

Following the nature of the complaints that triggered it, the current HRC inquiry into racism in the South African media has tended to focus on media product, with its research seeking evidence of racism in news reporting. While the scrutiny of news texts is a standard activity in media studies, it is now generally agreed that the analysis of news involves a good deal more than canny textual analysis.

To be valid and reliable, a study of racism in the media needs to address the whole media cycle, engaging moments of production, distribution and consumption. In short, to acknowledge that news is generated by an organisational complex: media ownership and control; gatekeeping mechanisms; professional codes of journalism; marketing and distribution; and audiences.

In this context individual news items manifest as secondary symptoms of a complex institutional culture, rather than simple cause or result.

Which is not to say that every piece of research must fully cover all of these dynamics. But unless some sense of the whole frames and informs enquiry, it lays itself open to question.

Then there are the basic requirements of any worthwhile research project: a clearly defined question to be investigated; carefully designated data; appropriate design and methodology; and rigorous analysis and interpretation. As editors have been quick to point out, the HRC inquiry is deficient on most of these fronts.

But let us stay with textual analysis, since this seems to be the preferred tool. Central to such analysis will be one's definition of racist attitudes and precisely how these may be identified in news reportage. Here the reports of both the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and Claudia Braude take too much for granted.

Their analysis is informed by discourse theory, which asserts that language and narrative are prime sites for the securing and contesting of social meaning. But neither report addresses primary 'message characteristics'.

The key operational discourse in news items is a set of internationally entrenched professional codes: news values; categories of story; approved modes of narration; codes of news photography; headlining; captioning and general layout and design.

Serious news analysis sees these codes intersecting at every point with another powerful set: the local discourses (social and political agendas) of the place and time in which news is being produced. So one is dealing with two separate dynamics: the peculiar codes of news, and then the local frames and idiom with which they work.

What follows is simply a list of examples illustrating how the conception of news analysis outlined above might produce very different results from those of the HRC research.

First, news values. Not every event qualifies to become a news story. Events involving conflict or violence ('hard news') are strongly preferred. Crime, accidents, strikes and corruption are prime news fodder. They sell newspapers, and will be reported in ratio to various groups in the population at large. Since most South Africans are black, black protagonists and victims will predominate. So a bald count of such items does not reveal much.

These stories will also involve dramatic headlines and photos. This is grist to the mill of media worldwide, and not peculiarly South African. So hold 'hard news' as proof of racism.

What does matter here (and to their credit the MMP attempt this distinction) is whether the item suggests that race is in some essential way the reason for violence, crime or corruption. These are the items to isolate and submit to further scrutiny.

But even when we have a category of items which appear to be explicitly prejudiced, the thoughtful analyst will need to consider not just

& race, class & other prejudices



Racism is real, but class prejudice is the culprit that claims black media victims, writes Eve Bertelsen.

one variable (racism) but a number of variables. This can best be demonstrated by a quick look at the MMP's 'content analysis' and Braude's 'discourse analysis'.

Content analysis claims to be strictly systematic, quantitative and objective. Its strength is in testing single, independent variables. In the case of the MMP's work, a designated sample of items is coded against a list of 'racist' propositions and it finds high support in 'white' media for the view that blacks are violent, criminal and irrational and that black lives are unimportant.

(In passing, one might question whether narrative constructs – these 'racist propositions' – embedded as they are in complex news stories, can be objectively coded by content analysis. It would appear, rather, that every act of coding involved a judgement call/interpretation.)

But my point is a broader one. Content analysis insists that the unit of analysis (here, a racist proposition) should demonstrably belong to one and only one category. If there is any question that it falls simultaneously into two categories, new variables must be added.

On this score, it is instructive to compare the MMP's findings with the famous content studies of the Glasgow Media Group in the UK, published as *Bad News* and *More Bad News*. There the researchers found the British media culpable of vilifying the working class in the form of trade unionists and striking workers. The GMG's 'class' stereotyping bears an uncanny resemblance to the 'racist' stereotyping identified by both Braude and the MMP.

Workers are dirty, lazy, irrational, operate in mobs (are nameless, depicted en masse), prone to violence and so on. And yet these are *white* journalists depicting *white* workers. Which might give any researcher pause for thought.

So, hold the variable 'race' for a moment and test instead for 'class' (a factor shared by both sets

of data), and you come up with a different research question, and different findings.

Might there perhaps be an element of class prejudice in such representations? This seems highly likely, since the lower orders have habitually been depicted in this way in centuries of media and literature around the world.

So at least two important variables for a start then: race and class. More might be added. Racism is always permeated by prejudices of class, gender and other ideologies that operate in specific situations.

As both Braude and the MMP are only testing for race, and 'race' as a *catch-all* category, some of their findings are rather puzzling.

Yes, they admit, they find examples of both negative and positive stereotyping of blacks. Braude's account of the media's handling of Sam Shilowa's appointment as premier of Gauteng and Tito Mboweni's as governor of the Reserve Bank support my case. Shilowa is denigrated by the mainstream press, whereas Mboweni is showered with praise.

All Braude can conclude is that the first report is a reprehensible instance of racism, while the non-racism of the second is to be commended.

But if (since both men are black), we hold the variable 'race' here, and test for 'class' (vested interests, agendas, ideology), the finding is different. If we read attentively, we discover that Shilowa is a known leftist, and is appointing ministers from the SACP/Cosatu camp, all of whom are presented as a threat.

Whom do they threaten? They are explicitly depicted as threatening to business interests (and those of the newspaper itself). So, it turns out, it is their *class politics*, and not their *race* at all that is being denigrated.

And is Mboweni simply the honourable excep-

▶ CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



REGINA GONQA
b. 1932

Okwakh' okudile – Yours is what you have eaten.

With the loss of cattle owing to the Battle of Grahamstown, I have tried to show how the cattle, like mothers, can no longer feed their families or their children. They have nowhere to graze, nowhere to call home. Egazini was a terrible battle because it made life difficult for mothers and wives. The proverb I have used for this image deals with how sometimes you cannot call food eaten unless you have swallowed it properly.

race, class & other prejudices

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

-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 antiracist 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 BOOI
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.

STUDENTS DEFY TV GENRE BOUNDARIES

The M-Net Edit initiative was launched in March 2000 for creative, visionary, daring, bold and disciplined film and TV students.

R25 000 has been awarded to the winners

EDIT 2000 WINNERS

Short films

- No Sir, I'm not on the menu - University of Natal
- Holy Water - Laduma Film Factory
- Moonlight Film - Pretoria Technikon

Game Show

- Guzzle The Puzzle - Wits University

Animation

- Hoogenboosen Affair - Pretoria Technikon
- Newt - RAU University

Documentary

- The Small Silent War - Fatchetstroom University
- Shifa - Viva La Diva - Wits University

Entertainment/Magazine/Variety

- The Funk Experiment - Rhodes University
- In Site - University of Port Elizabeth

ESSENTIAL DATA

31 October - deadline for programme submissions

November & December - programmes aired on M-Net

March 2001 - The Edit Awards for outstanding talent

For info: edit@mnet.co.za

EDIT

Emerging Dynamism in Television
an m-net initiative

MAGICWORKS