

Book Review

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Herman Wasserman, *Media, Geopolitics and Power*, UCT Press: Cape Town, 2018; 217 pp.; ISBN 978-1-7758-2226-4; R220.

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The strength of this book is not only that Herman Wasserman gives us a comprehensive overview of the major changes in South Africa's journalism industries since the transition to democracy, but that he does it through the theoretical lens of Global South thinking. In order to cover the terrain thoroughly Wasserman draws on years of careful observation of – and his previous writings on – the shifts in the institutions and practices of journalism. He insists that these changes are best understood through the fine detail of combining a political *and* economic analysis, as well as a survey of the roles, responsibilities and struggles with voice, representation and ethics that journalists have had to grapple with in the democratic era. To this body of knowledge Wasserman adds the insights he has gleaned through his involvement in several international studies which have sought to chart changes in journalism across the world since the massive political upheavals of 1989 unsettled the Cold War compact and introduced structural changes that no longer quite fit the 'four theories of the press'-type models that have been current. The insights from these more recent studies are woven into issue-driven chapters so as to reinforce his contention that South Africa is not simply an 'area' to study or to be additively incorporated into a greater body of global knowledge with North America and Europe as the reference points. The political departure for Wasserman is that what has happened in South Africa since 1989 (and more intensely since 1994) has a great deal to do with wider global processes and should be studied in conjunction with this consciousness of inter-relationality. Throughout the book he uses the frame of 'local specificity and global relevance' (p. 167) to tilt the view so that we keep seeing the connection with larger processes and the back and forth flow of influences and subtle variations.

Media, Geopolitics and Power gives us a multi-faceted view by using the frames of Global North and Global South, internationalisation, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) arrangement of upcoming regional powers, and a location in Africa which gives rise to demands for 'decolonisation' and 'dewesternisation' of not just journalism practices but also of knowledge about media. This sounds like a giddy mix, but he persuasively argues the case for taking all these locations into account as vantage points to enrich our understanding of how South Africa sits within a media environment full of flux, uncertainty, crisis and possibility. The conclusion is not that this country is on the receiving end of influences and flows, only, but that its engagements within these various structures (particularly BRICS and as an African country) means that it effectively also influences these flows (and he backs up this argument with a number of examples that show South Africa's surprising media presence on the wider world stage).

Wasserman is not just trying to chart a very complex picture that spans the rapid move from the dominance of legacy media into the firmly established digital age. He is also speaking back to

teleological ideas that political movement away from authoritarianism and into democracy will necessarily come with the benefits of freedom, rich citizenship, open media and voice. In the first chapter he insists the economy of the post-apartheid media needs to be as carefully scrutinised as the politics of the media and the politics and economics within which the media operate. He makes the case that many of the organisations that protect free media in South Africa (such as the SA National Editors' Forum and the activist organisation Right2Know) have expended their energies on the political and regulatory environments but have ignored almost entirely the post-apartheid economic situation, which he characterises as 'neoliberal'. Using the powerful ideas of 'elite continuity' and 'elite renewal' (borrowed from Sparks, 2009) – he shows how such an economic regime can limit the possibilities for newly enfranchised citizens to shape not only politics but also economic life and media. The media continue to represent the middle class and the elites; efforts to broaden and deepen community media so as to reach deeper into society have been patchy, and journalists (themselves often upwardly mobile or aspirational) rely on elite sources which skew their concerns and agendas.

Wasserman is deeply interested in how media could serve a broader range of society with more thought and attention. One of the chapters comes out of his study on tabloidisation (which was published as *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: True Story!*) and here he shows how anxieties about the strategies used by popular forms of media to build audiences stem from elitist ideas about proper forms of media. The tabloids built readerships of millions in South Africa at the very same time newspapers were declining in the North and West, thus underlining his argument that local specificity has to be studied carefully before making global claims that always position Europe and North America as forerunners of media trends across the world. This argument is made again in his chapter on social media use in Africa.

Other chapters focus on China's soft power incursions into Africa and South Africa, the teaching of media and journalism that has a global horizon, and a reflection on theory-building which more usefully marries insights from Global North and Global South and the movement between them.

It might come as a surprise to the reader, but Wasserman does not buy into talk of a 'crisis' in media or journalism, in the sense that it is often used. Seeing an environment filled with dynamism he has attempted to give us new ways to think about a field of study that has often been treated too statically and unimaginatively.

Reference

- Sparks C (2009) South African media in transition. *Journal of African Media Studies* 1(2): 195–220.
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Author biography

Anthea Garman is a professor in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, where she teaches writing and editing for journalism and academic writing for postgraduate research students. She is the author of *Antjie Krog and the Postapartheid Public Sphere: Speaking Poetry to Power* (UKZN Press, 2015).