

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Deliberative Theory and African Philosophy: The Future of Deliberation in Transitional Societies

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This article invites a conversation about the role of the media and the responsibility of journalists in post-colonial societies in transition to becoming stable democracies. It outlines some of the specific challenges such societies face in cultivating a discursive environment underpinned by complementarity and mutuality. The article introduces the African philosophy of Ubuntu, a normative basis for journalism and deliberative democracy, which exhibits a distinctly non-partisan approach and resolves some of the exigencies of diversely constituted democracies. It argues that, through the lens of Ubuntu, the media can be seen to act both in the public and the national interest. Overall, this article seeks to redefine the role of media from that of gatekeepers and watchdogs of power to that of mediators for the purpose of seeking consensus among members of society as well as between people and government.

Keywords: communication; democracy; deliberation; discourse; Ubuntu; media; journalism

Introduction

Building democratic societies entails informing citizens of their rights and responsibilities. Citizens must know how they can actively engage in governance. They must have a platform to express their voice, hold the powerful to account and collectively determine the common good (Rodny-Gumede 2015a). The media play a key role in fulfilling these tasks, especially in post-colonial societies in transition to becoming stable democracies. But their role faces a distinct set of challenges.

The first challenge derives from the diverse character of post-colonial democracies. Take the case of South Africa, where diversity of language and values and sharp economic inequalities make it impossible to talk of ‘the public’ as one homogenous or like-minded mass (Wasserman & de Beer 2005; Gassner 2007). How can the media’s norms be guided by their commitment to the public interest when interests are so widely constituted?

The 2012 coverage of police forces shooting thirty-four protesting mineworkers in a rural part of South Africa is a case in point. Reports of this incident, which has come to be known as the ‘Marikana Massacre’ (see Rodny-Gumede 2015b) focused more on the violence of the striking miners than the widely neglected and fundamental problems underlying labour relations in the country (Rodny-Gumede 2015b). This meant that a variety of news channels serving a wide range of demographics all focused on one angle, which ultimately reinforced the narrow and privileged narrative of a suburban (white)

population, while neglecting alternative views, including those of the miners themselves.

The second challenge concerns the need for budding democratic governments to garner public support. The post-apartheid government in South Africa accuses the media of serving, under the guise of a liberal agenda, a white elite that is averse to democratic transformation led by a black majority (see Rodny-Gumede 2015a: 110). Instead of focusing on what is wrong, the thinking goes, the media should contribute to nation building and the development of nascent democratic efforts – especially considering the uphill battle of addressing all the inequalities created by apartheid (Jacobs 2007; Fourie 2001; Netshitenzhe 2002; Wasserman & de Beer 2006; Hadland 2007).

These two challenges imply a clash of values, narratives and interests among citizens and a potential undermining of a democratic government’s efforts by media that sometimes inadvertently align with a problematic oppositional stance. These nuanced and complex realities require a rethinking of the often-assumed dichotomy whereby the media act either in the public interest or in the national interest (see Netshitenzhe 2002). As Wasserman and de Beer (2006: 70) propose, the question may not be so much about the public ‘versus’ the national interest but rather about how the media conceive of the ‘nation’ and a diverse and complex ‘public’ in the first place and whether they do so in mutually exclusive terms or as complementary ideas. While the watchdog role is important in societies that have come out of authoritarian rule and where elites have not previously been held accountable, new democracies must also supplement accountability with the task of not destabilising the often

fragile legitimacy of a new regime (Vltmer 2006). At the same time, the media also have an obligation to maximize, rather than curb, the potential of a diversely constituted public.

This article proposes a way to resolve these tensions. It begins by considering the national and public interest as bound-up rather than conflictual. Doing so, however, requires a shift in the frameworks that inform not only a theory of the press but also our normative assumptions around democracy more generally. I propose the concept of Ubuntu, a philosophy of complementarity and unity in diversity, as a basis for such a framework.

From Adversarialism to Mutualism

Dominant normative assumptions about the role of the media in society are often informed by an adversarial realism, which refers to the premise that human interests and social relations are inherently conflictual. Such a view is embedded in media practice, as in the case of the 1947 Hutchins Commission or the Commission on the Freedom of the Press, which laid out the role of the media in modern democratic societies. In this landmark report, the social responsibility of the press and an informed citizenry were held as paramount values. While this commission was convened for the United States, global media philosophies have internalised the social responsibility ethos for the media (Nordenstreng 1998), which includes the idea of providing a platform for balanced information, comment and criticism as well as projecting a representative picture of constituent groups in society.

The normative underpinnings of this derive from an adversarial realism which assumes that humans inevitably organise according to various interests, that these interests are mutually exclusive, and that contest and competition are the best way to coordinate (Karlberg 2004). From within this realism, democracy has become synonymous with partisanship, even though there is no necessary correlation between the two (Karlberg 2004: 43). Echoing this approach, the media perpetuate assumptions of partisanship by aiming to provide a 'balance' of views or 'sides' to a story, as well as by providing an 'oppositional' stance vis-à-vis government.

Partisan democracy, however, is a culturally specific model of democracy that is naturalised in Western societies and associated with the emergence of capitalism (Lyon 1984; Tannen 1998). Capitalism and partisanship presuppose that people are motivated by self-interest and that societies are best organised as contests. This is why social protest is thought of as an effective tool in managing the excesses of self-interest and abuses of power by creating dissent or, in the context of journalism, by putting the media in the role of watchdog.

But while the watchdog approach has been instrumental in the democratisation process of post-authoritarian societies, the unique exigencies of contemporary societies in transition bring attention to its many limitations. These include, among others, the reduction of complex democratic issues into oversimplified camps. Subsequently, nuanced issues are diluted, and confrontation and conflict are emphasised. This becomes particularly visible in the

field of journalism, where stories are frequently framed in terms of (sometimes very false) binaries and, more importantly, common ground is systemically obscured (Hine & McLaren 2019; Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018a). Combined with a hyper-commercialisation of media that capitalises on a carefully curated taste for drama, division and spectacle (McPhail 2006), much public discourse devolves into a discursive battlefield (see Shah & Thornton 2004; Cottle 2006).

Where diversity is steadily on the rise and democratic governments are still maturing, such types of public discourse polarise and conceal commonalities, failing to cultivate the complementarity and mutuality necessary for joint progress (see Aslan & Ebrahim 2016). As a result, and to create spaces for thoughtful and constructive processes of democratic deliberation, proponents of deliberative democracy advocate cooperative truth-seeking and, by extension, models of public and civic journalism and authentic deliberation where power is equally distributed (see Bessette 1980). Traced to the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere (Habermas 1962), the concept of deliberation has shifted from the aim of securing consensus and agreement through language to recognising pluralism and striving for metaconsensus, 'which involves the mutual recognition of the legitimacy of the different values, preferences, judgments and discourses held by other participants' (Curato et al 2017: 31). Pluralism is channelled into workable agreements rather than adversarial point-scoring (Curato et al. 2017: 31).

As a contribution to such notions of deliberative democracy, yet pushing some of its frontiers, the normative theory of Ubuntu offers valuable insights, especially in relation to the concepts of partisanship and power. Specifically, while various models of public and community media (see Habermas 1962; Filson 1992; Dahlgren 1995) facilitate substantive and prudent partisan debate, they seldom explicitly question the premise of partisanship itself (Karlberg 2010). Ubuntu, on the other hand, views all human interests as essentially and deeply bound-up, engendering in this way a non-party polity.

Beyond this, deliberative democracy advocates an 'equal distribution' of power (see Bessette 1980), which traces back to predominant understandings of power in Western social theory. Here power is conceived of primarily in material terms as something that can be held, wielded or at best shared/distributed (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018a). By contrast, Ubuntu, offers a conception of power as immaterial 'force' or as mutuality between people, which can only be co-generated (see Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018a). In doing so, it begins to resolve some of the challenges of democratic social practice, such as those related to the role of media in transitional societies.

Ubuntu, Non-partisanship and Power

The challenges of contemporary democratic reality have prompted many, especially in the Global South, to consider alternative epistemologies for journalism and democratic deliberation (Sass & Dryzek 2013). Post-apartheid South Africa referred to the normative moral theory of Ubuntu

as a key philosophy underpinning governance and service delivery (Rodny-Gumede 2015a: 110). Ubuntu vaguely means 'a person is a person through other persons' or 'I am because we are' (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018b). It has its roots in the Sub-Sahara and is frequently thought of as a notion of 'humanity toward others' (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25). Ubuntu expresses harmony in diversity and human reliance on 'relations with others to exercise, develop and fulfil those capacities that make one a person' (Shutte 2001: 12). Ubuntu defines us as primarily other-oriented rather than selfish, and means that the more we consider others, the more fully human we become. Deriving from an oral tradition, Ubuntu is 'still in the making' (Wiredu 1980: 36) and is generally understood as an 'ideal'. This means that while it can and has, at times, been misappropriated (see Tomaselli 2009), this does not make the principles it embodies any less pertinent.

Among these principles is non-partisanship related to harmony. While the idea of the public sphere (Habermas 1962) requires sincere and authentic deliberation, it does not necessarily view varying interests as inherently complementary (Karlberg 2010). Ubuntu, on the other hand, is conducive to non-competitive forms of decision-making and favours unanimous, consensus-based deliberation (Wiredu 1996; Bujo 1997; Gyekye 1997; Metz 2014). This takes place in many African communities, where 'discussion continues until a compromise is found and all in the discussion agree with the outcome' (Metz 2007: 324). Leadership is shared and community members explore matters together, coming to decisions by agreement that incorporates 'both majority and minority viewpoints' (Blankenberg 1999: 46). Wiredu (1996: 135) describes this as a non-party polity, where political candidates do not answer to a constituency but rather to the public as a whole.

Sceptics of (African) consensual democracy suggest that it is essentialist and has historically excluded non-Africans (see Ani 2014) and women. Yet the principle of Ubuntu is not to be conflated with the history of African consensus or democracy. While many describe its manifestations in a particular society at a particular time, Ubuntu in its ideal and normative sense provides an opportunity to explore contemporary applications of 'I am because we are'. Through the normative lens of Ubuntu, which assumes that human affairs are not divergent but rather deeply bound-up, instead of negotiating or maximising the widest set of interests (see Lyon 1984), harmony for the common good (i.e. other-orientation) is a default premise.

Related to this, Ubuntu engenders a notion of power that distinguishes itself from predominant conceptions of power in noteworthy ways (see Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018a). In brief, the idea of balancing or eliminating power inequalities, as associated with concepts of deliberative democracy (see Bessette 1980), suggests that power is something to be had or held in the first place. Deriving from traditional ideas of domination and submission, power, in this context, is thought of primarily in terms of material resources, potential abuses and struggles for ascendance (or, at best, a balance) (see Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018a). This derives from and entrenches oppositional

identity formation, the idea of conflictual human interests and the need for partisan posturing. Conversely, and building on alternative, capacity and capability related – including feminist – notions of power (see Miller 1982; Giddens 1984; Boulding 1990; Nussbaum 2011), Ubuntu foregrounds immaterial and entirely force-based understandings, where power is thought of as that which emerges between people only when they collaborate and the more they collaborate (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018a).

As a result, Ubuntu eschews the ideas of domination and submission in favour of channelling richly textured yet complementary forms of identity formation, bound-up conceptions of human interests and non-partisan approaches to democratic deliberation that focus on the realm of common ground and harmonious coordination. This provides a noteworthy nuance. By viewing interests as richly textured and diverse, the idea of complementarity contrasts both with Wiredu's (1980) assumption of the sameness of interests and Ani's (2014) supposition of their divergence. The latter stems from the view that democracy's primary role is to manage competitive energies (see Ani 2014), though there is no reason why the idea of 'by the people for the people' cannot be systemically premised on cooperative energies instead.

Implications abound. Through the lens of Ubuntu, the media are not seen as gatekeepers and watchdogs of power but rather as mediators for the purpose of nurturing consensus among members of society as well as between people and the government. In pursuing common solutions to social problems, citizens look towards themselves rather than (only) toward the political elite. This is particularly significant in places with diverse language and socio-economic or values-based backgrounds (Wasserman & De Beer 2005; Gassner 2007). Public discourse, according to Ubuntu, has the role of maximising and bringing diversity together in mutually enriching ways. In this context, the media become 'gate-openers' (Wasserman 2013: 78) for narrative wealth. Examples of this can be found in the South African talk show scene, where case studies show that 'gate-opening' happens when a traditional binary framing of issues is replaced by an open-ended one that invites deliberation and mutual exploration in place of persuasion and partisan posturing (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018b: 42–43). Journalists and hosts draw out contrasting (rather than conflicting) angles and cultivate an overarching 'we' identity that nests a wide range of richly textured sub-identities. Time is taken to probe and clarify the underlying motives of guests in order to find common ground, while participants exercise self-reflexivity and contextualise their views and experiences.

Of course, and importantly, this does not mean glossing over differences or speaking in artificially polite tones to preserve a dominant narrative. On the contrary, epistemic richness and freedom of expression are encouraged as participants engage in informed, probing, critical analysis, while expressing themselves with care and moderation. Diversity is regarded as an asset and the perspectives, concerns, insights and expertise of a wide range of

participants is drawn out. This, it is often assumed, can only be ensured through a 'confrontation' of opposing views that are framed in terms of 'pro and contra', even if to amplify a 'weaker side' (Manin 2017: 44). Naturalising partisan positions, however, can be reductionist as it fails to address the full complexity and layered nature of reality, obscuring common ground where it does exist.

In this context, healthy criticism (see Manin 2017) is not absent, yet it is detached from partisan posturing. As individuals express their experiences and views, these become a collective resource and stand to be adopted, refined or discarded according to group wisdom. As such, consensus (including that which is derived by majority agreement) means that a decision is wholeheartedly adopted and carried out without dissent or sabotage, so as to probe its validity. If the chosen strategy proves misaligned, it is reconsidered (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018b). Collective enquiry and deliberation then become a collective process of learning through continued planning, action and reflection.

Because of this, impartiality, neutrality and objectivity are 'neither necessary nor desirable' (Fourie 2001: 37). The journalist sees herself as an active part of the community rather than an outsider or observer, and has a personal stake in collating and interpreting events (Blankenberg 1999: 49–50). As a participant, her assumptions are incorporated into her presentation of the views of others. In this context, Christians (2004: 247) talks of 'authentically disclosing' or historically and biographically contextualising one's views – be it as a journalist or as a member of the community. This means expressing one's perspective without being wholly identified with it or defending it at all costs. In this sense, a wider set of interests and concerns opens up (Duncan & Seloane 1998; Rodney-Gumede 2015a), and citizens move from passivity to active participation in the process of self-governance (Carey 1997: 139), and listening becomes more important than persuading (see Wasserman 2013).

However, rather than thinking in terms of distinct models of journalism, discourse and democracy, anywhere can be seen to exhibit Ubuntu to the extent that some of its characteristics come to the fore. Insofar as authentic disclosure and contextualisation emerge, for example, a news story or television programme can be seen to exhibit Ubuntu. The same story or television programme, however, may also focus on controversy and partisan posturing, thereby reducing the extent to which Ubuntu is evidenced. For example, an article exploring the motives of a man behind a shooting may ask: 'Does [his] grin convey a sense of accomplishment or complete disengagement from the consequences of his actions?' (see Kelly 2013: n.p.). This framing implies a binary between deliberate action on the one hand and insanity on the other and suggests they are mutually exclusive. Reality is presented in terms of two possibilities, one of which must be true and the other false, obscuring many other combinations. Coverage exhibiting Ubuntu, on the other hand, may include both the perpetrator's feeling of achievement and his detachment from his actions as two (of many) possible and possibly interacting factors in what the author would

authentically disclose as his personal reading of a mugshot. In other words, media makers have space to elaborate on their coverage, on their choice of framing and their analysis in order to contextualise their own voice as one of many in an ongoing discourse between researchers, specialists, commentators and ordinary citizens who have a perspective to offer on how different causal forces might interact and interrelate. As such, nuances are dialogised rather than polemicised (Fairclough 2003).

Ubuntu views public life in terms of deep communal relations and reciprocity, and the media as facilitators of critical consciousness that enable 'communal relationships between residents as well as between residents and the state' or other groups, individuals and civil society organisations (Metz 2015: 83). Ubuntu, then, engenders an ethos that combines the role of the media as nation builders with that of serving the public, rendering this not as a compromise but a strength. It caters to a wider, more representative conception of the citizenry as a whole. By assuming other-orientation, rather than self-interest, as the chief motivator of human nature, Ubuntu directs the idea of deliberative democracy towards deeply harmonious outcomes.

Some Challenges and Limitations

Ubuntu may be critiqued for its potential to threaten the sacredness of individual freedom (Metz 2011: 532). Ubuntu, the thinking goes, is better suited to small-scale or traditional societies rather than large-scale modern or industrial ones. However, Metz (2011) suggests that Ubuntu is well placed to inform a public morality. Its moral conception of human dignity builds on the capacity of individuals to construct community through identifying with and exhibiting solidarity towards others. For journalism, this means that the media must show empathy with and minimise harm done to the people about whom they report. It also questions the truth criteria associated with Western culture, by valuing rather than trying to disregard cultural and social interpretations within a community. Whatever is deliberated or reported on is assessed from the perspective of the impact on the community as a whole (Fourie 2011). Overall then, the purpose of democratic deliberation, and that of the media in the service of deliberative democracy, is to play a developmental role.

Of course, a consciousness of Ubuntu is not ubiquitous, and it exists alongside various other values and ideologies, all of which shape current realities and social practice. Within prevailing partisan systems, still largely beholden to economic dynamics, the substantive, principle-based discourse of deliberative approaches struggles to flourish. Within the space of journalism, oppositional spectacle continues to dominate the political economy of advertising-financed media. Such media organisations are pressured to increase their profit margins and therefore amplify the most dramatic and irreconcilable positions to feed a cultivated taste for drama that directs viewers towards advertisers for profits (see Jhally 2006).

Yet cultural trends and politico-economic realities are not essential human truths. What is attractive and sells

today can very well change tomorrow and so audience tastes can be seen as ever-evolving. Viewed from this evolutionary perspective, value becomes relative. This was certainly the case with societies moving from totalitarian and authoritarian structures to democratic and libertarian ones, and it is echoed in the concepts of press freedom and freedom of expression. These can be appreciated as historic strides, while further efforts can be made to refine and mature democratic sensibilities in the form of harmonious, cohesive interactions. At the end of the day, just because something is viewed as idealistic, this does mean that it is not possible or desirable to achieve. Many social movements, for example the one against climate change, while entirely inconvenient to the status quo, are increasingly seen as non-negotiable. The question, then, becomes not if but when a sense of urgency will overcome a critical mass of people in favour of harmonious and cohesive approaches to governance and public discourse.

Conclusions

This piece explored the pressing need for and future trajectory of deliberative democracy in contemporary societies by examining the role of the media and the obligation of journalists within contexts of post-colonial societies transitioning to stable democracies. These ideas, of course, can be extended beyond post-colonial fledgling democracies to include established ones that are changing through increased multiculturalism (see Duncan & Seleone 1998). In European countries, for example, unprecedented numbers of immigrants are transforming the ethico-cultural fabric of society and contributing in new ways to established democratic processes (Aslan & Ebrahim 2016). A predominantly adversarial approach to governance and social practice, including prevalent forms of discourse and journalism, may be maladapted to meet the needs of these diversely constituted societies. Instead, the collaborative and cohesive strategies of deliberative democracy are better suited to not only manage but maximise complementarity in diversity.

As an enrichment to and progression of deliberative democratic thought, the African moral philosophy of Ubuntu provides a basis for such strategies. What characterises Ubuntu's unique contribution is its assumption that human beings are fundamentally other-oriented, that power is a mutually created force for progress and that the most effective way to organise is not partisanship but togetherness and harmony. Ubuntu offers some vital contributions to the field of deliberative democracy and suggests that, though an emphasis on competitive and conflictual forms of social organisation currently prevails, the potential exists for many contemporary divisions to be bridged through cultivating a deeply relational attitude of 'I am because we are'. Whether this can be achieved 'only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behavior or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will' (Baha'i International Community 1985) remains to be seen.

Competing Interests

Dr. Leyla Tavernaro-Haidarian, PhD is a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Public Deliberation.

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How to cite this article: Tavernaro-Haidarian, L. (2020). Deliberative Theory and African Philosophy: The Future of Deliberation in Transitional Societies. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 16(1), pp.20–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.389>

Submitted: 17 September 2019 **Accepted:** 10 June 2020 **Published:** 26 August 2020

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