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Public media and public theology: At loggerheads or partners in complexity?[1]

ABSTRACT

Media criticism, both from inside the journalism and media studies fraternity and outside, such as theology, often depart from reductionist normative functionalist and critical political economy perspectives. Examples from the former perspective include complaints from theologians that the media set the agenda, also relating to matters of religion, and that the content the media provide does not contribute to a healthy, moral and peaceful society. Media researchers who adopt critical perspectives often argue in turn that the media are tied to elite capitalist interests and values and contribute to the marginalisation and suppression of the disenfranchised in the deeply unequal post-apartheid South African society.

Arguing that these and other normative approaches fail to come to grips with the complexity of the media in a postmodern society, this article firstly provides an overview of the field of communication and media studies. Secondly the field of public theology is addressed as an example of an approach in theology that has seemingly tried to narrow the gap between modern and postmodern conceptions of knowledge and research. Thirdly the article outlines complexity theory, as it was proposed by Paul Cilliers in *Complexity and postmodernism* (1998), as an approach to media research that is able to avoid the pitfalls of traditional normative approaches.

In sum the article argues that complexity theory does not preclude a ethical stance towards the role of journalists and the media in society, but that it enables research to deal with uncertainty and the so-called "end of meta-narratives", including Christianity, without succumbing to total relativism.

INTRODUCTION

According to a headline on page 10 in the Afrikaans Sunday newspaper *Rapport* of 19 February 2012, the NG Kerk (Afrikaans for "Dutch Reformed Church") has lost 20 000 members in the last year, and about 10 000 in the year before that, apparently due to the "rapid secularization of urban Afrikaans speakers". By the way, no less than 320 reactions from readers to that single report were posted on the internet-website *of Rapport* before the item was closed for comment (see http://www.rapport.co.za/Suid-Afrika/Nuus/NGK-lidmate-20-000-minder-in-een-jaar-20120218). Many of the comments related to reasons for leaving the church and various arguments and counter-arguments were expressed – in an often robust manner – to say the least.

But the church is arguably not the only public institution under pressure, and although you might not read about it in the public media all that often, journalism itself is deemed to be in a serious crisis. Many newspapers are rapidly losing circulation and advertising income and especially in the Western World a great number have closed down or reduced staff in an effort

to survive. Serious scholars are already predicting the demise of the professional journalist, to be replaced entirely by the citizen journalist and "User-Generated-Newslike-Content" (Hirst, 2011) in cyberspace.

Will the journalist and the "Dominee" (Afrikaans for reverend) end up begging for food on the same street corner? And on that corner, besides arguing about the formulation, tone and spelling of the beggar's note, what will they say to each other? I leave the contribution of the Dominee to your own imaginations, but for the journalist, I am prepared to act as conduit, all be it on my own terms. As independent researcher of the profession, I will try to steer away from the often reductionist discourse of journalism by using academic jargon and including ample quotations from media studies scriptures in my argument – something I am sure the Dominee will relate to.

The theme we deal with here is analytical perspectives on the relationship between public theology and public media. The reason why the relationship is questioned in the title of this article refers to the unease, even outright hostility, that often exists between the parties.

I can imagine that it must be frustrating for theologians to try and spread the Gospel through the public media. If truth be told, many Christians must be angry that their good name and image are often tarnished by the so-called news values of the public media which result in stories of conflict and scandal to be preferred to "good" or substantive news. Some theologians might also feel that the media are only interested in "celebrities", even in matters of religion, while the rank and file must watch from the side-lines. Furthermore, some social commentators and theologians often take the media to task for content that is regarded as immoral and harmful to their sensibilities, believes or children (see Biernatzki, 2003;Van Rooyen, 2008).

Although the response from journalism practice to complaints from readers, including church goers, is often rather dismissive, aggrieved theologians might find it reassuring that they have strong allies in the journalism and media studies research community. Many media researchers consistently argue that the public media is a undemocratic, inaccessible, sensationalist, commercialised and unethical. Journalism educators, including myself, therefore work hard to instil in their students a sense of civic and ethical responsibility, empathy for the marginalised and disenfranchised and a commitment to make the world a better place.

Thus, the first point to register here is that there exists a noticeable gap between journalism theory and practice, particularly in relation to questions of the ethical conduct of many practitioners.

But before I turn to the substance of media criticism originating from media scholars themselves, a very brief overview of the theoretical field of communication studies must be provided. This will indicate not only the high level of complexity in the field, but how it is often reduced for practical and strategic reasons.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Journalism and media studies is situated within a broad communication studies framework, which includes sub-fields such as inter-personal and inter-cultural communication, political communication, public relations and advertising, amongst others (DeFleur & Dennis, 1994). Even if we narrow the field down to mass communication alone, the scope of paradigms, approaches, theories, models etc. is still too wide to attempt a summation here. But at the risk of oversimplification, two kinds of theories can be distinguished: objectivist and interpretative (Griffin, 2000).

Objectivist theories search for the Truth (with a capitol "T") and try to approach objectivity; they are reductionist, deal with cause and effect (by controlling variables); value explanation

and predictability; require validation and experimentation; and use quantitative methods (ibid.). Interpretative theories, on the other hand, search for different truths; recognise subjectivity and search for multiple meaning within texts (ibid.). They value complexity, understanding and emancipation, and use qualitative methods (ibid.).

Craig (1999) identifies seven communication research traditions – listed here in descending order of objectivity (i.e. becoming more interpretative). First is the socio-psychological tradition, one of the oldest in mass communication, that is interested in cause and effect research, for instance about the harmful effects of violent content on television on children. Second is the cybernetic tradition that had the telephone as inspiration for its theorizing. The well-known Shannon/Weaver-model of linear communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) belongs to this tradition. Third we have the rhetorical tradition, which dates back to Ancient Greece and deals with public persuasion. Fourthly there is the semiotic tradition, in which language is theorized as a sign system. The socio-cultural tradition is fifth on the list, and argues that social reality is a construction through language. Sixth is the critical tradition with its critique of capitalism and power; and seventh and last we have the phenomenological tradition, the most interpretative, in which experience is valued above all else and theory develops from the ground upwards.

Roughly corresponding to the split between objectivist and interpretative theories, media studies historically developed along two branches – a positivistic and a critical paradigm respectively (Du Plooy, 1995). Within each branch, but also independent and adjacent to them, a variety of approaches and theories developed, often by incorporating ideas and methods from other disciplines, from philosophy and psychology to linguistics, literature studies and sociology. Examples include technological determinism, information society theory, poststructuralist/postmodern, postcolonial and Afro centric approaches and normative theories (Fourie, 2007).

Within these reduced paradigms two popular theories, namely normative functionalism, part of the positivist tradition, and critical political economy, a critical theory variant, are often operational. Normative functionalism presumes that the media should contribute to social cohesion, development and well-being by performing its assigned functions well – such as providing constructive information, education and entertainment, as well as allowing media access to different social actors and groups in order to achieve "pluralism" and strengthen democracy (Fourie, 2007). On the other hand critical theories of political economy argue that the mainstream capitalist media are inevitably tied to elite power and interests and will therefore work against the emancipation of the marginalised and disenfranchised in society (ibid.).

As I tried to indicate above, there are numerous interesting developments ongoing between the somewhat dated signposts of functionalism and (certain variations of) critical theory. Particularly noticeable are certain critical-cultural approaches that have incorporated post-structural theories as for example, by Foucault and others on the links between discourse, power and knowledge (Foucault, 1990). Valuable influences from sociology include the field theory of Bourdieu, which produces important insights regarding the place of media as a structured field of cultural production related to other fields of power and influence in society (Bourdieu, 1989).

However, despite these many divergent views in media studies, public debates on the performance of journalists and the media in general often still centres on rather dated and reductionist conceptions of the role of the media in society. This is rather difficult to understand, especially in light of so many profound changes in the media and journalism around us for at least the last decade and more.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

With the rise of the internet and forms of new and social media this so-called bottom-up approach

to journalism has gripped the imagination of many critics of industrial mainstream journalism. The title of a recent book by Dan Gillmor (2004), *We the media,* captures this idea. Especially in the last decade the perceived boundary between the mass media and mass audiences has broken down considerably, to the extent that commentators like Gillmor now talk of "the people formerly known as the audience".

Also for the church, it is now possible to publish itself in the public domain to a far greater extent that was ever possible. In other words, access is no longer under the exclusive control of the so-called gate-keepers of the public media. The role, activities and performance of members of the NG Kerk on the internet and social media, including Facebook, are for instance currently the focus of post-graduate research at the journalism department of Stellenbosch University. Traditional print outlets of the church, such as the *Kerkbode* and some academic journals, have established an online presence.

So, the question could be raised why a relationship with the public media is still deemed important for the church and theology? Is it because of traditional perceptions that mainstream Afrikaans newspapers like *Die Burger, Beeld,* and *Volksblad (*for decades close allies of the ruling National Party and NG Kerk during apartheid) are important, or is there a coherent current strategy at work in the engagement between theology and the public media?

Just as many media researchers have yet to wake up to the idea that journalism in the new media is now taking place more and more as an expression of popular rather than elite culture, Christians will find it ever more difficult to influence and determine the nature and content of discourses in the public domain. In the past, influence over the editor of one of the prominent Afrikaans newspapers meant a measure of control over the level of the public debate in many centres of power and sections of society at large, but those days are long gone.

I am not denying that many people still watch SABC-TV and read many newspapers and magazines, but the fact of the matter is that the balance of power in the relationship between the media and audiences has shifted irrevocably. For the audience in general this trend could be empowering, for it is now possible to make your voice heard almost immediately in response to journalistic and other forms of media production. Particular segments of an audience, such as Christian theologians, now have the ability to promote their cause, albeit in growing segmented niche-market conditions. The problem with this type of publication is that it can become insular – in other words it is the online-version of preaching to the converted.

But, on the other hand, more traditional forms of "top-down" mass media established their own patterns of in- and exclusivity, with arguably much less options for popular choice and counter-expression. One such form of counter-expression in and through the media originates from public theology.

PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND MEDIA CRITICISM

My remarks up to now have been directed at Christian theology and the media in general, but of course theology is no less a complex and diverse field than media studies. The aim is not to engage in an in-depth theological debate (which falls outside me area of expertise), but even a cursory glance reveals that public theology is concerned with "how the Christian faith addresses matters in society at large" (Pearson, n.d). He continues (ibid.):

> Public theology assumes that it is relevant for all humanity, not just Christians. It should be conceived from a perspective that recognises both the marginal location of the Christian faith in a post-Christendom world, and the value of other disciplines... . Public theology is located as one voice among many in the marketplace of ideas... .Unlike other types of

theology, it does not seek to "convert", but is concerned with the well-being of society.

Commentators who try to explain the transition from modernity to post modernity often refer to the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (1984). According to a generally accepted interpretation, Lyotard argues that modernist "meta-narratives", including those of Christianity, have been surpassed and marginalised in a complex postmodern society. If the quotation from Pearson above is interpreted correctly, then some versions of public theology represent an effort to narrow the gap between modernist and post-modernist positions in theology.

In fact, current academic discourses in public theology (see Caputo, 2007; Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology-website, n.d.) have seemingly incorporated postmodern philosophical influences already. When reading academic literature I often get the feeling that we are all recycling the same ideas – often just by using some alternative definitions and terms. Given the discursive and structural interconnectedness of the academy and the inclusiveness of discourse, it could hardly be different, at least that is what postmodernist scholars like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu would argue.

Then again, we must also guard against (too much) cynicism – that deadly vice that journalists often fall prey to. Especially with the inspiring examples of Christians like Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu looming large in public theology, one is quickly overwhelmed by shame when you embrace the passivity of the arm chair. Who in his or her right mind can feel satisfied with the state of humanity and our influence on our environment – near and far? I suppose it is testament to the scale of our problems and challenges that some fall to praying and others to swearing.

In media studies those on the praying side include media ethicists, who argue that better ethical standards and performance by journalists will improve not only their media output, but society in general. Their sentiments will arguably be compatible with those of some public theologians who, amongst many other issues, seem concerned with the role and performance of the public media.

At least three levels of approach to public media from public theology seem obvious. Firstly, public theology would arguably approach the media in order to spread the gospel (with a small g if not a big one). Secondly, and related to that, because public theology is interested in the "world's agenda" and wants to improve society on a practical level, it would be important to take part in discursive struggles in the public media. Thirdly, on moral and ethical grounds some public theologians might also be interested in improving the quality of media content available to the public.

Based on my very limited knowledge of public theology, I would argue that media criticism from that quarters probably still centres on relatively traditional normative functionalist and critical elements. The fact that both functionalism and critical theory work towards a utopian society will arguably appeal to public theologians who have transferred Christian visions of heaven to an earthly paradise. But the question arises whether traditional normative media paradigms can adequately describe the dynamic and complex media environment of the 21st century? The crux of the argument here is that a clear break with modernist meta-narratives of rational progress and universal ethics is vital in this regard, and the challenge then is to find a way of describing the media in all its complexity from a postmodern perspective.

In this respect public theology has seemingly already taken a first step – to break with narrow dogmatic interpretations of founding meta-narratives, but this leads to the crucial next question: Are both media ethicists and public theologians ready to view society, including the media, as a complex phenomenon that is impossible to describe, understand, explain, predict, control or reform (as a positivistic conception of theory and research would have it – see Fourie, 2007).

COMPLEXITY AND POSTMODERNISM

The framework below is taken directly from Cilliers (2005:257), where he outlines the characteristics of a "critical understanding of complexity", which he distinguishes from a "more strictly mathematical and computational" (positivist) view:

1. Complex systems (like the media – GJB) are open systems.
2. The operate under conditions not at equilibrium.
3. Complex systems consists of many components. The components themselves are often simple (or can be treated as such).
4. The output of components is a function of their inputs. At least some of these functions must be non-linear.
5. The state of the system is determined by the values of the inputs and outputs.
6. Interactions are defined by actual input-output relations and they are dynamic (the strength of the interactions change over time).
7. Components on average interact with many others. There are often multiple routes possible between components, mediated in different ways.
8. Some sequences will of interaction will provide feedback routes, whether long or short.Complex systems display behaviour that results from the interaction between components and not from the characteristics inherent to the components themselves. This is sometimes called emergence.
9. Asymmetrical structure (temporal, spatial and functional organisation) is developed maintained and adapted in complex systems through internal dynamic processes. Structure is maintained even though the components themselves are exchanged or renewed.
10. Complex systems display behaviour over a divergent range of timescales. This is necessary in order for the system to cope with its environment. It must adapt to changes in the environment quickly, but it can only sustain itself if at least part of the system changes at a slower rate than changes in the environment. This part can be seen as the "memory" of the system.
11. More than one description of a complex system is possible. Different descriptions will decompose the system in different ways. Different descriptions may also have different degrees of complexity.

According to Cilliers (2005: 258) the implications of these characteristics provide the following three insights: 1) "…Complex behaviour is possible when the behaviour of a system is constrained … but a fully constrained system has no capacity for complex behaviour either… 2) Since different descriptions of a complex system decompose the system in different ways, the knowledge gained by any description is always relative to the perspective from which the description was made... Although there is no a priori procedure for deciding which description is correct, some descriptions will deliver more interesting results than others. 3) In describing the macro-behaviour (or emergent behaviour) of the system, not all the micro-features can be taken into account. The description is a reduction of complexity. Nevertheless, micro-behaviour is not the result of anything else but the micro-activities of the system…".

In his book *Complexity & Postmodernism* Cilliers (1998:3-5, 6-7) first presented a similar list of characteristics of complex systems – according to Brand (2011) the "ten commandments of complexity[2]" - and also provided an example of a practical application (to describe economic systems) which I have re-adapted to the media here. Thus, following Cilliers (1998:6-7) closely

by replacing "economy" with "media", the following picture emerges:

In the media a large amount of elements are connected and that individuals and institutions interact through various forms of communication on different levels. These relationships change continually. A media element interacts with a large number of the other elements, including formal and informal, institutional and private.

The interactions are non-linear and small causes can have large results and vice versa, for instance, a short news item or comment can have a profound influence on other elements in the system. Media elements normally interact with those around them (but this does not preclude wide-ranging influence, look at for instance the international reach of the Reitz-4 video-saga - GJB).

The activity of a media element creates feedback loops which may eventually reflect back on themselves. A media item may have positive and/or negative feedback to journalists and audiences. The media system is open – it is virtually impossible to draw its borders. It is continuously influenced by political, economic, social and cultural systems. The scope of the media system is usually determined by the description of the system and is thus often influenced by the position of the observer. This process is called framing.

Since the media system is driven by various dynamics, including supply and demand, it can never be in a state of equilibrium, although stages of relative stability develop. Media systems are greatly influenced by their history. Any analysis that ignores the dimension of time is incomplete. A media element can only act on available (local) information. It does not know what all the other elements in the system are doing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA RESEARCH

In it is of vital importance that media system is open and that the act of drawing its borders has "political" implications. The selection of any particular aspect of the media – and the distance established between the researcher and the object of research - will influence the framing of the system and the research findings.

For instance, it is only when one draws an arbitrary boundary around "professional" or "industrial" journalism today, as Hirst (2011) proposes, that the question: "can journalism survive the Internet?" becomes salient. The fact is that the relationship between supply and demand in the media system is changing and therefore news outlets, particularly newspapers, are under threat. Their previous commercial models are failing, while a new model has not yet surfaced. Daily newspapers in South Africa have lost about 90 000 buyers over the past year, according to the latest quarterly data from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (http://business.iafrica.com/news/780944.html). Some observers view this as a crisis, because of the perceived link between traditional journalism and democracy.

Shifts in the media system have also affected discursive struggles amongst media theorists. Since the introduction of new and social media, the difficulty for media scholars to define what constitutes "journalism" in the 21st century has only increased. Professional journalism as we know it arose only in the late 19th and early 20th century as a result of various economic, political, cultural and social factors. Some commentators link the emergence of professional journalism to the high point of modernism in art and literature (Miller, 2012). Certainly, the ethos of professional journalism is tied to Enlightenment ideals of progress, rationality and scientific objectivity. A view from complexity indicates that professional journalism cannot be regarded, protected or saved in isolation from the media in general or the processes and pressures in society and the world at large.

Are lamenters of the perceived demise of professional journalism, such as Hirst (2011), really

saying that recent technological development which have placed more media in the hands of more people – and have given rise to the unprecedented exchange of information across existing boundaries – is bad for democracy? Or is it more a case of dislike for the things that people are saying, and the way that they are saying it? I realise that freedom of expression also contains limits and responsibilities within itself, but it is noticeable that many professed saviours, liberators and emancipators of the people often display elitist tendencies as soon as the people get a voice and use it. From the perspective of complexity theory, however, it is important to note that some conceptions of journalism may be under threat, but that the media are adapting and dynamically self-organising.

I am not saying that we are all victims of the "system", that the media is a "mirror" to society and that we should excuse immoral or unethical conduct by media practitioners on the grounds that they are "just messengers". But critics must also ask themselves why they often isolate particular elements or agents for analysis, while others are disregarded and ignored. I argue that a critical interrogation of these processes of in- and exclusion will unearth the dynamics of power and prejudice.

A view from complexity mean that we cannot view particular aspects of the media, such as (news) journalism, in normative functionalist isolation, as a cog in a wheel without a particular history and trajectory. This does not mean that all critical scholars, of whom many embrace historical materialism, always incorporate historical factors fruitfully into media analysis. Too much media criticism is posed against the backdrop of a mythical "Golden Age" of morality, ethics, fairness, and responsibility.

It is not theologians alone who employ this discursive strategy – at least they have powerful creation and salvation myths to refer to. Even without such obvious devises, many a media analyst build an oeuvre on the undisclosed departure point that the media of the not to distant future were undoubtedly of nobler persuasion and higher standard than current incarnations. Most disturbing is that no amount of counter-evidence from thorough historical analysis can shake the foundations of Golden Age-believers.

Much current criticism of new technology and social media, for instance, can be traced back to technological pessimism which date back decades and centuries. Listen to this quote by Henry David Thoreau in 1854:

> We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate…We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.

Replace "telegraph" with "internet" and it becomes clear that this sentiment is still prevalent today. But the question is whether this type of cultural and technological conservatism – albeit entertaining – provides much insight into the dynamics of a ever changing complex society.

On the other hand, I am also not making a case from technological and scientific optimism of the kind documented in Noble (1998: 52), to the effect that scientific knowledge will allow humans to "stretch the deplorable narrow limits of man's dominion over the universe to their promised bounds" and attain a "true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures". Clearly, this is a new kind of dogma which contributes little to our insight into the complex relationship between humans and technology.

On this front a rather more constructive engagement is that of Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz in *The techno-human condition* (2011:12). They state:

The essence of our response? Stop trying to think our way out of what is too complex to be adequately understood, and seek the sources of rationality and ethical action in our uncertainty and ignorance about most things, rather in our knowledge about and control over just a few things. Add to that – or derive from that – a degree of psychological and institutional flexibility that acknowledges and dignifies our ignorance and limits. Rehabilitate humility.

Currently much energy is often wasted by the media pot and theological kettle calling each other black, while a view from complexity would suggest that the nature and state of society in totality is simply beyond our understanding and control. This does not mean that we should throw in the towel, but it could be the beginning of the end of simplistic binary thinking about good and bad and efforts to point fingers and shift the blame. But we should realise the boundaries of our abilities and knowledge and accept that uncertainty and humility should be part of our approach as researchers.

However, as Cillliers (2005:259) postulates, this modest view from complexity does not necessarily imply a "weak one that should no longer be taken seriously". A view from complexity does not necessarily vagueness, Cilliers (2005) argues. He continues that "the fact that our knowledge is limited is not a disaster, it is a condition for knowledge (p.263). Limits enable knowledge" (2005:263). Or, as Cilliers (2002:83) elaborated elsewhere:

To keep on confronting these limits is what science – and life – is all about. Nevertheless they will remain limits in the sense that we cannot say what it is that eludes us. We cannot calculate what it is that escapes our grasp.

Neither does an acceptance of complexity necessarily implies a nihilistic or relativistic position. Cilliers (1998) argues that a postmodern ethics based on uncertainty does not necessarily mean total relativity or "anything goes". Cilliers (1998:136) refers to Lyotard's claim that "his analysis of the postmodern condition provides us with 'the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown'". Cilliers (2002:83) states:

What we need, therefore, are ways of dealing with that which we cannot calculate, of coping with our ignorance. There is a name for this. It is called 'ethics' and no amount of complexity theory will allow us to escape it.

Because we cannot have "perfect knowledge of complex systems…we have to reduce that complexity; we have to make *choices"* (Cilliers, 2005:264; original emphasis). Normative issues and ethical consideration, Cilliers argue, are therefore "intertwined with our very understanding of complexity" and are "not to be entertained as something supplementing our dealings with social systems" (ibid.).

Thus, in refuting the common charge against postmodernism that it precludes an ethical position, Cilliers (1998: 139) argues that "to fall back on universal principles is to deny the complexity of the social system we live in and can never be just". On the other hand "a practical theory of justice" would entail that "it becomes the responsibility of every player in any discursive practice to know the rules of the language game involved (ibid.:137). With reference to Lyotard, Cilliers continues (ibid.):

The rules are local, i.e. 'limited in time and space'... In following the rules one has to assume

responsibility both for the rules themselves and for the effects of that specific practice. The responsibility cannot be shifted to any guiding principles or institutions – whether they be the State, Church or the Club.

On the other hand, because each element in the system is ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole, it is also difficult to assign individual blame. As Cilliers (1998:5) states:

> When we look at the behaviour of a complex system as a whole, our focus shifts from the individual element in the system to the complex structure of the system. The complexity emerges as a result of the patterns of interaction between the elements.

We are thus at the limits of a more traditional conceptions of an ethical positioning towards media conduct and performance. On the one hand we seemingly cannot refer to universal principals and institutions, while it also becomes difficult to assign blame to individuals. Simply to blame the "system" is pointless. Where then should critics and researchers of the media look for direction in future? The short answer is that complexity theory provides a fruitful starting point, precisely because it does not claim to be a complete recipe for finding certain answers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article is not a call for media workers to be exempted from their individual and collective responsibilities. But a view from complexity suggests that we must base our norms and values in our limited and local knowledge of the past and present, and accept the law of unintended consequences as far as planning for the future is concerned. From this perspective any need to compare current media performance against that of the "good old days", or any other non-existent or unreachable goal or norm, will disappear.

I therefore argue that we must take serious the notion that elements in a complex system cannot comprehend the totality of the system. One of the implications of this insight is that we must include as much "local" factors in our media research as possible. Media scholars and critics, including public theologians, who want to approach a description of complexity must therefore shy away from reductionist and essentialist normative and objectivist theories and do "rich" contextual research.

For both media researchers and public theologians who have already shifted their normative expectations from "Truth" to limited perspectives on contextual "truths", the next challenge may be even greater. I am referring to the divide between theoretical conceptions of ethical journalism and institutionalised practice, despite numerous efforts to bridge the gap over many decades (see for example Black, Steele & Barney, 1995; Kieran, 1998; Keeble, 2001; Day, 2000; Retief, 2002).

Perhaps part of the problem to understand frequent "ethical lapses" in the media relates to efforts to apply ethics as a separate body of knowledge to the media as an independent system. A view from complexity suggests that ethical behaviour amongst journalists might be an (unintended) emergent property of the media, and part of the society in which they are situated. Debates about whether the media and journalists act ethically or not are thus not to be reduced to linear cause and effect arguments or case studies about scapegoats.

In the case of the relationship between public theology and public media it is thus the actual, existing interplay of complex local and dynamic interactions between numerous stakeholders, institutions and role players that will influence ethical outcomes, rather than any theoretical positioning of meta-narratives and paradigms. As part of the latter I include consecrated founding texts and ethical codes.

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(Endnotes)

1 The first draft of this article was titled "Against the grain: An argument for complexity in media analysis" and was presented at a symposium with the theme "Public theology and public media? Analytical

perspectives", organised by the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology and the Discipline Group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology at Stellenbosch University on 1 March 2012. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers who suggested improvements, including a proposal to change the original title to reflect the central argument better. The current title represents my effort in that direction.

2   Although Cilliers' (1998) originally listed 10 characteristics of complexity, the list was extended to 12 in Cilliers (2005).

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