

9 Theorizing Feminist-Democratic Media Activism via NGO Media Activism in South Africa

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Inequality in media is a global issue. Around the world, patriarchal and capitalist media industry structures center the needs of the wealthy and powerful. Media messages perpetuate disadvantaging images and contribute to social marginalization. Inequality in media denies participation, misrepresents identities, erases experiences, and silences voices. In order to combat issues such as mediated misrepresentation or regime-driven media policy, activism is needed. Media activism scholars employ a multitude of methods to cover a plethora of geographical and cultural contexts—existing research ranges from case studies of media activist groups (Min & Kim, 2012) and non-governmental organizations (Sorce, 2019c) to strategic analyses that investigate social media (Bosch, 2017; Chan, 2016) or data(fied) activism (Barassi, 2016; Milan, 2013) in grassroots initiatives.

Globally, NGOs play an important role in social change initiatives and have gained increasing interest within media and communication studies (e.g., Imison, 2014; Ngai, 2017; Ruelle & Peverelli, 2017). While existing scholarship has theorized certain types of media activism (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Milan, 2013; Tréré, 2018), researchers continue to struggle locating analytical frameworks that can grasp what is often a wide range of NGO activist activities steeped in particular political and sociocultural complexities. When it comes to activism by media-oriented NGOs, theorizing is still scarce.

In this chapter, I employ institutional ethnography to offer a theoretical framework for studying NGO-based media activism that is grounded in activist experience. Taking the activity of a successful South African media activism NGO as a launching point, this chapter develops *feminist-democratic media activism* (hereafter FDMA) as a theory that makes visible the democratic and feminist values inherent to NGO activism in the media sector of the Global South—including critiques of media power, political economy, access and participation, and intersectional media representation. In building theory from activist practice and activist experience, FDMA reflects the organizational values and the values of NGO workers, which includes how they understand the main issues in the mediascape, how they

organize and plan activities, and how communication and media figures into their action repertoire.

By integrating theoretical contributions from feminist activist theory (participation, equity, diversity, representation) and democratic media theory (people-centered media economy and policy), FDMA provides a frame to assess NGO activist activities, organizing, strategies, and impacts. In offering ethnographic insights from an impactful NGO, FDMA hopes to furnish a theoretical lens that enables the cross-cultural, cross-organizational, and multi-sited comparisons we are currently seeking. In order to situate FDMA as a viable theoretical construct that can capture the activities, strategies, and organizational identity of media activist organizing, this chapter provides a case study of “Media Monitoring Africa” (MMA), one of the most influential and well-known media NGOs in South Africa.

“Media Monitoring Africa”

MMA was founded out of the central concern that the national public broadcaster (South African Broadcasting Corporations) would not cover the first democratic elections of 1994 fairly due to its long history of government censorship. For over 25 years now, MMA has been monitoring South Africa media, organizing activist campaigns, and overseeing litigation procedures with oversight structures that were put in place to enable a fair media system. MMA recognizes the reciprocal relationship between media representation and production—the NGO seeks to help democratize the media system while improving ethical media content that reflects diversity and meets the highest standards of journalistic integrity. Per MMA’s mission statement, these efforts “will ultimately lead to citizens, media and the powerful respecting a culture of human rights and thereby encouraging a fair and just society” (About Us, Media Monitoring Africa, n.d.). MMA’s social justice-based approach could not be described other than feminist at its core—the NGO is invested in participation of diverse voices, with equal and intersectional representation. At the same time, MMA highlights the importance of media access, freedom, and quality—all values of media democratization.

Through its unique activist success and transnational rapport, MMA has also generated scholarly interest. Van Zyl and Kantor (1999) provide an overview of the role of media activism during the apartheid transition in South Africa and draw on the work of MMA—then called the “Media Monitoring Project.” The authors suggest that the NGO’s election monitoring was pivotal in underscoring the importance of media monitoring in democratizing societies. In particular, they laud MMA’s ability to advocate for media that center the needs of the diverse South African people while highlighting the importance of a democratic media industry. In my own work with MMA, I have argued that the NGO has been able to weave into the fabric of the South African mediascape through consistent yet innovative

activism, thereby securing an advantageous position for their campaigns (Sorce, 2019c).

Other scholars have focused on the feminist implications of MMA. Gallagher's (2001) book project discusses MMA's research that highlights gender misrepresentation and the missing involvement by women in the news media right after the apartheid era. She uses MMA's work to make her case for the continuing need for media monitoring and media activism. Another feminist global media scholar, Geertsema (2010) includes testimony from the Director of MMA in her study of gender-based activism. MMA has also been the NGO behind the 2010 and 2015 reports of the largest global initiative to monitor the state of women in media organizations and content—the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP). The GMMP is internationally recognized project for its work on monitoring, analyzing, and thus raising awareness on the global gender parity in media (Gallagher, 2001; Vega Montiel & Macharia, 2018). It is activism like this that makes MMA's commitment to feminism readily evident.

What Theories for Media NGO Research?

Media activism is defined to include the broad-based, non-hierarchical organizing through (digital) networks as well as grassroots or organization-led initiatives that seek social justice on a range of topics (Sorce, 2019b). The call to theorize activism, however, has been echoing through various areas in our discipline for the better part of two decades (Adelman & Frey, 2000; Chávez, 2013; Croteau, 2005; Frey & Carragee, 2007; Rodino-Colocino, 2012). Scholars have done so from various perspectives and with various emphases—*media activism*, *media advocacy*, *media democratization*, *media liberalization*, *media reform*, *media intervention*, *media transformation*, *media justice*, and *communication rights* are just some of the concepts literature in the area has yielded. Collectively, these terms advocate for equality and democracy as the overarching narrative and underscore the importance of an accessible mediascape that centers the interests of the people, reflects a plurality of voices, and remains free from government control.

Yet, Bennett (2017) critiques that media activism research dominantly focuses on case studies and particular strategic communication practices rather than working to expand our conceptual understandings about media activism's underlying ideals:

It may be useful for the development of the field, however, to add more explicit normative frameworks: principles of democratic activism, evaluation standards for various media strategies, and ways of talking about outcomes that enable comparisons across different sectors. These standards will help a field that is deeply concerned about values be more explicit about what those values are, and how to raise them to analytical frameworks.

He calls for the development of value-driven theories that harness experience-based evidence to furnish perspectives that also enable comparative scholarship. For MMA's NGO activism in South Africa, both democratic and feminist values play a key role. But what theor(ies) capture these values and activities?

In what they theorize as "democratic media activism" (hereafter DMA), Hackett and Carroll (2006) explain that media activists engage with media stakeholders on various levels, including the institutional setup of media organizations, the production process, the content, the audiences, and the cultural environment (pp. 85–86). Further, the authors provide three strategies for DMA through collective action. The first is to "reform or revamp the media field internally," which would involve media professionals taking collective action through unionization and a self-determined focus on ethical critical investigation (p. 52). A second strategy is to "create new and parallel fields," which involves the creation and financial support of alternative media. Finally, a third strategy is to implement policy change, media literacy education, and foster media advocacy groups.

The DMA approach engages a systemic perspective that hinges on democratization of the mediascape at large, which does not hold in its core cultural transformations that respond to issues of representation or equal participation by marginalized voices. However, the specific work of media NGOs with social change and equity agendas often falls in between systemic and cultural critiques. Organizations such as MMA exist in the "border zones, at the seams between system and lifeworld," in sites can become catalysts for "social movement formation and challenges to system logic" (Hackett & Carroll, 2006, p. 55). As such, NGOs working on media activism require an integrative theoretical approach that can also capture cultural issues surrounding the signification work of media texts.

Feminist theorizing about media activism latches onto the cultural critique with a focus on gender. This line of theorizing critiques the lack of women's involvement in the production of media, misrepresentation of women in media texts, and the resulting cultural marginalization. Importantly, intersectional perspectives have offered additional layers to doing activist work in contexts such as queer migration (Chávez, 2013) or black liberation (Jackson, 2016). In their model of *women's media action*, Byerly and Ross (2006) seek to "illustrate how women manifested their agency in creating . . . a feminist public sphere" (p. 100). Their findings yield that women activists primarily aspire to increase the amount of information about women available in the media and to stop media stereotyping. Second, the authors found that participants seek to mobilize other women and increase the coverage about women in media. Byerly and Ross thus argue that their model fits "any organized effort on women's part to make changes in established media enterprises or to create new media structures with the goal of expanding women's voice in society and enabling their social advancement" (p. 101).

For the South African context in particular, however, Geertsema (2010) found that the “professional-technical approach” to feminist media activism, such as “gender mainstreaming,” does not facilitate long-term impacts in patriarchal cultural values (p. 84). As a media activist NGO, MMA employs monitoring as a main activist tool. Gallagher’s (2001) book project on media monitoring and advocacy situates the necessity and goal for monitoring groups in the critique and creation of symbolic visibility for women. Within the scope of a feminist critique, she roots media advocacy in the form of monitoring as “based on the belief that the public can play a role in determining what stories are told, and how” (p. 8). Hoynes (2005) explains that media monitoring and research “produces knowledge that has a cultural authority that activism lacks” (p. 107). Yet, MMA has been able to situate itself as an element of the South African mediascape despite the fact that the NGO employs activist communication and action repertoires (Sorce, 2019c).

This study of MMA responds to Bennett’s (2017) call for media activism theory by showcasing how activist practice can become a site for theory-building while paying particular attention to the core values that shape media NGO organizing. As noted by Gallagher (2001), scholars should keep in mind the push and pull of theory and praxis, and between action and research: “It is this reciprocity between action and research that defines feminist media studies and that contributes to its intellectual and political force” (p. 14). In this study, I synthesize participant knowledge inductively in order to let lived experiences become reflected theory and translate praxis into conceptual ideas that have the potential to inform other contexts and activist-oriented research projects. By basing theory on experiences and actions beyond the Western context, this study is also an attempt to let activists speak from the margins and decolonize African knowledge production (Willems, 2015).

Studying NGO Media Activism Through Institutional Ethnography

In order to study MMA’s particular activist case in South Africa, this project employs an ethnographic approach. Scholars have studied NGOs through ethnography in order to provide descriptions about their specific behaviors, rituals, or practices (Lewis, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Fisher, 1997; Markowitz, 2000). However, these approaches cannot provide insights into how the NGO’s activities relate to structural dimensions in an institutionalized context, such as the media. MMA is a culture-sharing group and I was interested in learning about the NGO’s practices and values along with its team members’ experiences and convictions. At the same time, this meant relating practices and experiences to the larger systemic structures in the South African mediascape to understand how these values emerge.

Canadian feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith coined an ethnographic methodology that is born out of a feminist paradigm shift (Smith, 1974)

and seeks to account for the underlying factors that embed research participants in certain sets of social organization. Smith (1987) calls this methodology institutional ethnography (hereafter IE), explaining that this approach focuses on uncovering the various “ruling relations” that affect all aspects of our social experiences (see also Smith, 2005; 2006). These relations, she explains, are mediated by institutionalized processes “which together organize, coordinate, regulate, guide, and control contemporary societies” (Smith 1987, p. 152). One of those institutionalized ruling relations that mitigate social experience is the media (Sorice, 2019a).

After previous interactions with MMA while co-leading a study abroad program to South Africa, I had been impressed by the prominent position the NGO was able to secure with stakeholders such as the public broadcaster, print newspapers, and online media organizations. I returned in 2016 for a six-week stay in Johannesburg, where I was welcomed as a visiting scholar and provided access to MMA’s proprietary monitoring software, sat on meetings, and aided in the production of reports. This immersion into the daily routines and culture at MMA allowed me a unique standpoint for this IE of NGO media activism in South Africa.

During my time in Johannesburg, I employed three data gathering techniques. First, participant-observations of MMA’s daily routines, activities, and organizational processes, among others recorded at team meetings or special events with other activist groups. Second, individual interviews with all members of MMA, including members of their Board of trustees, as well as media professionals and other activist organizers whose NGOs maintain coalitional ties with MMA (a total of 23 recorded conversations). Third, I conducted textual analyses of MMA’s public communications, including their website statements, promotional materials, and other organizational documents. Building on this data, and in the spirit of inductive research, I develop FDMA as a theoretical reflection of MMA’s organizational activities and experiences around three central values: activist identity and practice, media democratization for public interest, and fostering feminism through projects and organizational identity.

The Activist Values of Media NGOs

The impetus behind MMA’s formation was South Africa’s transition to democracy from the segregational system of apartheid. The public broadcaster played a key role in the maintenance of the regime and was used as a mouthpiece for the government (Sparks, 2009). In that sense, MMA’s very existence is political, as an oversight structure that monitors and intervenes. MMA’s intervention and campaigns are rooted in a monitoring approach, which translates into specific activist practices, such as legal actions or protesting activities.

Organizational Identification

The Chairman of the MMA Board, Prof. Tawana Kupe, immediately explains: “The core of what they do is monitoring . . . but they do much more than monitoring. They also do advocacy.” He explains advocacy in terms of their structural activism with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the nation’s public broadcaster: “We’re big on media advocacy. . . . That is why we’re right now at the forefront of the SABC cases.” What becomes clear from the Chairman’s description of MMA’s advocacy work is that he strongly associates it with their mission to improve the political economic structures of the South African mediascape. In their individual in-depth interviews, many MMA members identified the links between media monitoring (“the research”) and the NGO’s activist activities. As Hoynes (2005) explains, media monitoring is often a “critical component” of media activism (p. 107). At MMA, media monitoring is the basis for media critiques and activism. The Chairman explains:

By monitoring, you get the empirical evidence of what’s happening. Based on that empirical evidence . . . you either promote good practices, or you campaign against bad practices in order to improve the broader media environment and promote freedom of expression.

MMA monitors and analyzes activities in the South African mediascape. On the basis of these analyses, MMA members coordinate activist activities. Phakamile, a social media coordinator for the children’s project, correspondingly notes: “You see, we do the research and then we can go out and say ‘This wasn’t fairly reported.’ We never protest without monitoring evidence.”

The interview prompt around MMA’s identification as a *media activist* organization received overwhelming enthusiasm from interviewees. Motshabi recalls the first time she heard of MMA: “They were known for their activism . . . ensuring that journalists cover topics fairly and with balance . . . and holding the SABC accountable.” She further explains that MMA’s relationship with activism was something that “drew” her to the organization. Similarly, Mike recounts that he first learned about MMA during his introductory media studies seminar at the University of the Witwatersrand. He explains: “We read about them in our textbook. . . . I think the textbook said they did research and activism . . . yes, activism, I remember.” Wellington summarizes:

By and large, I think the work that we do is activism. Whether you call it that or you don’t call it that is another thing. . . . Some would consider activism as getting dirty and being in the streets and running around. Which we do, time and again, with our picketing and all of that, but

mostly our work is around analyzing content, and that's activism. Litigation and advocacy, that's activism, so I think we are. Whether we call ourselves that is something else.

Interpersonal Identification

MMA members personally identify with activism as well as denote MMA "as an activist organization." Amanda summarizes: "I am personally very interested in activism. Back in Australia, I have always worked with organizations . . . LGBT and community initiatives, for example." Similarly, Motshabi articulates that her own experience as a "black woman underserved by relevant media programming" spurred her interest in doing activist work herself.

With the exception of one MMA team member, all NGO employees identify MMA as a *media activist* organization, though many later softened their statements and favored the term "advocacy." Amanda, a communications officer at MMA explains this when she contemplates the connotations of activism: "Someone might hear 'agitator' or 'protester,' rather than someone who wants to get the public's attention by saying: 'Hey, they're covering this wrong and this affects you.'" Thandi, leader of the media policy unit at MMA, also notes that the term "advocacy" might be a cultural preference. She recounts her own experience of watching her parents protest during the apartheid era, explaining that these memories give her a very specific "notion of what activism is, and what it requires of people . . . untiring attention and energy, always involved in the cause, instigating true political change."

Throughout the conversations with MMA members, interviewees continuously underscored how they personally relate to activism. For an NGO that engages in contentious actions surrounding media issues, a close-knit team with aligned value orientations is key. Louis, Amiot, Thomas, and Blackwood (2016) suggest that "greater activist identification" leads to "stronger intentions" to engage in activism, and to increase the "activist social network size" (p. 244).

Activism as Practice

While MMA members often describe MMA as a "watchdog" or "monitoring" organization, both activism and advocacy are an integral part of their organizational identity. Clarifying these two terms is important, as interviewees explain their own definitions of the two terms and how they relate to MMA's work. In the academic literature, the terms "media activism" and "media advocacy" are often used interchangeably, though scholars might have a personal term preference that influences the term they choose (see also Croteau, Hoynes, & Ryan, 2005; Jansen, Pooley, & Taub-Pervizpour,

2011). In the case of MMA, the NGO facilitates advocacy and performs activism. Special programs coordinator Carol explains how she relates to activism and advocacy:

An activist is somebody [who] is willing to lobby even their own neighbor to adopt a particular idea. Yes, there's activism [at MMA]. . . . Advocacy to me is on someone else's behalf, and activism is directed to a particular community.

As Carol's testimony shows, activism is part of civic engagement, built into the sociocultural fabric of democratic societies, with the goal of immediate social or political change. Advocacy, then, is often on behalf of others, where people or organizations lobby, advocate, raise awareness, or litigate for external entities. In the case of MMA, they do both. An example of MMA's advocacy work is when MMA performs media monitoring for a nonprofit to help them secure funding for their community media projects. Advocacy, however, does not fit the scope of MMA's activities when MMA members take to the streets and protests.

MMA frequently engages in protests and picketing—a clear form of activism and a classic action repertoire in social movements (Tarrow, 2006; Tilly, 2000). As a form of collective action, protesting is also employed by social change NGOs. Motshabi, a newly hired social media editor and rural media literacy coordinator at MMA, recalls:

I came to MMA right about when [Communications Minister] Muthambi put herself and [President] Zuma in charge of the SABC. One of the first things I did as a new team member with MMA was tape a big “X” over my mouth and go to Constitution Hill to protest [media] censorship.

Mike similarly summarizes that protesting is “the best outlet for civil society organizations to make their demands heard to the media corporations.” In sum, MMA engages in activism on issues such as government censorship or media regulation.

What becomes clear from conversations with members of MMA is that activist ideals and activist work manifest in three ways: MMA members reveal their own personal identifications and experiences with activism, denote the organization itself as an activist organization, and identify activist actions (such as protesting) a key contentious action of their NGO work. These lived experiences translate to theorizing in that they identify three core values of doing media activism work on the level of activist practice alongside personal and organizational identification with an activist identity.

The Democratic Values of Media NGOs

As an NGO with a main focus on the media, MMA pursues media democratization in various ways—the NGO engages in media reform campaigns to

improve industry structures, launches educational programs to foster more equitable conditions in newsrooms, and also advocates for citizen-oriented media policy and regulation, to name a few. Thandi's testimony about the historical importance of activism in South Africa's particular context leads to the discussion of democracy in the South African mediascape—one that has been undergoing the process of reform and democratization since the end of the apartheid regime (Barnett, 1999; Hadland, 2011; Sparks, 2009; Teer-Tomaselli, 2006). A core concern, according to MMA's Director, is the public broadcaster, the SABC.

Media Democratization

An illustrative example from my field work with MMA concerns the SABC crisis under former President Jacob Zuma (2009–2018). This particular encounter between the NGO and the public broadcaster showcases that a central democratic value of media NGO activism concerns democratic media policy and a media industry that operates in the interest of the public. In 2015, Zuma and his former Communications Minister Faith Muthambi (2014–2017) passed an amendment that granted the South African government exclusive power to appoint and regulate the SABC Executive Board. This board is not only in charge of programming decision—including the prime time news hour—but also oversees the digital news media channels and public radio stations across South Africa. In 2016, the SABC Executive Board terminated eight journalists to align the public broadcaster's newsrooms closer with the African National Congress (ANC), the governing party.

In direct response, MMA launched an institutional suit based on constitutional laws that specifically forbid government control of media and also demanded an official inquiry through the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), a regulatory body that ensures broadcasting in the public interest. As Mike explains: "The Constitution grants . . . non-governmental organizations to lobby for issues that are in the public's [interest] and to try and create pressure around that." In addition, MMA helped launch a coalitional campaign that organized protests against SABC censorship, together with the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and the Right 2 Know Campaign (R2K). As Amanda explains: "The SABC's power is forceful and stable. . . . Through the protests, people will know that this is an issue that pertains to them."

At the subsequent ICASA hearing, MMA Director William and Head of Policy Thandi delivered the four coalitional demands for the future of media policy at the SABC: First, to immediately reinstate the eight terminated SABC journalists; second to prohibit Muthambi's SABC policy that prevents the public broadcaster from covering protests; third, the removal of Hlaudi Motsoeneng as SABC Chief Operating Officer; and lastly, to dissolve the SABC Executive Board appointed by Muthambi and President Zuma. Both William and Thandi recall this experience as an act of "activism" where

“we acted as MMA to actively ensure that the SABC serve the people, not the government.”

Public Interest Media Advocacy

MMA’s actions around the SABC crisis reveals the NGO’s commitment to democratic values that underscore the importance of third-sector organizations to advocate on behalf of public interest. The NGO also actively makes use of activism, such as protesting and litigation, to challenge government control of the media. A free, democratic, and public interest media industry is understood as the cornerstone of a democratic society and with it values such as people-centered policy and balanced programming require activism. To intervene in the very structures of the South African mediascape is democratic media activism (Hackett & Carroll, 2006) that goes beyond sporadic campaigns. MMA’s organizational practice reveals that continuous monitoring, oversight, and activist action is needed to ensure that media operate in the interest of the public.

The Feminist Values of Media NGOs

As a monitoring organization, MMA operates as an oversight NGO that bases its activist programs and special campaigns on content analyses of media reporting. MMA has invested into a proprietary content analysis tool that runs online, called “Dexter.” This tool aggregates news texts from the salient news outlets in South Africa (public and commercial) and media monitors at MMA can upload transcriptions of radio and television newscasts in all nine official languages. Monitors can then search the data corpus for keywords, repetitions, and assigned tags. These content-based insights then serve as the basis for MMA’s monitoring reports, for example, to reveal how election news coverage critically omits gender issues. The NGO thereby recognizes media’s pivotal role in cultural understandings of identity and how more equitable representation can facilitate more positive perspectives.

Fostering Equality as a Goal

MMA has had a “Gender in the Media” project since its inception. “It was a big part of our very first monitoring exercise,” William explains. The project includes content analyses that point out misrepresentation in media content (Banjac & Dibetso, 2014) and interview-based studies of gender-based workplace discrimination in South African media corporations (Dibetso, 2013). Mike further explains that MMA’s “research on women in the media also focused on gender-based violence.” While the “Gender in the Media” special project specifically has feminist goals, MMA has found ways to bring feminism into other projects and special programs.

An analysis of MMA's organizational documents reveals that 15% of MMA's total published reports specifically focuses on gender, which include both structural inequalities in the newsroom and content-specific critiques. Aya explains: "We are constantly also seeking out opportunities [for] projects that speak to gender, but also the empowerment of women, or improving how media report and how people understand feminism, understand gender, and related issues." Additionally, 80% of the remaining special project reports, though not specifically focused on gender, centers goals of diversity and equality. Aya explains: "[E]ven in our analyses [of] our media monitoring that we do on an ongoing basis . . . we all consider feminist views in the media, gender-related matters, how the media communicate these, and how they are understood."

Organizational Feminism

Beyond representational aspects, MMA members also began connecting their activist and democratic values to feminism. Wellington explains: "I think we do activism as a human rights-based organization, and I know to me, feminism falls within that frame. . . . Our ideals as an NGO, yeah, they do fall into that [feminism]." In their individual interviews, MMA members addressed the question of feminism in two different ways: the organizational structure of MMA and feminist work culture. The conversations included discussions about how many women (of color) worked at MMA, how they contribute, why they are important, and why intersectionality in workers makes an organization stronger. We also discussed how MMA lets its team members set their activist agenda and how the organization's minimization of hierarchical decision-making allows for multidirectional input.

MMA members' identification of the NGO as a "feminist organization" is just as important as the feminist goals of their actual activism. Aya explains: "As a culture and how we interact with one another. You don't see the same linear power structures that you see perhaps in other organizations." This identification stands in sharp contrast to the dominant critiques in feminist organizational studies, where scholars continuously lament the hierarchies, gendering, and sexism present in organizations (Acker, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 2005). The interview data suggests that MMA's denotation as a "feminist organization" also becomes emblematic of how workers' feminist ideals can translate into intersectional, equity-driven hiring practices for NGOs.

During a conversation with three MMA monitors, we brainstormed together what feminism means to them. Thandi comments, "feminism . . . it's challenging the dominant ideologies of male representation." Aya adds an intersectional perspective:

Gender, definitely . . . also the LGBTI community, which has a difficult cultural standing in South Africa . . . And with that, I would consider race to be a feminist issue, as well as class . . . socioeconomics. I think

it does cut across those categories. It's not just looking at the empowerment of women, but you need to understand there are various issues that affect different groups that need to be paid attention to when you look at feminism as a whole.

It is this acute intersectional awareness of identity, difference, and equity that yield interpersonal identifications with feminism as a social ideal at MMA. Carol discusses the role of race and class for MMA's organizational profile. She explains: "I was the first poor black woman from Soweto to work at MMA. My being here was political. I hope when they find a replacement for me, they will consider another poor black woman. We are needed for perspective." Scholarship on intersectional hiring practices and workforce composition dovetail with Carol's plea (Acker, 1990; Healy, Bradley & Forson, 2011).

While MMA promotes feminism through its activism and internal organization, the language of feminism remains absent in their public communication. Instead, MMA has formulated a "Theory of Change" (Media Monitoring Africa, n.d.; see Figure 9.1) that maps the path to citizen-centered media by advocating for ethical and equitable media that hold the powerful accountable. Yet, the formulation in itself is feminist because its social change agenda centers people—regardless of gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, or ability. Ferree and Martin (1995) explain that many NGOs have feminist goals but do not articulate them in their mission statements—a "tactical" omission to avoid backlash (see also Harding, Fort & Fotaki, 2013). Amanda explains: "It's similar to activism in the sense that the word 'feminism' spooks people. . . . [T]hey hear 'radical' rather than someone who wants to find out why policy entrenches patriarchy."

MMA enacts its "Theory of Change" through specific activist projects that tackle gender misrepresentation and inequities in the structure of the mediascape. MMA Director William explains: "We exist because we know that inequity in media exists. Whether it is around gender, or race, the problems are there and at MMA, we try to fix how these issues pan out in our media." Wellington also describes MMA as a human rights based organization, but one that promotes a feminist mission. Thandi similarly explains: "We deal with issues of race, issues of gender, issues of class and marginalization. We see ourselves as fighting for those rights, and you can't separate that from feminism." William recounts an early experience with news editors where their gender report laid bare the pervasive misrepresentation and its cultural implication: "On every angle we hit them, nailed 'em completely. . . . Then we were surprised that they didn't wanna see us again." As Hoynes (2005) explains, a "less blame-oriented approach" (p. 105) opens up more opportunity for productive dialogue between stakeholders—a lesson that MMA has learned. William's description of the negotiation of activism and feminism also specifically speaks to the cultural environment in which MMA operates. Amanda notes: "You're

MEDIAMONITORING AFRICA THEORY OF CHANGE

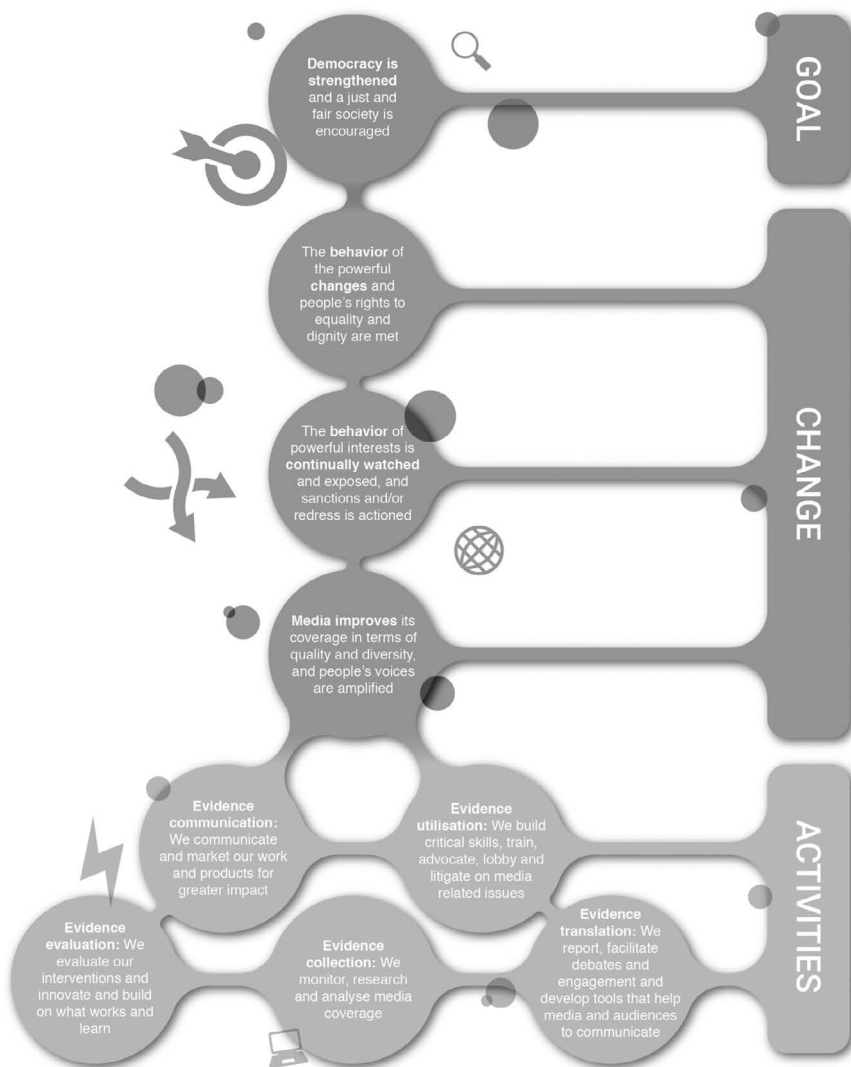


Figure 9.1 MMA's "Theory of Change" infographic.

Source: Courtesy of MMA (2018).

still there doing the activism, but it's just that the language you've chosen to use is, I guess, less threatening to some, like the publishers, or government." This echoes Geertsema's (2010) findings on the constraints of gender activism and overall backlash that NGOs experience in South Africa's patriarchal culture.

Theoretical Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

Taking the activity of a successful South African media activism NGO MMA as a launching point, this chapter develops *feminist-democratic media activism* as a theory that makes visible the democratic and feminist values inherent to NGO activism in the media sector of the Global South. In building on institutional ethnographic fieldwork, I chart three main values that anchor FDMA as a theoretical lens (see Figure 9.2): Activism as identity and practice, media democratization, and fostering representational equity alongside organizational feminism.

The activist node encompasses both interpersonal and organizational identifications with an activist identity, which can become important for the

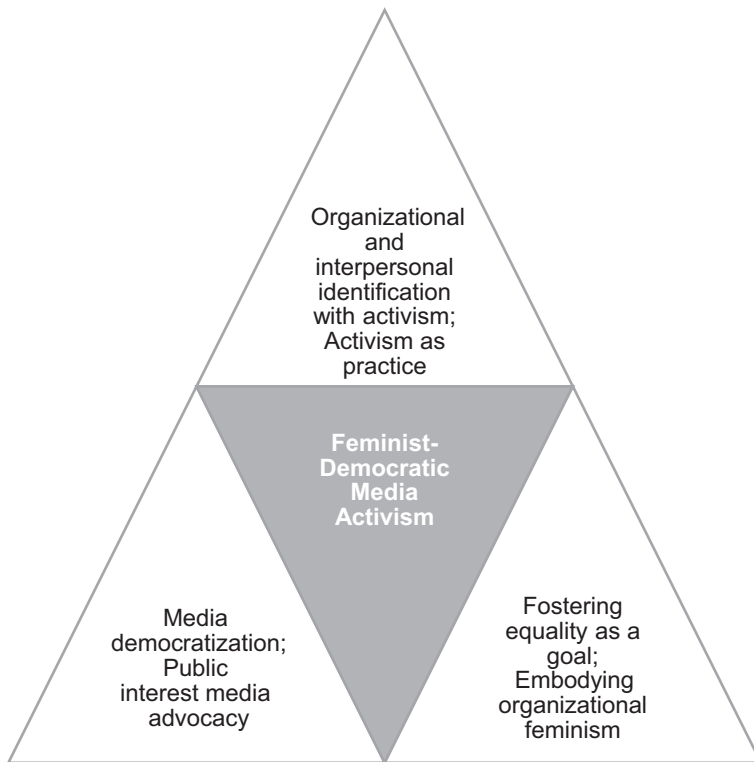


Figure 9.2 The cornerstones of feminist-democratic media activism in NGO contexts.

formation of a collective identity in the context of NGO work. Further, it implies activism as a form of contentious action that has become integrated into the overall action repertoire of an NGO. The social change agenda of NGOs working on media issues overarches the second node, democracy, which points to efforts of reform and public interest advocacy in the mediascape. Third, the feminist node denotes in how far a media NGO's organizational profile embodies and performs feminist values while explicitly campaigning for intersectional equality.

In building theory from real-life activist practice and experience, FDMA flags three important values of media activism, making them explicit and answering recent call for more nuanced theorizing of media activism (Bennett, 2017). By putting the "feminism" first, FDMA is also in itself a feminist gesture that underscores the importance of feminist-driven NGO activity of social change work. Ultimately, FDMA can thus provide a theoretical backdrop for future studies that assess NGO activist activities, organizing practices, strategies and campaigns, and even impacts on key communities in cross-cultural and multi-sited contexts.

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