

# The Trouble with 'Race'

## How it constricts our view of the world

Racism must go, few would dispute that. Better still: journalists should consign not just racism, but also the concept of 'race', to the proverbial spike, writes **Guy Berger**...

OUR APPROACH to race affects whether South Africa becomes an entirely race-free society, or if we remain racial but without the racism. It's the difference between a non-racial future where Nelson Mandela is a national hero, versus a multi-racial scenario where he is 'owned' and acclaimed only by his 'own' race.

The options are: a future where skin colour retains significant meaning, or an alternative where social differences (like class and language) cut across race, and where a common, over-arching culture emerges.

At the heart of this is the question: How do we as journalists understand race and racism? Here's an example. Transport your imagination to a workshop convened by the South African National Editors' Forum in Johannesburg last year. Participants are talking about a trial where three people get stiff sentences for murder and rape. The perpetrators are black men and the victims are white women.

You hear a journalist criticise a newspaper report that says, "the mainly black crowd at the court cheered the severity of the sentences". She asks why the colour of the crowd is singled out? It implies, she argues, that normally black people are not expected to behave like this. It conveys the assumption that blacks (in contrast to whites) typically regard life as cheap. The connotation is also that blacks usually side with killers of whites because it's evidently newsworthy when they don't.

Another journalist takes a different view. He says that it is precisely because of such assumptions that the story correctly highlights the race of the crowd – how else will whites be shown that their stereotypes are incorrect?

"Are you only writing for whites?" asks a third journalist.

A fourth journalist observes: "Because most whites so dehumanised most blacks, why should blacks give a damn about white deaths?" In other words, the stereotype has a real foundation. So, he proposes, it is indeed newsworthy that black people broke with type and showed support for the sentences.

You listen as the debate develops, and as it concludes without resolution.

So, is the report racist or not? The answer depends on your outlook about what race signifies, when it's a relevant factor and when its representation (or omission) entails racism. Here's my take on race theory and how it relates to covering this story:

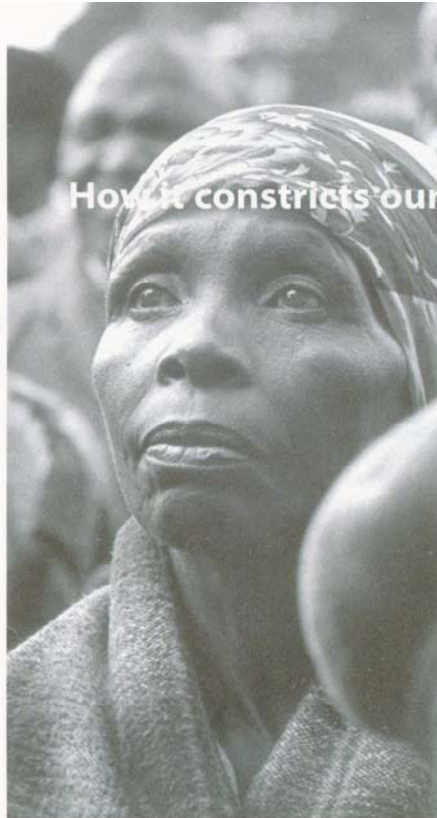
### RACISM RELIES ON RACE

In its 2000 report "Faultlines", the Human Rights Commission (HRC) says, *racism* is different from *racialism*. Whereas racialism entails value-free expressions about races, racism is unfair discrimination in terms of the Bill of Rights.

In a similar vein, US academic David Goldberg writes: "Racial differentiation – the discrimination between races and their purported members – is not in and of itself racist.

We speak of 'black business' and 'black self-respect' or 'Jewish political interests' without thereby demeaning members of the group to whom we refer."

Likewise, Tunisian theorist Albert Memmi states: "The description of a



difference does not constitute racism; it constitutes a description ... Ultimately, one becomes racist only with the deployment of a difference to denigrate the other."

There is no problem at a general level with this definition of racism as distinct from racialism. But how easy is it to separate the pair in practice?

Very difficult, would be the reply by French author Michel Wieviorka, who sees racialism and racism as terrible twins. In his analysis, there is little logic to distinguishing races unless racism is at play.

Certainly, South Africa has a close intertwining of racialism and racism. Consider a newspaper or a broadcaster that targets a group that – for reasons of class, residence, culture or language – still coincides with historically race-defined parameters. For example, *The Sowetan* serves mainly working-class readers who are still almost all black; the *Financial Mail* services upper-class readers who remain mainly white.

This racial niching risks a segregationist outlook where each racial 'community' is deemed to be interested only in its 'own affairs'. It is an outlook where the lives and loves, the dramas and deaths of 'other' races do not make news for the targeted race. In racial media, in other words, some races are more valued than others.

It may not be inherently racist to cater to audiences like this but media racialism can be a slippery slope to reinforcing racism. And this is because, both in practice and in theory, racialism works off a base of race. Racialism, without links to racism, is hard to imagine.

### RACES ARE MADE, NOT GIVEN

For there to be racism, there need to be races. But what count as 'racial' features in some contexts can in others be as socially insignificant and unnoticed as the number of eyelashes a person has. A complexion in South Africa that counts a person as 'coloured' is just part of the spectrum of being black in the US.

The key point, therefore, as the writer Antvar Brah puts it, is not race difference as if it were a self-evident fact, but instead who defines it, and how.

This view contrasts with those who see race as something natural. For example, the HRC's "Faultlines" report tells us that the idea of race "suggests that certain groups of people have common inheritable characteristics which divide them

from others, a kind of racial essence".

In short, for the HRC, we can embrace race – as an essence that we each inherit – in a value-free way, without having to take racism on board.

This is an assumption that runs directly against arguments by renowned race theorist, Anthony Appiah. For him, racial identity cannot rest on any essence – because this would falsely assume intrinsic qualities for all group members. Instead, he argues that races only exist as a social and historical construct.

Historian Robert Miles shows that Irish and Jews, today deemed white in the US, were previously treated as inferior non-white races. Miles puts it thus: "The signification of racial phenotypical features is not an end in itself. It is effected for particular purposes in particular periods."

Back home, Steve Biko built an oppositional 'black' identity against apartheid's divide-and-rule attempt to differentiate Zulus and Xhosas, set Transkeians against Ciskeians, polarise Africans from Indians, separate Indians from coloureds, and so on. In a way, Biko mirrored the Nationalist government's project of engendering among previously divided English and Afrikaners a common 'whiteness' that would defend against the 'non-whites' and especially against the 'Reds'.

What this shows is that because races are socially constructed categories with specific histories, they cannot be value-free.

Because races are made and not given, not only can they mean different things, but they also need not always be with us. At some point, black and white identities *can* become redundant.

### RACE RUINS OUR COMMONALITY AND OUR UNIQUENESS

Racial identity implies unity. Writes Goldberg: "When this identity is internalised it prompts identification, a sense of belonging together." The result, he says, is that racial differentiation also defines Otherness, and therefore excludes people defined as different.

In South Africa, it works like this: "I am white, because I declare you as different, as black". Or: "I am black-black because you are Indian, coloured or white." Racial difference, in short, is both chillingly interdependent and comes with a built-in tendency to become racial division.

Appiah warns, racial 'unity' can elicit a tyranny that conscripts individuals to specific 'races'. Racial solidarity and conformity then trumps individuality. Accordingly, no white can ever transcend racism; no black may ever differ with his or her peers. This coercive racial typing does not necessarily amount to racism – that is, in the sense of unfair discrimination – but it is not very different to it.

### RACE FAILS TO TELL THE FULL STORY

Besides highlighting division and hindering a vision of a race-free future, there is a further problem in retaining race – especially for journalists. This is that race presents, as British analyst Paul Gilroy argues, a basis for absolutists to see physical features as a factual basis for sameness (within a race) and difference (between races).

James Donald and Ali Rattansi observe, that 'race' produces simplified interpretations of complex social, economic and cultural relations.

Similarly, the writer Percy Cohen notes that racial formulations are reductionist: they claim that people can be explained by skin colour or other racial attributes, that is, by a single, simple cause. Yet, at most, race tells only part of the story.

This is a critical matter when it comes to journalism, because it impacts directly on whether the media can avoid racism and yet hold on to the idea that a person's race suff-

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designated TV1 channel, which also had a large number of urban black viewers. Advertising for Castle Lager led the way with some milestone commercials such as 'Train' (1984), 'Joggers' (1987), 'Musicians' (1987), 'Canoe Race' (1989), 'Reunion' (1989) and 'Homecoming' (1990). This discourse of apartheid-breaching advertising manifested itself across nearly all brands of beer, and by the end of the 1980s had found its way into the advertising of virtually all the major corporations.

In the post-apartheid period there have been some instances of racial stereotyping of whites in advertisements. Indeed, some advertisements seem to represent a form of sub-conscious white self-effacement in penance for apartheid. An example of this is the advertising campaign for Vodacom that depicts a white bagel (Jewish male) making a fool of himself. By including white onlookers who frown upon the bagel, who are thus identified with the black point of view, this campaign attempts to legitimise the pejorative nature of its representation.

In conclusion, stereotypes are group concepts and may not always be generally recognised as stereotypes. The more obviously pejorative forms of racial stereotyping do in certain circumstances occur in advertisements, but are rare. Establishing an adequate framework for criticising less obvious forms of racial stereotyping is a complex task; depictions that are currently accepted at face value may in the future be regarded as racial stereotypes. There has been a transition in the depiction of blacks in South African advertising from ethnic to westernised or cosmopolitan and middle class. In a context of relative underdevelopment, these affirmative depictions are in general more likely to be decoded as being positive, as evidence of democratic change and upward mobility.

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## Fighting for Fairness

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grammes that garner non-white audiences, and that some sponsors refuse to place ads on such programmes at all. The policy, known as "discounting", is pervasive, but was brought to light only in 1999 when an internal memo from a media representation firm was leaked, in which the company advised its sales staff not to place ads on so-called 'urban' radio stations, explaining that businesses want "prospects, not suspects".

Clearly, advertisers' preferences, which determine which programmes are deemed successful and are therefore likely to be reproduced, are always not based in 'market sense': investigation by the Federal Communications Commission found that some companies offered explanations rank with bias for their refusal to buy ads on radio stations with primarily non-white listenerships. A Latino-formatted station was denied an ad for Ivory soap because, a representative claimed, "Hispanics don't bathe as frequently as non-Hispanics". Other companies cited worries that "our pilferage will increase" if they advertised on minority stations, or said simply, "your station will bring too many black people to my place of business".

The point is not that corporate advertisers can be racist. Rather, the US media's commercial structure means that, whatever the intentions of individual writers, producers and editors, the bottom-line values of advertisers and owners are allowed to trump media's creative and democratic potential.

**White-owned media tend to view communities of colour through a lens of pathology.**

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faces to explain things, that race is automatically and intrinsically relevant.

If we understand that 'races' are really fluid results of historical processes of racialisation, we can see that they are far from being ever-present, let alone in a consistent form or intensity.

To apply this insight to the case of the crowd at the court, the point is that black South Africans are not essentially caring or uncaring about white murders – or vice versa. Such racial assumptions have to be tested rather than taken for granted. Instead of working within the simplistic paradigm of race essentialism, journalists reporting the story could simply have asked the crowd: "Why are you cheering?"

To the extent that some spectators explained they were present to demonstrate 'black' empathy with the victims' families, the story could have reported on exactly this particular racialisation. But maybe different, non-racial, answers might have been given.

### RACE OVERSHADOWS OTHER REASONS

To see race as a social construction rather than a birth-mark opens our eyes to the wider range of ways we are shaped and defined. It helps us put race in its place – which is alongside class, gender, nationality and the many other factors that influence who we are and how we behave.

Understanding racism's roots in racialisation means that we can begin to do journalism that is also opposed to sexism and xenophobia.

We must rage against racism and we must repair its damage. But if we really want to eradicate this disgrace, we have to go further. That means a quest to erase race from the prominent place it occupies in how we make sense of the world and how we seek our undecided future.

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### FIGHTING BACK

The various expressions and sources of media racism mean that media activists have many fronts on which to fight. Some groups, like the NAACP, call for increased representation of people of colour in the media, both behind-the-scenes and on the front page.

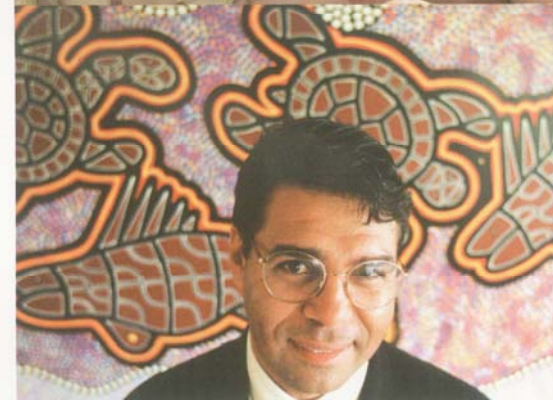
Others take on racist media directly: a campaign led by FAIR and others got the ABC radio network to reconsider including openly racist host Bob Grant in their lineup. Activists have encouraged local public TV stations to air documentaries on, for example, the role of US blacks in World War II.

Media activists also use research and monitoring to support their arguments. Recently, a coalition of juvenile justice

groups released a report on media coverage of youth crime, showing that, while crime involving young people is actually declining, the public's fear of such crime is increasing, in good part due to alarmist, misleading media coverage.

As well as talking back to media, activists also intervene in media, helping grassroots groups develop media skills and strategies to counter destructive coverage of their issues and also to serve as resources for reporters and hopefully improve coverage that way.

While fighting to improve mainstream media, media



activists are also increasingly creating their own. Access to new technology, while not a panacea, is allowing independent journalists and artists to create and distribute their own media, providing a vital alternative perspective. For example, both the Republican and the Democratic National Conventions in 2000 featured Independent Media Centres – ad-hoc, informally organised coalitions that supported dozens of alternative radio reporters, print journalists and film and videomakers who covered the conventions from a very different angle than the major media, including the voices of social justice activists, artists and social critics who were not being heard on the nightly news.

These encouraging efforts offer the best hope for moving toward truly diverse, anti-racist media. Ultimately, it will take a broad-based movement to demand structural changes in the US media industry – changes that would break up the dominant conglomerates, establish independent public broadcasting and promote strong, non-profit sources of information. Like other rights, the right to inclusive, fair media will not be granted. It must be won.

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