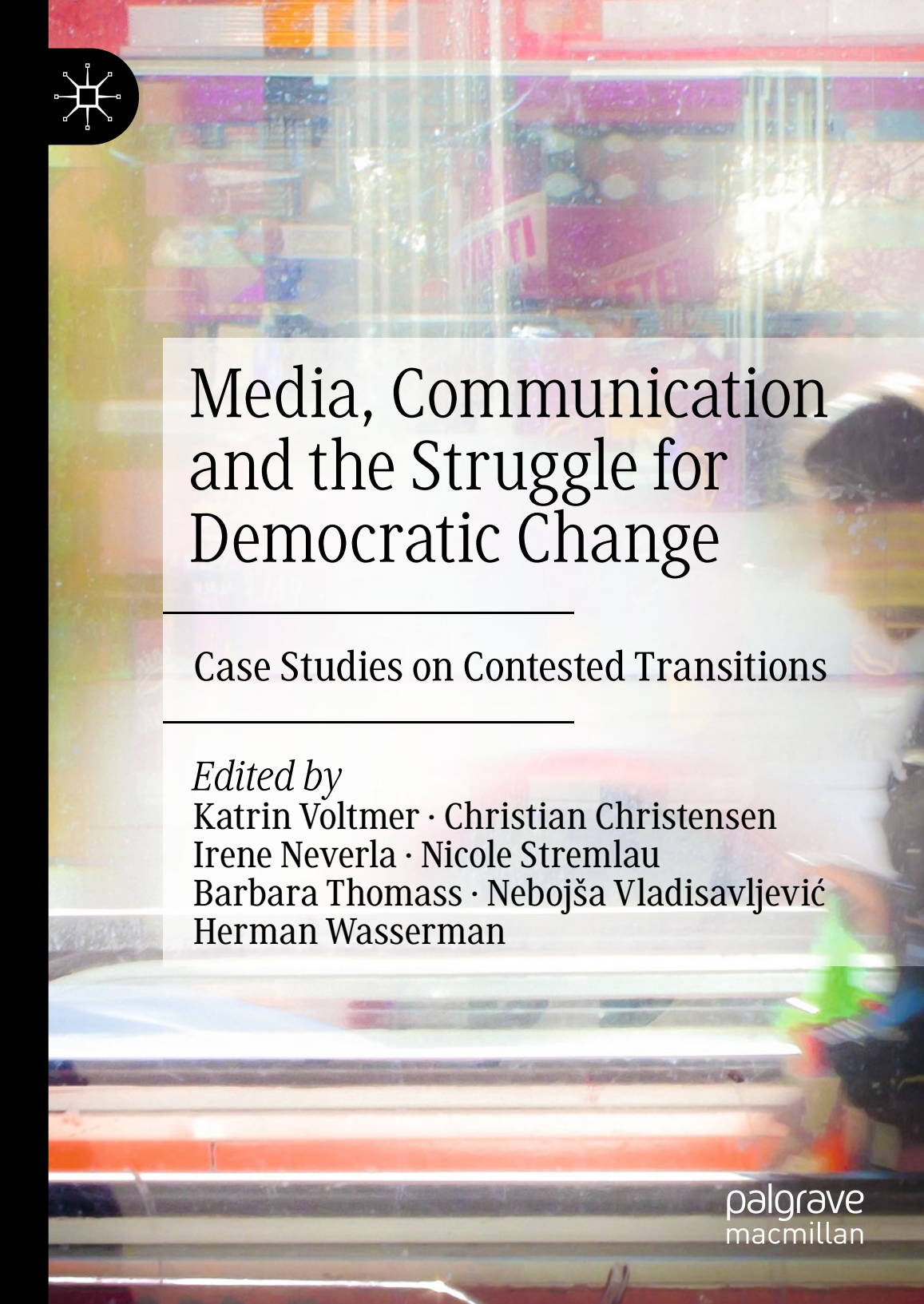

Media, Communication and the Struggle for Democratic Change

Case Studies on Contested Transitions

Edited by
Katrin Voltmer · Christian Christensen
Irene Neverla · Nicole Stremlau
Barbara Thomass · Nebojša Vladisavljević
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Democratization Conflicts as Communicative Contestations

Katrin Voltmer

Since the fall of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s of the last century, democracy has spread across the globe to an unprecedented degree and even reached countries whose cultural and political traditions are only loosely connected to the West, where democracy—as it is practised today—has its historical roots. All these transitions were bitterly fought for, often over decades of struggle and with incredible human costs. However, for many who celebrated the end of dictatorship some years ago, democracy has not lived up to their expectations, and disillusionment with the new political order is growing among citizens in new democracies. Many of them have experienced extreme economic hardship in the aftermath of the transition, as post-transitional countries and regimes spiralled into economic recession or introduced harsh austerity measures. There is also widespread disappointment with the quality of the new democratic order, which often seems to remain at a rather superficial, procedural level without translating into effective representation and meaningful citizenship. In many countries, democratic development seems to have come to a standstill

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and is even reversing, giving way to the return of authoritarian politics, this time with the varnish of democratic procedures, such as elections, which the new elites have learned to manipulate to their own advantage.

These contradicting developments—between ideal and reality, democratic opening and authoritarian closure—make it difficult for post-transitional societies to arrive at a consolidated state of affairs that would allow the new democratic order to grow roots and to flourish. Indeed, these societies seem to be locked in endless struggles over power and access to resources, but also over the meaning of values and collective identities, all of which polarize citizens and political elites in equal measure. Most of the recent scholarship on democratization has therefore shifted the focus from issues of consolidation to the study of post-transitional conflicts and the emergence of hybrid regimes that oscillate between democratic and authoritarian practices (see Levitsky and Way 2010; Snyder 2000). This book aims to contribute to this body of literature, but does so by approaching post-transitional developments from a unique perspective.

First, while existing literature focuses primarily on violent conflicts and civil wars that follow the introduction of competitive elections (Cederman et al. 2010; Mann 2005; Mansfield and Snyder 1995), the chapters in this volume are mainly concerned with 'normal politics' and the conflicts that are associated with the transformation of power and citizenship in the aftermath of regime change. We refer to these conflicts as *democratization conflicts* to describe the struggles that accompany democratic transitions. Even though some of these conflicts do involve outbreaks of violence (e.g., between ethnic or religious groups, or between state forces and citizens), most democratization conflicts remain below the threshold of open and sustained violence. Nevertheless, these struggles are formative events in the development of a young democracy and often bear highly symbolic significance for the society as a whole. As such, they have the potential to influence the future pathway of a country and ultimately the quality of the emerging political order.

Second, this book takes a communication approach to understanding democratization conflicts. While most democratization research focuses on institutional change and elite actions, our perspective views democratization conflicts as communicative struggles in which the antagonists compete for hegemony over the definition of reality: how to evaluate the transition and its outcome; what sense to make of the past and how to envision the future; whose claims for leadership are legitimate; and how to

reconcile national unity and the aspirations of a multitude of interests and identities. The narratives produced during these conflicts set the symbolic frames within which pathways and solutions are projected. In other words, the outcome of a conflict—which side prevails and whether an agreement can be reached—depends not only on the constellation of interests and the bargaining power of the opponents but equally on how these conflicts are portrayed and interpreted in public debate.

In the twenty-first century, the media—both traditional and new—have become the main arena where these debates are taking place. As a consequence, today's democratization conflicts are mediated conflicts that are fought out in the media (Cottle 2006). In this respect, the democratic transitions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries differ radically from the early 'third wave' of democratization (Huntington 1991) that took place in the 1970s when broadcasting was concentrated in a handful of channels and—for some readers, unimaginable!—the internet did not exist. Today, the media environment has expanded dramatically into a complex media ecology of a multitude of different channels and platforms forming a multilayered, fractured, yet convergent space of interactions and information flows (Scolari 2012).

In spite of the dramatic changes in the media environment and the central role the media play as a locus of contestation, students of democratization have paid surprisingly little attention to the role of the media in transition processes (for an overview, see Voltmer 2013; Zielonka 2015). In most democratization research, regulatory issues, most prominently censorship and state interference, and the structural features, such as ownership and media markets, dominate the research agenda. The degree of press freedom is then considered as an indicator of the progress—or lack thereof—a country has made on its path towards liberal democracy (see Bernhagen 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010). However, what is largely overlooked in this research is the agency of the media in democratization processes. They are not just mouthpieces of powerful elites, but actors in their own right, who shape the public discourse by their own logic of operation and selection preferences. Moreover, the media frequently enter the contestation as interested participants by taking sides and aligning themselves with particular conflict parties, thus determining whose voice is being heard and who is excluded from the public agenda.

This new media-saturated environment, with its abundance of voices and often overheated competition for attention and the consequences this might have for the development of emerging democracies, has still to be

investigated. This volume offers new empirical material that allows us to better understand the interplay of media, communication and democratic change. Taken together, the chapters investigate the following:

- How and to what extent the new media ecology shapes opportunities of participation and/or elite manipulation?
- How the media report on and frame democratization conflicts and what the implications are for the quality of the emerging democracy?
- How journalists reflect on their own role and to what extent Western models of journalism can be applied in times of dramatic change and conflict?
- How political elites use the media, both traditional and new, and how this reflects the degree and depth of democratic change?
- How civil society actors use and take advantage of different media platforms, and how this affects their ability to be heard and to influence political decisions?
- How effective the interventions of international media assistance organizations are in developing sustainable journalism in fragile environments?

Project Background

The findings presented in this book are based on an international research project—*Media, Conflict and Democratisation* (MeCoDEM)—that was funded by the European Union's Framework Seven Programme (grant agreement no. 613370) and conducted over three years (February 2014–January 2017). The research was carried out by a collaborative consortium of eight universities: University of Leeds (lead institution), University of Oxford, Ruhr-University Bochum, University of Hamburg, University of Cape Town, University of Belgrade, Stockholm University and American University in Cairo.

The empirical research of the project focused on four transitional democracies: Egypt (before 2013), Kenya, Serbia and South Africa, each of which representing specific constellations of change, political trajectories and cultural contexts. As will be explained in more detail later in this introduction, studying contrasting cases that are going through similar processes of democratic change helps to understand the impact of context factors on the dynamics and outcomes of this process.

During the three years of the project, the countries under study went through rapid—sometimes turbulent—change, providing us with insights into democratization conflicts as they happened. But in some cases, these events also affected our ability to carry out the initial research programme. The most dramatic and consequential developments took place in Egypt. When we designed the project proposal, Egypt was at the forefront of the Arab Spring and inspired pro-democracy movements across the region and beyond. By the time we started the project, the tables had turned against the reformers and authoritarianism was returning to the centres of power. Seven months before the actual start of the project, in July 2013, the military ousted the government of Mohamed Morsi, who had won the first post-revolution election. The bloodshed of that event and the criminalization and persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood following the coup d'état created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity that posed severe limitations on our research activities in the country. The kidnapping and murder of the Italian postgraduate student Giulio Regeni in Cairo in January 2016 was another event that emphasized the pressure on academic research in the country. For the sake of the safety of both researchers and participants, we therefore decided not to investigate any post-July 2013 issues or conflicts that involved the Muslim Brotherhood, who was declared a terrorist organization by the El-Sisi government; while in our fieldwork, we steered clear of any interviewees who might have connections with the security forces. Without the commitment and courage of the Egyptian team, it would have been impossible to continue with this part of the project.

In Kenya also, the situation turned out to be more volatile than anticipated. The terror attacks on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in September 2013 had led to increased securitization and the further marginalization of the Somali community (the attackers were of Somali origin). We decided to include the resulting inter-communal conflict in our research portfolio, even though approaching Somali activists and community leaders turned out to be extremely challenging and required the researchers on the ground to show an extraordinary level of flexibility and sensitivity to context.

Meanwhile, South Africa witnessed a wave of student protests in 2015–16 triggered by the government's decision to increase university fees. The movement soon turned to other issues—most notably, decolonialization of the curriculum and university structures. Besides pulling down statues and boycotting teaching, the protests radicalized and eventually brought all university activities to a standstill. These events fell into

a crucial phase of the project, and as a consequence, it became extremely difficult to recruit student assistants to support the fieldwork. The South African team persevered and even managed to organize the final project meeting at the University of Cape Town.

In comparison, Serbia appeared like a haven of stability: no coups, no terror attacks, no major strikes. But the period between 2014 and 2017 saw a marked return of authoritarian politics under Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, accompanied by a growing acceptance of hate speech and aggressive nationalism in public discourse that, in some instances, escalated into violent attacks against oppositional figures, including academics.

In the following pages, key concepts that inform the chapters of this book will be discussed in light of the existing literature: different types of democratization conflicts, public communication, media ecologies, journalism and strategic communication. Details of the research design and the empirical data that are used by the authors of this book, including the selection of countries and conflict cases, will also be provided. A brief overview of the structure of the book and the contribution of individual chapters will then be given, and the introduction concludes by highlighting the ambiguities of media change and democratic change that emerge from specific contextual circumstances.

The Struggle for Democratic Change and Democratization Conflicts

Democratization scholarship has often been criticized for its teleological thinking, and indeed, the very term 'democratization' seems to imply a (more or less) unidirectional process from a non-democratic system towards a representative and accountable government. The notion of 'stages of democratization' suggested by Linz and Stepan (1996) supports this view by distinguishing three steps of democratization—from liberalization within the old regime, to transition involving the breakdown of the old order and implementation of democratic institutions, and finally consolidation when democracy is accepted by all relevant actors as 'the only game in town'. Even though the authors acknowledge that the sequence of these stages might differ in individual countries, the endpoint of the development remains liberal democracy as practised in established democracies. In his seminal article, 'The end of the transition paradigm',

Carothers (2002) rejected this view by arguing that many democratizing countries are stuck in an early phase of consolidation without any signs of moving 'forward' in the expected direction. What is remarkable is that these 'hybrid' regimes have shown a high degree of resilience and in many cases seem to have established a certain equilibrium that serves the interests of the ruling elites in a perfect way.

In this book, we use the term 'democratization' as a well-established concept, but avoid any teleological assumptions regarding the outcome of these transformations. For example, the 2011–12 uprising in Egypt was driven by demands for democratic change, but these were quelled by old elites backed by the military establishment. In contrast, calls for a 'second transformation' in South Africa, while expressed in a context of relative consolidation, demand the deepening and enlargement of the existing democratic order. Thus, these struggles for democratic change are not confined to the dramatic period of regime change, when the forces of the old regime and democratic forces are pitched against each other; rather, they continue long after the immediate collapse of the old regime and can flare up in the context of particular events or crises. Even if the forces of the old regime are able to prevent further democratization (like in Egypt), democratic change remains on the agenda, often hidden in peripheral spheres of communication, thus forcing authoritarian leaders to adopt democratic rhetoric to justify their power.

Whatever the eventual outcome, democratization is a highly dramatic, often traumatic, experience that turns whole societies upside down. It therefore triggers conflicts that are recurrent over a long period of time and have the potential to polarize the society between irreconcilable camps. Many of these conflicts have their roots in the previous regime, such as unresolved grievances or rivalries between groups; others are the direct results of the transition itself and the reconfiguration of power relations brought about by the democratization process. Regime change inevitably involves winners and losers, leaving groups behind who have benefited from the old regime and bringing previous counter-elites into positions of power. Moreover, democratic transitions are accompanied by a fundamental cultural shift that promotes new values, norms and aspirations, while old world views continue to exist and shape people's beliefs and behaviour.

We refer to conflicts that accompany—or are triggered by—democratic change as 'democratization conflicts'. They can be related to two essential transformations that constitute the transition from a non-democratic

regime to a more accountable and participatory one: the transformation of citizenship and the transformation of power. Both are, of course, closely related, but each of the two dimensions revolves around specific issues and struggles and involves particular sets of participants. Even though overlapping with these two dimensions of democratization conflicts, elections require separate consideration. Elections are the essential democratic institution without which a country would not be classified as democratic. Yet, elections are frequently also the catalyst for the outbreak and intensification of democratization conflicts and highlight the dilemma of democratic institutions in transitional contexts: not only do they provide the mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, they are also frequently the cause for conflicts. Finally, the legacy of dictatorship often calls for the pursuit of transitional justice to address past traumata of persecution and human rights abuses. These four types of democratization conflicts are key elements of the research design of the MeCoDEM project and the chapters compiled in this volume.

The Transformation of Citizenship: Participation and Identity

If we understand democracy in its most fundamental way as 'government by the people' (according to the Oxford English Dictionary), then democratization is, in its essence, a transformation of the role and status of the people. From being subjects of the top-down imposition of power, they become citizens with rights and agency (Leydet 2017; Magnette 2005). Democratic citizenship then means taking an active part in the deliberation of issues of common interest and the decision-making process on how they are to be addressed. Conflicts over the nature and practices of citizenship involve how citizens participate in politics in and beyond elections: how binding are elections in relation to other expressions of popular preferences and wishes; and whose voices are being heard in the public debate? In recent struggles for democracy, popular mobilization empowered by new communication technologies has played a crucial role in challenging existing power structures (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012; Diamond 2010). Participants of these new networked movements often attach less value to formal processes of participation, such as elections, which are regarded as less meaningful than direct action. Electoral fraud and the manipulation of elections by political elites further undermine the credibility of voting as a significant form of participation.

Both electoral and non-electoral participation raise issues of equality. For even if the conduct of elections guarantees that the same weight is given to each vote, economic, social and cultural conditions affect the effectiveness of citizenship. Access to education, information and material resources have a huge impact on the ability of citizens to express their views and demands. This is particularly pertinent in many of the recently emerging democracies in the developing world, where, for substantial sections of the population, these prerequisites of effective citizenship are severely limited. The chapter by **Bosch et al.** in this volume shows how poverty affects the ability of citizens to be represented on the national media agenda, but also the imaginative ways of disadvantaged communities to make their voices heard.

While the political dimension of citizenship can be understood as a vertical relationship between citizens and power, citizenship also includes a horizontal dimension of political community and cultural belonging. Democratic openings have provided hitherto marginalized or stigmatized communities and groups with new opportunities to express their identities and campaign for their rights and interests. In many new democracies, identity politics based on religion, ethnicity or nationalism has become a powerful source of popular mobilization and shapes post-transitional politics in a more fundamental way than traditional economic conflicts along the left–right division. Group identities provide citizens with a sense of belonging and provide support in situations of hardship. However, since identities are constructed on the differentiation between 'us' and 'them', they can also unleash uncontrollable destructive energies against those who are seen as a threat or somehow inferior. In this volume, the chapter by **Cheeseman et al.** provides insights into how the Kenyan society copes with the trauma of inter-ethnic violence that broke out in the aftermath of the 2007 election by defining new norms of public communication. The study by **El Gendi and Soltan** takes us inside the Coptic community in Egypt that, in the face of increased physical threat by Islamist attacks, is increasingly polarized between those who see the community as part of a national whole and those who understand themselves as distinct from the majority culture.

Community as an important dimension of citizenship raises a range of normative questions that emerging democracies have to tackle—but not only them, as established democracies are struggling with similar issues: what is the right balance between the common good and particularities;

how can dialogue across the boundaries of identities be encouraged and maintained; what is the scope of toleration within a given cultural context?

The Transformation of Power: Representation and Accountability

The transformation of power is the most conflictual aspect of democratic change because democratic institutions are designed to contain power with the aim to protect society from the tyrannical suppression and the uncontrolled grab of resources that characterizes authoritarian regimes. Regular and competitive elections are the most obvious democratic control mechanism. Yet, the degree of uncertainty they impose on the exercise of power has led to a large arsenal of manipulation—from electoral laws to distorting information during election campaigns and even physical violence—to secure the desired outcome (Collier 2009; Schedler 2013; Snyder 2000).

Like the transformation of citizenship, the transformation of power can be understood as comprising a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension involves the relationship between those who govern and the governed, which, in democratic politics, is constituted through elections whereby citizens delegate power (temporarily) to the government. The quality of representation is, therefore, at the heart of the legitimacy of power in a functioning democracy. Representation means acting on behalf of those who are represented, making sure that their interests are taken into account when political decisions are made. But representation also involves 'being like' those who are represented (Coleman 2011). Traditionally, issues of representation have been mainly discussed in terms of the socio-economic composition of parliaments and governments. However, the growing importance of cultural factors and anti-elite sentiments has forced politicians to invest great energies in 'being like' those they (claim to) represent and appear and behave like ordinary people. Consequently, representation increasingly takes on a performative quality (Saward 2010), with politicians dressing or speaking in a colloquial way or doing everyday things. Populist leaders in both emerging and established democracies have made excessive use of strategies of presenting themselves as a 'wo/man on the street' to distance themselves from an allegedly detached elite. More often than not, 'being like' the people has replaced substantive representation as 'acting on behalf' of the people. However, symbolic politics can play a vital role in fragile moments of democratization when the unity of a country or the transition itself is at stake. The skilful use of symbols can create powerful images that speak directly to the

feelings of the citizens; it can establish trust between the representatives and the represented that helps to accept difficult times, and it can bridge divisions and create a sense of common purpose. For example, when Nelson Mandela used the victory of the South African rugby team in the 1995 World Cup to wear the jersey and cap of the Springboks, he made a powerful statement about his vision of the future of his country. The Springboks are South Africa's top rugby team, and during Apartheid, the all-white club epitomized the exclusionary and racist character of the regime. By shaking the hand of the club's captain and symbolically identifying with the team, Mandela made the point that in the new South Africa, the past can be overcome and people of all races can live peacefully together.

Responsiveness is another, more specific aspect of representation which expects elected representatives to adopt what people want and translate these demands into policies (Diamond and Morlino 2004). But responsiveness is more than that: it involves a communicative relationship of meaningful dialogue between representatives and citizens. Communicative responsiveness constitutes a genuinely two-way relationship that requires politicians to explain political issues in an honest and comprehensible way, while at the same time opening up channels for citizens to voice their concerns and be heard. In fact, a great deal of the loss of legitimacy in emerging democracies can be traced back to a failure of political elites to be responsive to the needs and demands of the citizens, both in policy and communicative terms. In this volume, **Sorensen et al.** examine listening as an often overlooked aspect of responsiveness in political communication, and the potential and the limitations of social media in this process.

Moving on to the horizontal dimension of political power, it is the principle of accountability here that ensures that power remains contained and tied to its ultimate purpose of serving the common good of the society (Przeworski et al. 1999). Within a system of checks and balances, office holders are supposed to answer to other agencies and institutions to explain and justify their decisions. These institutions have to have the right and independence to investigate the dealings of power holders and to monitor and scrutinize their actions. Courts are of central importance in this system. But the media, in their watchdog function, also play a crucial role in uncovering misuses of power.

Accountability is one of the fiercest battlegrounds in new democracies, and most instances of backsliding and de-democratization can be attributed to the attempts of governments to hollow out the competences and independence of monitoring institutions. While restrictions on courts are

difficult to achieve, attacks on the independence of the press are a regular feature of post-transitional politics—ranging from denial of access to information, to censorship and even physical violence against investigative journalists. The chapter by **Vladisavljević et al.** in this volume examines the attack of the Serbian government on the ombudsman of the country as part of a general return to authoritarian manipulation. What this study also reveals is the dubious role of parts of the media who sided with the government in this campaign, arguably to secure their own standing within the current power constellation.

Elections

The close link between democracy and conflict is most evident when it comes to elections. They embody what democracy is about: the channel through which citizens can express their will and exercise control over power, a set of mechanisms that allow for the peaceful settlement of differences: if necessary, you can get rid of the 'king' without killing him. Yet, elections have been singled out as one of the main causes for the outbreak of violent conflicts in transitioning countries (Cederman et al. 2013; Snyder 2000). Competition between candidates and parties is what makes elections democratic, but it can be treacherous in divided societies. Rather than seeking common ground, opponents tend to exaggerate differences to set themselves apart from their competitors. Since, for the running candidates, the stakes in post-transitional elections are extremely high, most elections in new democracies are fought as zero-sum games, as a battle between good and evil, disaster and a shining future, and thus at an extraordinary level of aggression. Therefore, mobilization of collective, seemingly 'natural' identities, such as ethnicity or religious beliefs, has become the strategy of choice to secure votes in a volatile electoral environment (Mann 2005). Identity politics works on a sharp distinction between 'us' and 'them' and therefore invokes inter-group hatred that cannot be undone once the election is over. As a consequence, elections often work as an accelerator for the polarization of a society, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to engage in a constructive national conversation about the future course of the country. In this volume, the chapters by **Cheeseman et al.** and **Al-Saqaf and Christensen** investigate the communicative dynamics of elections and the role of journalism and new media in driving, or bridging, societal divisions.

Transitional Justice

Many new democracies of the past decades have emerged from war and violent dictatorship and thus have to find a way for citizens of both sides of the conflict—victims and perpetrators—to live together. Transitional justice provides a set of mechanisms to address a legacy of past abuse, violence and human rights violations (Annan 2004). The underlying idea is that through investigating the truth behind past atrocities and by holding perpetrators to account, the suffering of victims will be recognized and future repeats of such horrors can be prevented (Arenhoevel 2008).

In reality, however, the situation is often more complex and seldom allows full justice that would satisfy all who are involved. There is an inherent tension between justice that demands full responsibility for past deeds, on the one hand, and reconciliation on the other. This tension is particularly evident where democratic change is only possible if an agreement between old and new elites can be achieved. Especially, in cases where the military has been closely involved in the old regime and its atrocities, it is impossible to address the past openly without taking the risk of bringing the transition to a halt. In these cases, wide-ranging amnesty provisions are the most likely outcome, which will inevitably violate the sense of justice of those who have suffered.

Of the four MeCoDEM countries, two countries—South Africa and Serbia—have gone through processes of transitional justice, but in very different institutional settings and with different outcomes. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission embarked on a set of hearings, broadcast to the general public by the national broadcaster SABC, where victims were invited to give evidence of their experience during the Apartheid regime. Perpetrators were also given the opportunity to speak and some were granted amnesty. The main emphasis of this process was on reconciliation. In Serbia, in contrast, the trial of Milošević was conducted outside the country by the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, and due to its formal nature, the emphasis lay on justice. However, the prosecution by the ICTY was widely seen as foreign interference and arguably prevented a process of reconciling divisions between nationalist and pro-European internationalist camps that characterize Serbian politics until today. Kenya experienced a similar conflict when Uhuru Kenyatta and others were charged by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity during the post-election ethnic violence in 2007–08. During the 2013 election campaign,

while investigations against him were still ongoing, Kenyatta was able to portray himself as being caught in a postcolonial struggle against 'Western' justice—and won the election.

A Communication Approach to Democratization Conflicts

Democratic transitions, whether eventually successful or not, are times when old certainties are fundamentally challenged and new world views struggle for domination. These struggles are essentially communication events where different groups—sometimes violently—promote their interpretation of reality: who is legitimized to govern; whose voices are to be heard in the public realm and who is excluded from the conversation; who is 'us' and who is 'them'; what is a good society (and a good democracy for that matter); and how are past, present and future linked? Studying democratization conflicts as communicative contestations is based on a constructivist approach to the formation of social reality (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Searle 1995). From this perspective, it is not primarily the objective conditions—for example, economic inequality or different religious beliefs—that cause conflicts, but the way in which these conditions are interpreted and represented in public discourses. For differences to become divisions, they have to be communicated in a way that resonates with the values, experiences and expectations of the wider public. The words that are used and the stories that are told provide the interpretative framework within which risks and gains, friends and foes, the past and the future are evaluated and decisions on further action are made. As W.I. Thomas famously stated: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Chandler and Munday 2011). In other words, while conflicts are socially constructed through shared, but disputed discourses, they have real-world consequences, as people act upon the interpretations and beliefs they hold about the world around them.

These communicative contestations are played out in and by the media. Even though a great deal of human communication is unmediated, taking place in physical spaces such as homes, town squares, tea houses and so on, these views and voices only become relevant and part of the collective conversation if they are represented by the media or shared through digital networks. The dependency of modern societies on the media as arena of public communication means that the way in which democratization

conflicts are communicated is, to a large extent, determined by the media's rules of operation and their ability to shape the public agenda.

However, acknowledging the central role of the media in modern democratization conflicts does not suggest adopting a media-centric approach that ignores other forces that shape the course and outcomes of these contestations. Rather, we conceptualize the role of the media as being part of a communicative space of public debate that includes a broad range of actors who interact with the media in their attempt to promote their own frames and narratives of ongoing conflicts. This view is informed by the notion of political communication systems developed by Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), according to which political communication is understood as a field of interdependent actors (politicians, journalists) who compete with each other over the control of the public agenda. At the same time, both sets of actors have to adjust to and cooperate with each other in order to achieve their goals. Even though Blumler and Gurevitch argue within a system-theoretical framework, they challenge the dominant view in media studies that sees politics and the media as two distinct systems, each operating within their own institutional structures and norms (see, e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004; for a critical discussion of conceptions of 'media systems', see **Rantanen** in this volume). Instead, they focus on actors who are autonomous but dependent and pursue different goals but with the same means. This ambivalent relationship between political power and the media is the source of continuous struggles over the boundaries of autonomy and control each of the actors has, and these struggles intensify as the less predictable the dynamics of public communication become. Since transitions are times of heightened insecurity, it comes as no surprise that the tensions between political actors and the media frequently escalate into open confrontations and hostilities that not only damage the antagonists, but have disastrous effects on the quality of public communication.

Democratization and the associated thrust towards a more open and pluralistic arena of public communication is a massive shock to the routines of interaction between media and political power. Left without the instruments of direct censorship and facing the uncertainty of competitive elections, politicians in emerging democracies use whatever weapons are available—from threats to manipulated ownership and new forms of 'information warfare'—to secure control over the public agenda, and ultimately public opinion. They are met by journalists who might be economically vulnerable, but who have embraced the opportunities opened

up by a free (or freer) press for developing their professional ambitions (Voltmer 2013: 133–160). As a consequence, the relationship between politicians and journalists often resembles a war zone of attacks and retaliations, where truth and mutual respect are the main casualties. Yet, the significance of the notorious 'media wars' lies beyond the obvious power struggle between media and political actors; they are part of a broader transformation of the values and norms that govern public communication: what can be said in public and how; what is the dividing line between critique and disrespect; what degree of extremism is tolerable; how should conflict and consensus be balanced; and so on. These normative challenges affect all participants involved in public communication—that is, not only journalists, but equally political authorities and citizens who, thanks to social media, are now playing a more active role in public debates.

In their search for a new normative framework, most journalists in emerging democracies turn to Western models of journalism as guidance to navigate through the uncertainties of transition and the cataclysm of 'media wars'. And indeed, the norms of truthfulness, critical investigation and balance that define Western models of journalism are endowed with a universal appeal, closely linked to the proper functioning of democracy and an enlightened public sphere (see Christians et al. 2009). However, transplanted to an environment whose culture and politics differs markedly from Western countries, it is often unclear how these norms can be put into practice. The chapter by **Lohner et al.** in this volume explores how journalists in the four countries covered by the MeCoDEM project reflect on journalistic norms and how these norms work out in the volatile context of regime transformation and social tensions. The case study by **Cheeseman et al.** further illuminates the dilemma between the norms of press freedom and peace in the aftermath of the post-election inter-ethnic violence in Kenya in 2007–08. They argue that while a more consensus-oriented reporting style has helped to prevent further violence in the subsequent election in 2013, this has also undermined the moral authority of journalists. Meanwhile, media assistance organizations who are running training programmes for journalists worldwide have become increasingly aware of the problems caused by a simplistic transfer of Western journalistic norms and practices. As **Drefs and Thomass** show in their analysis in this volume, adopting a more context-sensitive approach that takes into account cultural perceptions and political constraints has opened up new challenges for international NGOs whose organizational and financial structures often do not allow for sustainable long-term engagements.