. The distinctive discursive framing of air pollution in the 'Poison in Our Air' series in terms of uncertainty and hazardous risk is indicative of the attempt to reconcile a set of contradictions. Firstly, the adoption of a storytelling narrative, focussing on risks and hazards, provides one means of reconciling two different discursive-temporal registers, that of the long-time frame of environmental change and impact, and that of the daily-ness of news. Secondly, it is a way in which news journalism can reconcile the experiential discourse of local residents with the discourse of scientific expertise mobilised by corporations. The conclusion that there is a need for further research into the matter is a position upon which all sides of this sort of political conflict can be presented as being in favour of.<sup>20</sup>

But the contradictions underlying this set of stories are not merely at the level of news discourse. There is also a set of tensions at an institutional level. The ambivalent discursive framing of air pollution needs to be placed in the larger context of the internal relationships between journalists, editors, marketing, and managerial actors within media organisations. Media organisations are not merely neutral mediums for other social actors, but often have clearly definable interests in issues being reported. In this case, for example, the Independent group is part of a broad based growth coalition in Durban promoting inward investment, of which the South Durban basin's status as the country's second most important hub of industrial activity is a major element. *The Mercury* runs a regular supplement (*High Road*) and sponsored 'advertorials' that promote local industrial and commercial development initiatives. Seen in the context of the Independent group's commitment to a boosterist agenda, *The Mercury's* reporting of South Durban community mobilisation takes on a different significance. It must be seen as the product of ongoing compromises and negotiations between different imperatives and norms: the parent group's commitment to a business-led agenda of economic development; the commercial imperative to reposition certain newspapers in an effort to engage broader readerships and retain revenue; and a shift in the norms of reporting towards human-interest stories, and a gradual transformation in the general ethos of journalism. In this particular case, the editorial imperative of providing human-interest based news reporting was articulated in a register that did not fundamentally contradict broader interests derived from commercial revenue sources and local economic promotion.<sup>21</sup>

The case of the media coverage of air pollution in South Durban therefore seems to fit nicely with Gamson's three-fold evaluative schema. There has been an increase in the amount of coverage of community activism and protest, and coverage that provides a clear linkage between everyday experiences and major public policy issues (Svendsen 2001). In the wake of the 'Poison in Our Air' series, the ascription of effective agency to

citizen mobilisation has become a standard feature of the news frame of environmental reporting on South Durban. Government and corporate initiatives to tighten up emission control, to set up consultative forums, or to fund further research, are now routinely contextualised as being responses to the sustained mobilisation of local communities. Another recent tangible outcome of media-oriented environmental activism has been the decision in early 2001 by the Independent's national business paper, *Business Report*, to establish an environmental news 'beat', based in its Durban office. There are two points of interest about this development. Firstly, *Business Report* is a supplement carried in all of the Independent group's metropolitan papers, including *The Mercury* in Durban, *The Argus* in Cape Town, and *The Star* in Johannesburg. This provides another indication of the ways in which locally embedded mobilisation has been able to capture national media coverage by successfully cultivating trust and legitimacy at the local scale. Secondly, the adoption of regular environmental coverage by *Business Report* is an index of the distance travelled by environmental politics in South Africa. It illustrates that questions of environmental controls on industry and of the potential social impacts of industrial and urban growth have become issues that business investment decision-making can no longer ignore. And there is a third indicator of success of environmental activism in South Durban. Prior to 1999-2000, the standard response of the main industries, and particularly of the two oil refineries in South Durban, was one of secrecy and denial. In the last two or three years, these companies have overhauled their press and public relations operations, becoming significantly more proactive in disclosing leaks when they occur and more assertive in the press in promoting their initiatives in the wider community.<sup>22</sup>

## **New Media, New Politics?**

Environmental movements and organisations like SDCEA, EJNF, and Groundwork, are signifying agents involved in a struggle to define the meaning of issues and events, in conflict and co-operation with journalists, other media actors, government officials, companies, and experts. A key objective of South Durban environmental activism has been the mobilisation of mainstream media attention as a means of acting upon powerful institutional actors, such as the national Department of Agriculture, Environment and Tourism, and major multi-national corporations. In this respect at least, they have actually been highly successful. The value of these organisations to news organisations has increased through a combination of shifts in news agendas and commercialisation, and at the same time, environmental activists have been particularly effective at adopting a repertoire of campaigning and protest strategies that is well suited to changed criteria of newsworthiness.

There are three general issues concerning media/movement dynamics that this case illustrates. Firstly, it illustrates that mainstream media remain crucial to grassroots activists, for mobilisation and validation purposes, but in particular as a means of exerting pressure on powerful institutional actors. And it is equally important to emphasise in this respect that the capacity of mainstream news media to pursue a critical watchdog role (i.e. the vibrancy of the *public sphere*) crucially depends on the capacities of non-media actors to collect, monitor, and distribute knowledge and information (i.e. on a vibrant *civil society*).

Secondly, it is worth noting that the successful adoption of a strategy of media-oriented activism might have significant impacts on the dynamics of movement strategy. Mobilising the relatively low cost resource of media coverage implies accepting certain constraints by adopting specific action-strategies that accord with the imperatives of newsworthiness. Firstly, this involves the adoption of certain sorts of campaign and

protest strategies. For example, the recourse to legal challenges has become important in the South Durban context, particularly as a means of challenging the development plans of the areas two oil refineries, an approach that has been most vigorously pursued by another organisation in the area, the Merebank Environmental Action Committee, since 2000, and which has generated extensive news coverage.<sup>23</sup> More generally, SDCEA's approach to local mobilisation also indicates that protest is in no small part staged as a performance to attract media attention. Secondly, successful media-oriented political action might also favour the adoption of particular discursive frames. For example, a universalising discourse of constitutional rights, when allied to the discursive 'browning' of the environment, provides a means of framing environmental issues as ones that transcend socio-economic divisions, making them more amenable to coverage in news markets that are marked by an imperative to construct cross-community forms of address.

Media-oriented activism can also generate a dynamic of organisational change within movements. In the specific case of SDCEA, it was suggested by some activists that the very success of the media-oriented strategy had a built-in dynamic of transforming its distinctive alliance-structure into a more formal and conventional organisation. News coverage of a strategic environmental impact assessment undertaken in 1999 for the city-council, in which the city authorities were presented as considering the possibility of a new round of 'forced re-location' as the only way of squaring the imperatives of further industrial development in South Durban with the environmental and health impacts on local residents, was identified as a key moment in this shift in status. As SDCEA became recognised as a legitimate and credible source, so the news media's tendency to focus upon identifiable spokespersons tended to focus upon key individuals as representatives of a single organisation rather than an alliance of organisations. As a consequence, since 2000 activists have made a conscious effort to



diversify the number of spokespersons speaking in the name of SDCEA, as a means of countering the potentially negative appearance of there being just one or two individual activists involved, thereby more effectively performing the *alliance-ness* of this form of environmental mobilisation. A similar dynamic was noted by activists involved in other areas, for example in tenants rights campaigns, where media coverage of successful campaigning had in part transformed the identity of organisations from an issue-based focus into general human rights organisations.<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, the case of environmental activism in South Durban illustrates the role that media and communications play in the politics of scale characteristic of emergent forms of contemporary social movement mobilisation (see Barnett 2002). Communications technologies and practices are crucial to the ability of locally embedded actors to act on a variety of scales, in this case mobilising local social networks to leverage city-wide and national media coverage while at the same time drawing on international networks for assistance with strategy, for expertise, funding, and discursive frames. But it is important to emphasise the contingent relationships between the spatial structuring of media markets and organisations on the one hand and of contentious political conflict on the other. The example of environmental mobilisation in South Durban might actually be quite distinctive in this respect. This case is characterised by the coincidence in the same location of the locally embedded interests of residential communities and a relatively immobile infrastructure of industrial production, processing, and distribution that has national economic significance. This has provided local activists with an important lever with which to generate national media attention by cultivating contacts with Durban-based media organisations. This is not necessarily replicable by any and all forms of political mobilisation.

The case-study discussed here accords with Claus Offe's (1996) characterisation of contemporary social movement activity as a form of self-limiting radicalism. Having

local communities represented as effective agents of policy change, or forcing environmental issues onto the agenda of business journalism, may appear to be only minor successes. They certainly do not fit a heroic image of large-scale political transformation. Indeed, there is a continuing suspicion on the left concerning the efficacy of a politics of environmental justice and racism, which is seen as a rights-based politics that elides issues of structural transformation (e.g. Ruiters 2001). However, my argument is that the emergence of a politics of environmental justice, mediated in no small part by the adoption of a successful media-oriented strategy of mobilisation, is indicative of a fundamental shift in *how* power is exercised and contested in the South African context. In this respect, the modest successes of environmental activists in shifting news agendas are perhaps indicative of the gradual emergence of a culture of accountability and publicity that is a basic constituent of any democratic polity. And these modest indices of success are certainly considered to be important achievements by activists themselves, for whom mainstream media coverage is seen as a central element of their campaigning, not least as a means of exerting pressure on key actors in business and government. Not the least significant effect of media transformation might therefore be an incremental cultural democratisation of news agendas, reflected in the adoption of styles of reporting and modes of address that connect up the norms of everyday life with the imperatives of public debate.

To return to Berger's guiding question concerning the relationship between media transformation and the distribution of social power, the dynamics of environmental activism in South Durban indicates that media restructuring in the post-apartheid period has had real effects in both re-shaping how politics is done, facilitating new forms of political action, and in enabling the politicisation of new issues. The new South African media landscape has provided significant opportunities for marginalised political actors to exert influence and assert their presence in the public realm. But if

media restructuring can be interpreted as opening up new opportunities, it should not be forgotten that the capacity to make the most of these is likely to be sharply differentiated spatially, socially, and in terms of what issue is at stake. The point worth emphasising in concluding, is that the case discussed here illustrates that the political significance of new media technologies, converged communications infrastructures, corporate ownership, and market restructuring cannot be deduced in abstraction from broader patterns of political activity. The democratic potential of media, old and new, depends on the ability of actors embedded in civil society to practice well-worn political virtues, by adopting appropriate repertoires of protest, effectively mobilising resources, and establishing legitimacy amongst constituencies.

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<sup>1</sup> See Horwitz (2001); Barnett (1999a); (2000).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Desai (2002) for discussion of new forms of mobilisation around housing and tenant's rights. Other examples of political action that are perhaps indicative of a newly emergent form of issue-based movement mobilisation would include the campaigning of the Treatment Action Campaign, and the mobilisation of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. See Bond (2001).

<sup>3</sup> The research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and undertaken in February-April and August-September 2001, while based at the Graduate Programme of Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban. Research involved more than 30 interviews with journalists, activists, and management representatives, and textual analysis of news coverage.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with Lorne MacLaine (Marketing Department, Independent KZN), Durban, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2001; Interviews with Tony Carnie (Environment Correspondent, *The Mercury*), Durban, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Jill Gowans (Journalist, *The Mercury*), Durban, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2001; V. Yoganathan (Editorial Staff, *The Mercury*), Durban, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Julie Kelly (*Carte Blanche*, M-Net), Durban, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Akash Bramdeo (Journalist, *e-TV News*), Durban, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Martin Challenor (Marketing Department, Independent KZN), Durban, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Phumi Nhlapo (Journalist, *Business Report*), Durban, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2001; David Stanley (Journalist, *East Coast Radio*), Durban, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2001.

<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion of the development of environmental policy in Durban during this period, see Freund (2002).

<sup>6</sup> For the genealogy of these terms, see Holifield (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Linda Ambler (Groundwork), Pietermaritzburg, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Siphso Metetwa (Media Liaison, Environmental Justice Network Forum) Pietermaritzburg, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Zanele Mngoma (KZN Coordinator, Environmental Justice Network Forum), Durban, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Michelle Simons (SDCEA), 5<sup>th</sup> April 2001.

<sup>9</sup> In the particular context of South Durban, the most localised form of print media are freely distributed 'knock-n-drops'. These include the *Southlands Sun* & *South Coast Sun*, both of which are part of the national Caxton print and publishing empire, which circulate in predominantly white neighbourhoods. Companies use them to publicise formal consultation procedures over new developments, but their restricted circulation is considered to be problematic by South Durban environmental activists. Along with another local free paper, *Community Talk*, these free papers are heavily dependent on advertising revenue from the corporations with whom environmental activists are in conflict, and so are to a considerable extent 'captured' media. Editions regularly carry paid-for promotions concerning corporate social responsibility investment schemes for example. However, even these media have begun to give coverage for 'community' viewpoints as expressed by SDCEA and related actors over the last two or three years. The leading independent paper covering parts of the South Durban area is *The Leader*, a long established weekly primarily oriented towards the Indian Community in Durban, which has provided extensive coverage of environmental campaigning in the basin.

<sup>10</sup> 'Engen the biggest polluter in Durban', *Mail and Guardian*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1995.

<sup>11</sup> 'Coming Clean', *Daily News*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1995.

<sup>12</sup> My account of SDCEA is indebted to the work of Di Scott, of the Department of Geography and Environment at UND.

<sup>13</sup> For further details of the emergence of community mobilisation in South Durban, see Root *et al* (1999).

<sup>14</sup> In this case, with the Boston-based South African Exchange Programme on Environmental Justice.

<sup>15</sup> 'US environmentalists visit toxic hot spots', *Mail and Guardian*, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2000; 'Durban's air a 'toxic soup'', *Mail and Guardian*, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2001.

<sup>16</sup> 'South Durban communities establish a clean-up program', *Biosphere*, April 2002.

<sup>17</sup> 'Cancer and air pollution in Durban South: fact or fiction? Agony of the Children', *The Mercury*, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2000.

<sup>18</sup> 'How bad is the pollution and who controls the polluters?', *The Mercury*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2000.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Right to Reply', *The Mercury*, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2000.

<sup>20</sup> 'Now what needs to be done?', *The Mercury*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2000.

<sup>21</sup> One outcome of the series was the award to *The Mercury's* lead environment correspondent, Tony Carnie, of the 2001 CNN African Journalist of the Year Award for Health and Medical Reporting. Carnie's award further enhanced the legitimacy of reporting of environmental issues.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Margaret Rowe (Communications Manager, SAPREF Refinery), Durban, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2001.

<sup>23</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with Rory O'Connor (Wildlife and Environmental Society of South Africa and SDCEA), 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2001; Desmond D'Sa (Wentworth Development Forum and SDCEA), Durban 19<sup>th</sup> April 2001; Bobby Peek (Groundwork and SDCEA, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2001); Sayed Iqbal Mohamed (Organisation of Civic Rights), 17<sup>th</sup> April 2001).