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The Commodification of Political Advertising on Television

during the 2009 General Elections in South Africa

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Abstract

The research on which this article is based reports the extent to which political advertising on television commodifies politics in South Africa. Thus, this paper illustrates the commodification process of political advertising on television during the 2009 general elections. A critical political economy of political advertising and an inductive thematic content analysis were used to interpret the data collected. Altogether, the data were collected through document analysis and a self-administered questionnaire. A sample was employed and the findings showed that the issue of commodification in politics was prominent in the political advertisements on television during the 2009 election period. The conclusion made is that political advertising on television commodifies politics to a large extent. This is evident in the financial demands related to the production, access, as well as the distribution of the advertisements.

Keywords: *commodification, commodity, political advertising, television, citizens, elections*

I. Introduction

Political advertising on television was introduced in South Africa in November 2008 and monitored by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) (Government Gazette, 2008). It became popularised and broadcast on the public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC). The SABC is structured to have two public service channels, *SABC 1* and *SABC 2*, while *SABC 3* is considered as the commercial channel. South Africa currently has four broadcasting channels, two dedicated to public service broadcasting – *SABC 1* and *SABC 2* – and one commercial station – *SABC 3* – as well as one free to air channel – *e-TV* – that is not part of the SABC. The political advertisements have been aired on all these channels. However, for the purpose of the study

only the political advertisements that appeared on *SABC 1*, *2*, and *3* were considered. Furthermore, during the pre-election period, *SABC 1* had a viewership or cumulative audience (cume) reach of 87.2% of adults older than 16 in the month of March 2009, and in April 2009 it had 74.6%. *SABC 2* had a cume reach of 85.6% in March 2009, and in April 2009 it had 88.1%. *SABC 3* had a cume reach of 85.9% in March 2009, and 85.3% in April 2009 (South African Advertising Research, 2009). The cume reach in this instance means that the above stated percentage of adults (16 years and older) in South Africa viewed the television station at least once during that particular month.

However, prior to this, political advertising on television was prohibited because broadcasting advertisements were permitted only on radio, and the rationale was twofold: '[television] advertising is an expensive enterprise, making it less egalitarian than radio and television advertising is believed to be a particularly potent form of persuasion' (Teer-Toamaselli, 2006, p. 434). Although television began broadcasting in 1976 in South Africa, this was after less developed countries such as Zimbabwe – then known as Rhodesia. However, development or modernisation seems to carry with it concerns that are lost to the public gaze. Political advertising on television was not permitted until two months prior to the 2009 elections in South Africa, in spite of the possibilities established to have political advertising on television even during democratisation in 1994 through the Bill of Rights and the right to freedom of expression and choice. Hence, apart from the freedom of expression and choice - not only of the politicians but also the audience or citizens - that political advertising on television can offer, concern focuses on the commodification process of politics through political advertising on television.

The commodification process in politics is evident in countries such as the United States, where political candidates are sold as commodities, with certain mannerisms of speech, dress,

and overall code of conduct informed by commercial standards (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995, p.5). Although the commodification process can be beneficial to some politicians and commercial media, it can, in turn, commodify politics for the audience and some political parties – where politics can be bought and the audience are seen as consumers instead of citizens.

Political advertising on television is a double-edge sword (McNair, 2007). On the one hand, perhaps political advertising on television can inform the audience as citizens by creating choice in that the audience will be able to listen to what the politicians have to canvass to them not only on radio, newspapers and the Internet but also on television. Advertising can also provide in-depth information about the political campaigns and, hence, fulfil the information function of the media (Curran, 2000). On the other hand, if political advertising on television operates on the same model as commercial advertising, this creates room for concern because generally commercial advertising aims to create a buying mood, and through commercial advertising goods are advertised and sold as commodities (McNair, 1999).

The commodification process of political advertising can thus depoliticise and create political apathy among citizens whereby they become less involved in public affairs, such as politics, and equally lapse into political apathy based on a source such as television (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). More especially, this is the case in the information age where media platforms such as social media have been popularised. It can also entail lack of information about political issues and lack of participation in the political process while the audience become passive receivers of content rather than active participants in the content, and through this politics and television as a public sphere can seem private (Habermas, 1989).

Hence due to technological developments such as new media, television seems less differentiated, diverse, pluralistic, participatory and deliberative (Habermas, 1989).

A gap in research, with the aid of previous literature, was identified as the literature showed that the messages and the portrayal of images were addressed to a large extent in the Western perspective (McNair, 1999, 2007; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995, 2006; Scammell & Langer, 2006). However, the research conducted prior to the research in this article seems to overlook pertinent issues which are generally hidden from the public gaze such as the commodification of politics through political advertising.

In the South African perspective though, Fourie and Froneman (2003) and Fourie (2008) have focused on the image versus issue debate and have somewhat dismissed the debate about commodity and the commodification process of political advertising, although it has been vaguely addressed by McNair (1999, 2007) as well as Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (1995) in the western perspective. Apart from not giving much attention to the commodification process of political advertising and the manner in which this commodifies politics, a majority of this literature has relied on the analysis of political advertising in print and posters. This study built on knowledge in the field of political advertising and equally media studies by focusing on the commodification process of political advertising on television during the 2009 general elections.

Critical political economy of political advertising and content analysis were used to interpret the data collected, while the data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire and a document analysis. The findings show that the commodification of politics was very prominent in the political advertisements on television during the 2009 election period. The conclusion to be made is that political advertising on television commodifies politics to a large extent. This is evident in the financial demands related to the

production, access as well as the distortion of the political advertisements and the manner in which the democratic role of the media was hindered.

The sections that follow discuss the commodification process of political advertising, critical political economy of political advertising, the methodology, and the commodification process of political advertising on television. Lastly, a conclusion which summarises the discussion is drawn.

II. Commodification in Political Advertising

Political advertising can depoliticise the citizen or create political apathy. Advertisers have long since learned that most people are soft minded, so they capitalise on this susceptibility with skillful and effective slogans (King, 2010, p.3). Through political advertising on television, it is possible that the viewer may not be given sufficient information about the political issues in order to make an informed choice (Pinskerton & Austin, 2004). Political advertising can depoliticise the citizen through catchy slogans and attractive packaging that create the illusion that the political advertisements are being sold like soap on the supermarket shelf instead of being created for the citizen. This also leads to the interpretation that the contents of the packaging may not meet the requirements suggested by the package but can mislead the 'consumer' (McNair, 1999, 2007).

The study of political advertising is of fundamental importance. For example, Berger (2004) chooses to discuss political advertising because "decisions about whom we vote for play a crucial role in determining what laws will be passed and how we will lead our lives" (p. 87). In addition, Kern (1989) argues that advertising has influence that includes, but is much broader than that of, informing the public about the positions of candidate on the issues of the day. This broader influence, as suggested by Kern, is encouragement to investigate the

phenomenon of political advertising on television even further by reporting on the extent to which the commodification process of the political advertisements on television in turn commodifies politics. Prior to moving further it is essential to define political advertising, commodity and commodification.

Political advertising refers to the purchase and use of advertising space, paid for at a commercial rate, in order to transmit political messages to an audience (McNair, 1999). It has "an overt function to persuade voters" (Tak, Kaid, & Lee, 2008, p.175). Altogether political advertising on television can be understood and defined as a controlled and non-mediated channel in the sense that it is not shaped by mechanisms such as journalistic constraints that refer to the purchase and use of advertising space. In addition, as opposed to the journalistic constraints of gate-keeping and framing, the political candidates are allowed the freedom to frame and shape their own political advertisements. Inclusive to this definition, political advertising is staged through the mass media in order to transmit political messages to the potential electorate.

The term "commodities" can be understood as communications or media that are sold or that have commercial value for other reasons, such as selling viewers and readers to advertisers (Baker, 2002). "Political advertising" on television can be perceived as a commodity due to the way in which it is produced, distributed and funded. McLuhan (2010) argues that the medium is the message meaning that the message provided is inevitably attended to in proportion to the media in which it is conveyed. For instance, television can be used manipulatively, and for such reasons it can be argued that political advertising has a better chance of becoming a commodity on television than in any other media. The nature of television itself is about catchy and colourful images and sound which is commonly increased during advertisement breaks with information that often lacks depth. Here, the

commercialisation or commodification of politics can occur at a greater degree as opposed to in other media such as print media. To reiterate this point, commercialisation is a process whereby the media replace the standards of the public interest and public service with market-related commercial standards and produce information in the form of a commodity sold to their audience (McNair 1999; Scammell & Langer, 2006). In the same way, this means that through political advertising on television politics is perhaps traded to both the political candidates and the audience. Consequently, the notion of "commodity" in politics suggests that with enough financial power and use of the correct advertising professionals, for example Ogilvy – a leading South African advertising agent – and the exploitative use of potentially manipulative media, such as television, one can perhaps win the elections beyond expectation. These advertising experts know how to exploit the mechanism of advertising to their clients' advantage and can also include top of the range technology such High Definition (HD) advertisements.

"Commodification" describes the way in which use values are transferred into exchange values in a capitalist system (Mosco, 1996). The commodity is the actual form of the product when its production is principally organised through the process of exchange. Commodification is the process of transforming the value of the product into exchange value, and this means that the value of the product is established in the marketplace (Mosco, 1996). In order to get the product to the marketplace and for it to sell, it needs to move through the stages of production, distribution, funding and ensuring wide access to the audience ('consumer'); this process is the commodification process. It is important to note that in essence the commodification process can imply that one no longer needs to be educated in politics or have the credentials of a good politician in order to obtain the majority of votes.

Moreover, political advertising on television is very expensive and tends to be glamorised or commercialised. It creates an unfair advantage among political parties in this regard. By the same token, Norris (2005) acknowledges that the contemporary focus on television campaigns has intensified the spotlight on party leadership, moving electoral politics from issue-based conflicts over party programmes toward a "personalisation" of politics. Perhaps politics or political advertising should not be about personalisation or the personality, but it should be about the political party's societal role, its true meaning and that which the party stands for. For instance, Norris (2005), states that "the professionalisation" of the political-consultancy industry has developed furthest in the United States (U.S), fuelled by the traditional weakness of U.S. party organisations, the rise of candidate-centred campaigns in the 1960s, the capital-intensive nature of advertising-driven campaigns, and the number and frequency of U.S. primary and general elections (cf. Diamond & Bates, 1989). Although the U.S. has been identified as the prototype when referring to political advertising on television, this does not necessarily mean that South Africa should follow suit in the footsteps of the U.S. because this might prove to be disadvantageous to South Africa's context as a democracy. South Africa needs its own voice when it comes to this phenomenon. In this regard, attention could be placed on the elimination of the demanding and expensive commodification process in political advertising and television.

III. Critical Political Economy of Political Advertising

The research was informed by the critical political economy of media theory. Political economy is a general term for an entire tradition of economic analysis at odds with mainstream economics in that it places much greater emphasis on ethical and normative questions (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Critical political economy approaches to culture (or media or communications) were developed in the 1960s amongst academic sociologists and political

scientists who were concerned about the increasing role of private business in cultural production (Hesmondhalgh, 2002).

This theory is relevant when analysing the power relations in the commodification process of political advertising on television. The power relations in this regard are defined by the ability to afford the resources in the funding, production and distribution of political advertising on television. Equally, it is used to analyse and examine political advertising on South African television by considering aspects such as the production as well as access to, and funding of, political advertising. As such, it analyses power in relation to cultural production, that is, the relationship of power to political advertising on television. For example, it helps to analyse the influence of power (money) or the funding of the political advertisements on television over content, over the audience, and over the production process.

Critical political economy is a theory of the media that is interested in the relationship between economic organisations and political, social and cultural life. It starts with the sets of social relations and the play of power. "It is interested in seeing how the construction and interpretation of meaning is shaped at every level by the asymmetries in social relations" (Golding & Murdock, 2000, p.73). Its historic aspect becomes important because it pays close attention to long-term changes in the role of the state, corporations and/or the media in culture (for example the role of political advertising). In addition, "one of the keys to Marxist analysis and legacy that has influenced all subsequent political economy is to analyse the commodity to determine what the appearance means in order to uncover the social relations congealed in the commodity form" (Mosco, 1996, p.144). More importantly, it is relevant because it goes "beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with the basic moral questions of justice, equity and public good" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p.31).

Critical political economy of political advertisements is used in this paper to interpret and to assess the relationship of power relations towards funding, producing and distributing these advertisements. This is in order to establish how political advertisements commodify politics, and thus critically discuss the commodification process of political advertising on television. In addition, critical political economy of political advertising "has been notable for its emphasis on describing and examining the significance of those structural forms responsible for the production, distribution, and exchange of communication commodities" (Mosco, 1996, p.145).

IV. Methodology

Inductive open coding and thematic content analysis were used in the research reported in this paper. The sample was a purposive sample. Document analysis and a self-administered questionnaire were used to collect the data. The paradigm on which this research is premised is the critical political economy of the media theory. Together with content analysis it is used to interpret and analyse the data.

Qualitative research involves several methods of data collection such as focus groups, field observation, in-depth interviews and case studies (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). Document analysis is relevant in analysing the issues of funding and financing of political advertising on television. Lastly, the questionnaire that was used achieves an overall perspective from the political media officers or election managers of the different political parties in relation to the funding, production and the distribution of the political advertisements on television.

The population considered for the study was the political parties which had political advertisements on television in the pre-election period of the 22 April 2009 South Africa. Pre-election is mentioned because the political parties were permitted to broadcast their

political advertisements up until 48 hours prior to Election Day (22 April 2009). A sample was drawn from the major political parties which had representation in parliament and which had political advertisements broadcast on television. Six major political parties out of the eight were selected as part of the sample. They are the African National Congress (ANC), African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), Democratic Alliance (DA), Congress of the People (COPE), Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and the Independent Democrats (ID) were part of the selected sample. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and United Democratic Movement (UDM), as major political parties, were not part of the sample because representatives from these parties confessed that these parties did not have political advertisements on television due to lack of resources. There were 27 political parties which appeared on the national ballot paper of the 2009 elections.

The limitations of the methodology used were apparent in the questionnaire. Two out of the six political parties did not give feedback to the questionnaire, namely the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Freedom Front Plus (FF+). The Democratic Alliance (DA) did not participate in answering the questionnaire while a representative from the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) could not be reached. As regards political parties that provided feedback to the questionnaire, some of their answers were limited, with some political parties refraining from giving feedback about aspects such as the financial cost of producing the political advertisements on television. Aptly, since the selected sample is a purposive sample, the results cannot apply to all the political advertisements that were broadcast on television during the 2009 pre-election period in South Africa but only to the selected sample.

V. The Commodification of Politics in Political Advertising on Television

In the commodification process of political advertising, the broadcast product can be a commodity due to its packaging, content, distribution or production. In other words, the more

costly it is to produce and distribute a product, the more likely it is to be considered a commodity. Critical political economy of political advertising focuses on the critical analysis of media content, its funding, production and distribution. The more misleading the packaging of the product, the more prone it is to be perceived as a commodity. It is evident that the political advertisements on the South African television were aimed at attracting the electorate. However, the advertisements did not exploit their platform because most of the advertisements from the selected sample were not manipulative and misleading to a large degree as they thoroughly communicated concepts that appeared in their manifestos, with only a few exceptions. For example, the ACDP and the ID raised issues of crime, abuse and poverty. Such issues are also elaborated upon in their manifestos. However, a key determining factor in political advertising, apart from the content, is the broadcasting slots. These can either complement or hinder the roles of the media; such is public broadcasting in a democracy.

The commodity attribute in political advertising can depoliticise the citizens and create political apathy unless the broadcasting spots are made longer or even changed into documentary format. This is necessary in order to allow for in-depth coverage of the prominent issues that the party stands for and allow for debate and participation as it should brief the electorate and assist voters to make an informed choice at election time (Curran, 2000). The average duration of the broadcasting slots as permitted in the ICASA regulations was 60 seconds (Government Gazette, 2008). Although political parties, such as the ACDP and the ID, had political advertisements that came close to 90 seconds and exceeded 90 seconds, the ACDP political advertisement was 126 seconds long and the ID was 96 seconds. These two political parties did not adhere to the regulations set by ICASA while those who did adhere to the regulations could have been marginalised unless it was the choice of

particular political parties to have shorter broadcasting spots from the outset. For examples, the DA political advertisement was 60 seconds, the ANC's was 51 seconds, the FF+ was 36 seconds and COPE's political advertisements was 39 seconds long. Thus, the onus of ensuring that the political parties adhere to the regulations should be on ICASA. However, lack of relevance of the medium can also depoliticise the audience as citizens. For example, social media, as opposed to television, have become popularised in the information age. The media are speedily available and accessible to citizens more specifically through the use of mobile phones.

Apart from depoliticising the audience, the political advertisements on television can depoliticise the political parties themselves by stratifying and marginalising the political parties. For example, political parties such as the IFP and UDM admitted an inability to broadcast political advertisements on television due to a lack of funds, signalling that some political parties could not compete. Excessive private funding in the case where some political parties cannot access the same funding opportunities as others could lead to some political parties having better political advertisements that have more defined images, which are made with top-of-the range technology. The increased use of paid consultants, public opinion polls, direct mail and professional television broadcasts, along with the extended duration of campaigns, led to rising costs and the shift from labour-intensive to more capital intensive campaigns (Norris, 2005; Young, 2002; Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). Moreover, having publicly funded, instead of privately funded, political advertisements is better because it is less likely that the public funders will want to influence the political process and the political parties as opposed to private funders. Political advertisements on television need to be publicly funded in order to be insulated from market pressure (Curran, 2000).

Norris (2005) argues that the professionalisation of political consultancy industry has developed further in the United States. This can be beneficial to the political parties themselves, but can hinder the democratic roles of the media. It is beneficial to political parties because when the political advertisements are produced by the political parties themselves, they cannot be distorted by journalistic selection (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). Political advertising is a controlled non-mediated campaign channel, which means that the responsibility for the advertisements lies with the political parties, and they do not run the risk of the political advertisements being altered by the media production process. Furthermore, political advertisement actors determine how they are presented on television (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006). As such, in order to be influential in their political advertisements, political candidates can hire advertising professionals to create their advertisements (Diamond & Bates, 1984). The use of professionals can help political parties eliminate frustration due to the mechanics of the media that they are not familiar with, but it can hinder the democratisation functions of the media as professionalism entails commercial standards that are not complementary to the democratic functioning of the media. The use of professionals entails inequality. For example, the ANC was perceived to have consulted one of the best professional television production companies in South Africa, Ogilvy, which ensured High Definition (HD) images for the political advertisements it produced. Thus, political advertisements on television have been shown to be encapsulated by inequalities. Although the ACPD also stated that to produce the advertisements a professional company was used, it also stated that the specifications of the content of the political advertisements that were given to the professional company were based on their manifesto (Diamond & Bates, 1989). This shows that some political parties attempted not to mislead the public by not only producing the content of the advertisement in relation to their manifestos but also in

accordance with the regulations that were provided by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) (Government Gazette, 2008). This means that there was an attempt to avoid manipulation because the political advertisements were largely determined by the ability to meet the individual and social needs (public interest). The political parties mentioned that they worked closely with the professional agencies and the production stages adhered to the regulations set by ICASA and the IEC. Equally, critical political economy is interested in society and how the construction and interpretation of meaning is shaped at every level by asymmetries in social relations (Golding & Murdock, 2000). Thus, through professionalization, which entails the use of professional advertising agencies, politics can be personalised whereby the electorate or audience are steered to a personality of the political candidates and not what the political party stands for. Only the ANC, ID and the ACDP opted for using the personality of their political leaders. The ANC used its leader, Jacob Zuma, to portray a responsible leader by presenting him seated in a big high chair and saying firmly the political party's slogan "Together we can do more." The ID leader, Patricia de Lille, is quoted in the ID political advertisement saying that she empathises with working ordinary citizens:

Most of you know me as a politician, but I'm also a mother. Like you, I have a family, and like you every day I have to work. I have personally been affected by crime. And too often I see poverty, homelessness and drug abuse. Some days it gets me down and I feel like giving up but I know like you I have a choice, a choice to do nothing, to complain or to be part of the solution. I have chosen to be part of the solution by fighting for your rights, by defending the constitution, by keeping a close eye on government and calling them to account, and by proposing solutions to the problems we all face. Don't give up hope; the

fight is not over. Join me and thousands of other South Africans and be part of the solution.

Similarly, the ACDP leader is quoted in the political advertisement of the ACDP referring to the audience as 'friends.' He also refers his 'friends' to their friends as he says:

I'd say, friends, the ACDP has the strategies, the ACDP has the policies, the ACDP has a will, the ACDP has a capacity to do what needs to be done to ensure that South Africa becomes a very peaceful and prosperous nation. God bless you as you talk to your friends; as you talk to your neighbours; as you try to influence them to bring in a government that cares for the people of South Africa; a government that wants to make South Africa a safe, stable and prosperous nation. God bless you.

Kaid & Holtz-Bacha (1995) state that the "political systems and the electoral system go hand in hand with the role of parties, and it is only in the U.S. that television political advertisements are sponsored by the candidates themselves" (p. 5). However, in November 2008 in South Africa the candidates were allowed to sponsor their own political advertisements toward the 2009 pre-election period. Therefore, four of the political parties – the DA, the ANC, the ACDP and COPE – specified using their own funds for the political advertisements on television. For example, the ACDP confessed to have spent R 50 000 in the production of their political advertisement, while ID mentioned, in the feedback to the questionnaire, that it cost them R 100 000 to produce the advertisements. COPE stated that apart from the R 2 million it spent in the production of the advertisements, an extra R 1, 5 million was used to purchase extra broadcasting spots. The commodity is prevalent in the form that the product becomes when its production is principally organised through to the process of exchange (Mosco, 1996 p. 40). This means that the more voters the political party is able to capture in its political advertising the more prone it is to obtain votes. Commodities

can be understood as communications of media that are sold or that have commercial values for other reasons, such as selling viewers and readers to advertisers, and in this regard politicians (Baker, 2002). This explains this marginalised competitive participation of political parties such as the IFP and UDM who admitted in the interviews that they could not participate in the political advertising because of lack of resources. In order to participate effectively in the process, the political parties must have sufficient funds to do so. Thus, financial demand can curb democratic participation, pluralism, and diversity, and thus it can limit choice to the electorate. Pluralism is generally associated with diversity in the media. The presence of a number of different and independent voices and deferring political opinions in the media is important to society because citizens expect and need diversity and pluralism of content (Doyle, 2002). Similarly, the financial demand of political advertising on television can also hinder the democratic roles of the media. However, critical political economy is concerned about the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention and goes beyond issues of efficacy to engage with the moral question of justice, equality and public good (Golding & Murdock, 2000).

It is fair enough that political parties are presented with free broadcasting spots from ICASA, but the free broadcasting spots become useless when the parties do not have the funding to produce the political advertisements. It is noted from the feedback received from the questionnaire that the production processes of political advertising on television were very expensive. For example, amounts of R 50 000 and R 100 000 were revealed as the amounts used for the production of the advertisements by the ACDP and ID respectively. A huge gap was spelled out when COPE stated that it used R 1, 2 million for the production of advertisements on television and an extra R 1, 5 million for extra broadcasting spots. This then offers power to some political parties to better perform and produce better political

advertisements while negating other political parties. Hence, critical political economy is interested in the critical analysis and the interplay of power for possibilities for improvement. It also recognises and negotiates the tensions between intellectual thought as it is preoccupied with the unequal command over material resources and consequences of such 'inequality for the nature of the symbolic environment' (Boyd-Barret, 2002; Golding & Murdock, 1997).

Norris (2005) identifies the role of political parties as being essential to the functioning of modern representative democracy. Thus, those responsible for political advertising should be aware of the possibilities they expose themselves to by making use of political advertising.

These are the following:

- Commodification can cause the audience to be distracted from the real message.
- The expensive nature of political advertisements on television can be a limitation to political parties.
- Access to the political advertisements on television enable large audience reach.
- Political advertisements must be diverse in language to avoid the language barrier.
- Citizens should be addressed on public service media and not commercial media because they are not consumers. This also has a bearing on the democratic role of the media.
- Political advertisements can be misleading to the citizens as in commercial advertising, thus commodifying politics.
- The overall delivery of political advertisements should serve a citizen not a consumer.

Critical political economy helps to access the power relations in the commodification process of political advertising (Boyd-Barret, 2002; Golding & Murdock, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2002). The more funds a political party has the more power it can assume in the political advertisements on television. The more funds it has the more broadcasting spots

it can purchase and at prime time – between 19: 00 and 21: 30 for television. This means that the respective political parties could then reach a larger audience. An example is also evident in the case of COPE as it notes, in the feedback from the questionnaire, that it paid R 1, 5 million for extra broadcasting spots. Its television advertisements only appeared on *SABC1*. However, it could flight the political advertisement(s) 33 times on this channel which had a very high cumulative reach at this time (87.2%) in the month of March 2009. It seems then that COPE had an advantage over the other political parties as it spent a large amount of money, and in turn had the advantage of broadcasting its political advertisement an excessive number of times, and at the same time it could reach a large audience.

The ANC also admitted buying extra broadcasting spots from the public broadcaster, although they did not reveal the exact amount that they paid for them. The broadcasting spot included those targeted to audiences at peak time. For example, the respondent from the ANC stated that "there were advertisements that were paid for, and there were others that the public broadcaster gave to all political parties contesting as per ICASA regulations' (Government Gazette, 2008).

Although an Election Fund was made available by the IEC for the use of political campaigns, this fund did not seem enough for the political parties to compete in the political advertisements on television. It also manifested power relations as the funds were allocated in relation to the number of seats that the political parties had in parliament (Government Gazette, 2009). For this reason, although some political parties made use of the Election Fund, some political parties perhaps preferred to use the money elsewhere in order to boost their financially struggling political parties. Political parties such as the ACDP and the ID admitted using the IEC fund in funding political advertisements. For example, the ACDP noted that "donations from individuals and limited companies were used, and they used

money from the IEC for small promotions" (Government Gazette, 2009). The ID noted, in the feedback from the questionnaire, that "since we never paid to broadcast the advert (it was free), we only had to pay for its production. We got the money from our election fund account which contained money from the previous funds." Feedback from the ACDP and ID also made it clear that political parties could use private funds. Although the two parties, the ACDP and the ID, could use the free broadcasting spots they were placed at a disadvantage compared to COPE because it could purchase an excessive number of broadcasting spots.

Donations and alternative sources were also used by the political parties. For example, from the questionnaire feedback, COPE stated that it used donations from its members, while the ANC stated that it used fundraising although the donors and fundraisers were not revealed and made transparent to the citizen. Lack of transparency regarding the private funders and donors can perhaps hinder democracy itself. However, the respondent from the ANC gave a blanket response by stating that "the ANC conducted many fundraising initiatives from its supporters, membership and business for the elections war chest. It allowed a certain portion of that money for communication. This was then used to pay for the production and fighting of the television and other advertisements." It thus alluded to the investment by private business entities such as banks. One of the private funders was the Standard Bank, and a statement from it mentioned that the 'Standard Bank continues to support South Africa's democratic process and make contributions to political parties (Standard Bank Global, 2010). However, the bank policy remains unchanged, and funds are distributed based on the IEC funding to political parties in proportion to their representation in the National Assembly (Standard Bank Global, 2010).

The use of private funders can be a concern as private funders can expect favours of some sort in return because "he who pays the piper calls the tune" (McNair, 1999). Returning the

favour to private funders can also include the need to gain a proportion of political power that the particular political party has. However, the use of private funders can be beneficial to the political parties and the electoral process for political advertising on television if monitored well. Private funders to the political advertisements can be monitored well if they are directed to a communal fund such as the IEC fund. The chief executive officer, Brigalia Bam, revealed that over R 2 million was allocated to the political parties for use in political campaigns, and the funds came from private funders (Africa Day Conference, 2009). Perhaps it is also necessary to rethink the allocation of funds on the basis of the number of seats in parliament because this seemed to extradite smaller political parties. In order to give smaller political parties a competitive edge in a democracy such as South Africa – as it has been closely related to a one party state in the previous years – it is perhaps better to allocate the funds to the political parties by keeping in mind the context of South Africa as a democracy instead of strict adherence to the number of seats in parliament. In this manner, a multifaceted democracy, as opposed to a one party state, can be encouraged.

ICASA stated that it gave free broadcasting slots to some political parties while denying others the same opportunity due to the seats occupied by political parties in parliament. However, Keane (1992) asserts that democracy and public service media are reflective means of controlling the exercise of power, and thus power relations are regarded as early warning devises because they help define and publicise risks that are not worth taking (Keane, 1992; Golding & Murdock, 2000). Thus, public service role is curbed when a particular political party receives privileged coverage. For example, the ANC also mentioned in the feedback to the questionnaire that the total of 48 advertisements, which appeared on television, "depended on the ICASA arrangement with regard to the one we paid for. We targeted peak time when our message could have maximum impact." One political party continuously

broadcasting their political advertisement at peak time can have an unfair advantage over other political parties. However, the responsibility to ensure pluralism and diversity also falls in the hands of the public service broadcaster, the SABC, because pluralism and diversity define its key roles (Mbaine, 2003). "Public service broadcasting plays a role in a situation where structural imbalances and scarcities of media access can undermine democratisation and democracy" (Mbaine, 2003, p.138). Through the imbalance enjoyed by the political parties on the public service broadcaster, the SABC as a public broadcaster has hindered its normative roles. As such, the normative roles of the media can also be hindered by political power and financial power in that the highest bidder gets the prize.

In addition, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (2000) note that political candidates are able to reach many more people with television than was ever possible with newspapers, trains, rallies and campaign gimmicks. Equally, the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) estimated that during the election period, the SABC had a viewership of cumulative reach of 87.2% of adults older than the age of 16 during the month of March 2009, and in April 2009 it had 74, 6%. *SABC2* had a cumulative reach of 85, 6 % in March 2009, and in April 2009 it had 88,1% meanwhile *SABC3* had a cumulative reach of 85, 3% in April 2009. This proves that television could indeed reach a large audience. However, large audience reach does not necessarily mean that the political advertisements were accessible to the audience due to the lack of pluralism and diversity, and the constraints of the public sphere. The political advertisements on television were not pluralistic, as is shown above, because they afforded one political party or a few of them sufficient broadcasting slots in general and at prime time. The broadcasting slots were also not diverse as they were broadcast only in English. This could be a problem to those who do not understand the English language. Although an attempt to overcome this barrier was made by political parties such as the ANC which

provided advertisements which were broadcast in Xhosa, Sesotho and IsiZulu. Perhaps the political parties should consider the use of all eleven official languages, not only for diversity and pluralism but also to show the diversity of South Africa as a country. COPE also mentioned that there were subtitles in the political advertisements which were used to cater for indigenous languages, although the subtitles mentioned by COPE were not evident in the political advertisement viewed for the purpose of this study. In addition, the ID had a political advertisement on all SABC channels, but their advertisements were in English only. The ANC stated that they ran a total of 180 advertisements in electronic media. Although this statement was not specific, through the feedback to the questionnaire, the ANC political advertisements showed more diversity because they were broadcast in isiNguni (IsiZulu and IsiXhosa), seSotho (seTswana and seSotho), English and Afrikaans. However, political parties should pay attention when developing the political advertisements for television because poverty, illiteracy and language barriers can constrain the public sphere. According to Habermas (1989), "the ideal public sphere is largely separated from economic concerns because it is a discursive model of interaction whose function is to integrate various levels of society into a realm of common interaction" (p. 24). In society, the barriers of poverty and illiteracy can fragment national media experiences (Bogart, 1998). Because the audience sometimes needs some degree of intelligence and media literacy in order to interpret the message, the message does not come across easily. Television can make the public sphere seem private (Habermas, 1889), but the SABC as a public service broadcaster "should provide incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the public life by also facilitating a dialogue across a diverse range of views" (Jakubowikz, 1999, p.14). ICASA and the IEC could rethink the formulations of the regulations of the political advertisements on television with the democratic role of the media and the context of South

Africa's media in mind in order to enhance democracy. As South Africa is considered a traditional liberal democracy, formulations of the regulation of political advertising on television should perhaps make room for a deliberative democracy. On the one hand, deliberation as a social process is distinguished from other kinds of communication in that deliberators are amenable to changing their judgements, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception (Dryzek & Berejikian, 1993). On the other hand, a deliberative democracy is relevant because a liberal democracy deals only in the reconciliation and aggregation of preferences defined prior to political interaction (Cunningham, 2005).

VI. Conclusion

The commodification process of political advertising commodified politics to a large extent because the political advertisements on television were financially demanding. Likewise, the political advertisements on television also commodified politics because not only was professionalism and personalisation used in the political advertisements but inequality was prevalent due to the number of broadcasting spots allocated to the political parties and due to the time at which the political advertisements were broadcast. Commodity in politics prevailed as it seems the political candidates could buy politics due to the sophistication of the political advertisements in relation to the images and their layout. However, the commodification process of political advertising commodified politics to a large extent in that the democratic roles of the SABC, as a public service broadcaster, were hindered due to the lack of pluralism and diversity in the political advertisements as shown in the number of broadcasting spots permitted to each political party, the time at which it was permitted to broadcast, language barriers, and the constraints of the public sphere. The political advertisements allowed political candidates to overcome journalistic constraints

because they could create their own political advertisements without the pressures of gate-keeping. However, in the formulation of the regulations applying to the political advertisements perhaps the SABC, the IEC and ICASA should liaise with one another in order to ensure that formulations of the regulations take into account the context of South Africa as a democracy and the democratic roles of the media in a deliberative democracy instead of a liberal democracy.

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