

# race, class & other prejudices

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-tion, a good black man? Again, if one bothers to actually read the story, it becomes clear that it is his economic philosophy that wins him plaudits. As his *ideological position* is in tune with that of the press, his *race* becomes immaterial.

In both of these cases, the political and economic views of the actors are the primary variable in the reportage, and the issue of race is negligible.

One could extrapolate from these examples. If class interests and ideology are admitted as significant variables in South African news reporting, the picture that emerges is very different from that presented in the HRC reports.

Of course there is racism in the media. The privacy of black people is invaded, and crime and corrupt behaviour seem often to be put down to race. But crucial in all this is an unfashionable supplementary question that is never asked: what is the general *social position* of the large numbers of black South Africans dubbed criminal, threatening, nameless or unimportant? And what interests are at work in such representations?

The answer would appear to be that they are generally members of the working class, urban lumpen and rural poor. Or, in the case of corrupt managers or government offi-

cial, people whose behaviour threatens to besmirch the national image so dear to business interests.

In the case of the 'Johannesburg hospital crisis' or 'decaying CBD' of Braude fame, or widespread reports on 'incompetent' black managers, while race is certainly a factor, one might identify a 'subtext' which seems to evade Braude's psychoanalysis. By omitting to supply the *context* for such crises (e.g. drastic cuts in public spending driven by corporate pressure on government policy), the press unfairly put the urban poor and black managers in the firing line, while the real reasons for inner-city squalor and unmanageable institutions remain unspoken.

Can it be that the HRC and its researchers are blind to any dynamics other than race? Perhaps they have themselves been traduced by the vested interests that contour South African news reporting?

Racism is real, but it will always be found to articulate with other powerful forces shaping our social and political life. And the same goes for fashionable anti-racist rhetoric, suffused as it often is by self-interested agendas. If there is a hidden subtext in South African news, it is more complicated than the HRC reports suggest, and it remains to be exposed.

■ Eve Bertelsen lectures in media studies at Wits University



**VIOLET BOO**  
b. 1940

*Kaliphandw' igod' umunt' engakafi*  
- A grave is not dug before a person dies.

Makana was taken as a prisoner to Robben Island. His family and others did not believe that he was dead and waited for him to come back. I have shown the women of his family who are carrying the cross for him as they wait. All hope for the Xhosa people was taken away. But I also feel that there is hope for us today.

## media & markets

South Africa is a society where all things are defined by race, and the media are no exception. Journalists think in racist ways about both the stories they choose to tell and their audiences.

In print media, the continued use of racially-based newspaper editions points to the assumption that the reader's sense of news and interest is determined by his or her race.

In the old, apartheid style, the approach is to distribute 'white', 'black', 'Indian' and 'coloured' editions, an approach which perpetuates racial stereotypes.

On any given Sunday morning, a person living in a black township will wake up to a different edition of the *Sunday Times* than that distributed in formerly whites-only areas. This edition, which gives prominence to entertainment and soccer, is sold as the "soccer edition".

While all editions carry the same main story, other stories will be omitted from the front page, depending on for whom the edition is meant. The assumption is that the reader by virtue of his or her race will not be interested in particular stories. All editions come with supplements which are unashamedly racist in their approach.

On May 2 1999, a month before the last elections, all editions rightly carried a story on the president-to-be's possible cabinet on the front page, yet the main picture on the 'black/soccer' edition was that of the funeral service of a Bafokeng prince. The 'normal/white' edition ran a picture of the survivors of the London gay bar bomb.

A smaller picture of the London bar and the story were used in the 'soccer' edition - but the story about the rural prince of the North West province was omitted from the 'normal' edition. Instead, a story on the New Zealand rugby team was used, followed by a story on the disappearance of five schoolgirls from Kempton Park, a formerly whites-only area.

Both these stories were left out of the 'soccer' edition. In their place was a story about workers in Nigeria celebrating their regained freedom.

Also on this front page was a bar



Skin colour still determines story selection, says Zandile Nkutha.

tagging the entertainment news in the city metro, the 'soccer edition' supplement.

From the front page on this day alone, the choice of stories and prominence given to each in different editions shows that the publication has deliberately thought of its audience in racist ways.

A year later, on June 18 2000, amid Zimbabwe's turmoil prior to the election, the same newspaper carried a story about the leader of the Zimbabwean war veterans illegally occupying white farms. It was on the front page of both the 'soccer' and 'normal' editions.

However, the bar tagging the stories in the different editions was chosen on the basis of the race of the readers at which they were aimed.

In the 'soccer' edition, the picture of South Africa's biggest pop artist Brenda Fassie was used, with the headline, 'Caught in the Act'. It told how naughty Brenda gave away scandalous news about her new toy boy.

In the 'normal' edition the tag refers to stories about disgraced cricket captain Hansie Cronje and the British royal, Prince William.

In a post-apartheid South Africa, the reader's skin colour still determines the news he or she will get.

■ Zandile Nkutha is a political reporter on the *Sowetan*.

**Mike Robertson,**  
editor of the  
*Sunday Times,*  
responds:



If we are to accept Ms Nkutha's somewhat novel definition of racism, then the *Sowetan*, the paper she works for, would be among the most racist in the country.

We don't accept her definition, nor do we have any interest in engaging her in a debate based on such shallow journalism, except to say that in seeking to provide knowledge to readers, the *Sunday Times* recognises that some interests are shared, others are not.

The market will judge our success, but at this stage it would appear we are doing pretty well.

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