

Contested transitions: Journalistic interpretations of democracy in Egypt and South Africa

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Research on democratisation has largely focused on institutional change, while less attention has been given to the discursive underpinnings of transitional politics. This paper argues that for an emerging democracy to grow roots, it has to be brought to life through communication in the public realm where the meaning of democracy is debated, contested and negotiated. Journalists play a key role in shaping the discourse of democracy in transitional societies. They select the voices that can be heard in the public arena and provide the arguments supporting or resisting democratic change.

This paper explores journalistic discourses of democracy in Egypt and South Africa – two countries that mark contrasting points in democratic transition. While Egypt is an example of a stalled transition following the capture of a dramatic uprising by old elites, South Africa is confronted with persisting problems of social inequality and limited citizenship twenty years after the first democratic election. The study combines data from semi-structured interviews with journalists on the one hand and the media content these journalists have produced during crucial moments of contestation during the transition on the other. The comparison of individual perceptions and professional output sheds light on the constraints and opportunities of journalism in an environment of political power struggles and social unrest.

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