

The watchdog that never barked

{ or an investigation of the sin of omission }

by Ian Glenn

Let us start with some cold hard truths. Worldwide, there is rising pressure in wealthier states against immigration, particularly from Africa and the third world. In France, or Italy, or the United Kingdom, hostility to immigration has swayed election results and public policy. Nor should it be thought that this hostility is a feature of the first world only: a 2007 Pew survey found that two of the countries that had the most hostile attitudes to liberal immigration were the Ivory Coast and South Africa, with some 90% of South Africans opposed to any liberalisation of immigration policy. (See <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/607/global-trade-immigration>: "World publics welcome global trade – but not immigration".)

None of this is surprising to those in the know as publications from Jonathan Crush and others linked to the Southern African Migration Project have for years noted that one of the few things that unites black and white South Africans is hostility to immigration into South Africa of black Africans (for a list of SAMP publications, see <http://www.queensu.ca/samp/sampresources/samppublications/>).

And this is not an issue where the ANC has taken a different position from the population at large. At points, ANC cabinet members have claimed that uncontrolled immigration has caused government estimates for housing provision to be wrong and housing provision to falter (Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele, then Minister of Housing, quoted in *Business Report* 31 January 1997) and have argued consistently that jobs should be provided for South Africans first and foremost (see, for example, Labour Minister Membathisi Mdladlana in Klerksdorp in September 2005). While state security officials like former NIA boss Billy Masetla said, also in September 2005, that the issue of large numbers of Zimbabwean refugees (economic, or political) to Limpopo and the concerned reaction of residents was of "huge concern" there and that this phenomenon needed

urgent investigation.

Nor should it be thought that South Africa is alone in registering these pressures; in Botswana, the problems caused by the economic and social chaos in Zimbabwe and resultant illegal movement into Botswana have been noted regularly.

One of the peculiarities of South African media, then, might be how much more liberal (or indifferent) most local media are about something where public opinion is so strong and unanimous. This is a clear case where NGOs such as SAMP have made a case, based on historical and moral grounds that are strong, but far from overwhelming, that South Africans should accept that migration to South Africa from the rest of Africa is likely to continue and that South Africans should accommodate it. (For example, is it logical to expect local South Africans to feel strongly sympathetic to Zimbabweans on the grounds of historic mining immigration when Zimbabweans were stopped from coming to South Africa as miners from 1981?) What is clear is that SAMP and others, often with strong business or free-market interests, have carried a significant body of elite media with them, but done very little to persuade a broader public.

If 90% of the population in any country were against something, yet the local media either ignored the issue, or reported on it as though the majority were simply ignorant, or failed to try to persuade the majority that their views were incorrect, it would be natural to expect that, over time, the media would come to be seen as irrelevant, or that people would find ways of reading or interpreting media messages against the grain, or that other forms of political protest would make themselves felt.

This has happened here.

An alien by any other name?

One of the perennial objections of bodies such as the Media Monitoring Project to coverage of the problem of

uncontrolled movement of foreigners into South Africa is to object to the phrase "illegal aliens". The MMP and the South African Migration Project recommend that media instead use the phrase "undocumented foreigners". This may seem to be an attempt to get to the French phrase "Les sans papiers" (the ones without papers), but of course the problem is that the phrase is essentially euphemistic and tries to deny what is central to the hostility of many South Africans: that foreigners, who have entered the country illegally, are competing for resources and threatening their own status.

One of the problems world wide is that the sense of fair play of ordinary citizens and resentment towards those seen jumping queues or breaking the law is much stronger than lawmakers sometimes assume – something seen fairly dramatically in the United States where an attempt across party lines, with the support of President Bush, to regularise the situation of many illegal Mexicans, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, foundered on strong public resistance while failing to draw any strong public support.

In France, too, the phrase may seem palliative and to avoid any pejorative stereotypes but becomes simply a shorthand for the problem and certainly does not stop strong policing or the election of a Sarkozy whose tough talk about immigrant behaviour helped his election success. At its worst, the prim recommendations of many liberal pro-immigrant bodies seem like Orwellian Newspeak that refuse to consider many of the basic hard questions fuelling resentment: are some foreigners driving crime, taking away resources like housing and healthcare, undercutting locals in their search for employment? And, if they are here illegally, does that not matter?

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The reaction of media critics and the MMP to the xenophobic violence has been to blame the usual suspects – the tabloids, and in particular the *Daily Sun*. The MMP has in fact

Does the pandering perpetuate the xenophobia?

by William Bird

In a recent speech the South African Press Ombudsman Joe Thloloe noted that he had yet to receive a complaint against the *Daily Sun* or any other tabloid for that matter from a member of the tabloid's target audience. Instead, he argued, complaints tended to be made by middle-class people, or well-resourced organisations.

Indeed, it was MMP and its partner CRMSA that submitted a complaint against the *Daily Sun* based on its coverage of the xenophobic violence.¹

One of the questions that arises from this interesting observation is, why is it that members of target audiences do not submit complaints?

The reasons for this absence of audience complaint may well be because it requires resources, time, knowledge of the complaints

process, and of how to access it, time and resources to submit a complaint and follow through on the process.

Certainly, there has been a marked increase in action to raise awareness of the Press Council of South Africa, but it is in the interests of all print media for research to be conducted into levels of awareness and peoples' knowledge of and participation in the complaints process.

Another answer that is provided by the *Daily Sun*, among others, is that they are merely giving their readers what they

want and if there is xenophobia in the community then they are simply going to reflect it. Accordingly, the *Daily Sun's* readers are thus all happy and have little to complain about.

The problem with such a position, however, is that it quite clearly ignores the role the media plays in creating the world through the news and issues it presents. It is disingenuous to assert that the media simply reflects the concerns and environment of readers without the influence of clear editorial, individual, ideological and discursive choices and positions determining what is presented.

In addition to being clearly unsustainable, the impact of such an argument is that it abrogates responsibility of the media for its content, "we can't be blamed for simply reporting what is there".

Another concerning aspect of such an argument is that it assumes that their target market all share the same xenophobic view. It is one thing to suggest that some readers may have xenophobic views, but quite another to suggest that every member of the community shares those views, as a means of justifying or perpetuating them.

There can be little doubt that there is xenophobia in the communities that read the *Daily Sun*. However, the question arises as to whether this is sufficient justification for perpetuating stereotypes or ignoring basic media ethics. Taken to its logical conclusion, the reason a paper panders to the desires of its readers is to ensure that they get what they want and continue buying the paper.

This is a commercial imperative position that suggests commercial interests are what define and drive the news agenda. Certainly, it is true in many instances that newspapers and other

submitted a complaint with Press Ombudsman Joe Thlooe and the South African Human Rights Commission about the *Daily Sun*, arguing that it played a role in inciting or preparing violence by using the “aliens” tag and reporting negatively on foreign nationals in South Africa and in not condemning the outbreaks of violence early enough.

In an analysis based on their analysis of all media from 2007 and the first quarter of 2008, Media Tenor South Africa indeed found that the *Daily Sun* was the most hostile in its treatment of foreign nationals of all the media (“Lessons in the rear-view mirror: Reporting on foreigners in South African media”, 4 June 2008).

Yet, I would argue that before we can fix any kind of responsibility on the media, far more complex questions need to be considered. For a start, there are methodological problems with techniques that simply measure reports, without considering what the underlying reality is. A medium may emerge as “neutral” because it simply ignores problems and reports superficially on, say, visits by foreign dignitaries or the appointment of a foreign football coach.

Did the “serious” media warn us and urge government and local authorities to prepare? Did they report seriously and timeously on ongoing attacks on foreign shopkeepers? (They certainly did not in Cape Town in the case of the spate of murders of Somali shopkeepers.) Did they push for adequate responses to earlier outbreaks of murderous group violence such as the killing of 63 temporary security guards during the security guard strike? As the headline of an article by Jeremy Gordin and Eleanor Momberg in the 3 June 2007 *Sunday Independent* put it: “Security guards died like dogs. So who cares?” – but did they or any other papers follow up the concerns they raised? Did community radio work to integrate the communities? (Nobody has suggested they were inciting violence, though who would know?) Were they doing enough to convey the concerns of local residents to a wider public? Have our media shown how the network of anger and violence was set off and who was driving or controlling it?

The answer to all these questions seems to me to be “No” though they probably all need far more investigation. Neither the “quality” press nor the SABC nor other broadcasters have demonstrated that they have the resources – intellectual, moral, or material – to convey the reality of life for angry township dwellers or for foreign refugees living here.

They have not followed up or questioned group

violence or pushed for redress for its victims. If residents and criminal elements felt they could resort to theft and murder with impunity, that may be because the media have given this kind of violent crime so little sustained attention and done so little to press for police results – in comparison, say, to crimes involving white, middle-class or celebrity victims.

Local broadsheets and local broadcasters have, in other words, left a vacuum which the *Daily Sun* was left to fill in articulating the grievances of its South African readers.

Native sons?

Much of the criticism of local black South Africans in comparison to foreigners seems to miss the familial psychodynamics of the situation. When whites (or well-off blacks) complain about how hard-working and well-educated Malawian (houseboys, in the telling stereotype) or Zimbabweans here are compared to locals, they surely miss the point. From one legitimate point of view, to be part of a nation, native, born here (the etymology of nation is in *natus*, to be born) is to claim familial privilege and preference. Any family that takes in step-children or foster children and treats them as though they were its own and allows them familial privileges should expect resentment, hurt and rage from its own children.

A sense of entitlement, as native South Africans, is surely not unreasonable. It assumes that part of the new South Africa is expecting that some of the hurt and pain of the past and the suffering of one’s ancestors will lead to better treatment now, to not having to work for very low wages, to having some of the fruits of the new South Africa.

The expectation that poor South Africans should show a kind of generous acceptance of African brotherhood over their claims to preference as South Africans, or the remonstrations with poor black South Africans that they have not reciprocated the generosity of African states to South African refugees neglects the point that no other group in South Africa is willing to be this generous.

Government policy now explicitly demands that preference in advertised posts in business or state service

be given to native South Africans, black and white, over all foreigners, even black Africans, unless the circumstances are truly exceptional. For the middle and professional classes, in other words, being part of the family counts, and counts strongly, in our favour. As a not so hard-working or competent academic, or doctor, or bureaucrat, or as a businessperson bidding for a contract, I am, in other words, protected against competition from a foreigner who may be harder-working or better qualified or willing to work for half of what I am.

When it comes to the poor, however, the ANC and government and corrupt officials, as numerous commentators have pointed out, have failed to take proper care of those who might legitimately have expected it and probably needed it more.

Reactions to media

Given the arguments so far, it will hardly be surprising that media commentators seem to me to miss the force of Deon du Plessis’s defence of the *Daily Sun* in the *Mail&Guardian* of 12 June, when he argues that it stands for the home team, for the average working class black South African. Tabloids

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tend to be moralistic, chauvinistic and patriotic. While the MMP may complain about the *Daily Sun*’s headlines, they are here fairly pointlessly blaming the messenger rather than examining the causes of the discontent that the *Daily Sun* articulates. Unless it can be shown that the *Daily Sun* was consistently distorting the truth or blaming the wrong people, the MMP position will amount to a form of polite censorship.

Nor is it clear that the *Daily Sun* had much effect or that print media are in a position to affect popular sentiment in

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media rely on a commercial revenue model for their growth and existence. One view of this model is that it will always mean that newspapers will simply pander to the interests of capital.

While there is some validity to such a position, it is not solely built or sustained on such basic conditions. It is fair to note that commercial imperative will impact on the news agenda and content, as well as how it is reported. However, within this it is possible, essential in most cases even, to maintain and produce news that is ethical, accurate and fair.

It is critical for the media to adhere to such standards in order to retain their credibility, for without credibility in the long-term, they will fail to sell and papers will suffer from no longer being commercially viable.²

It is reasonable on some level to note that all media will necessarily pander to their audiences, either for commercial reasons or for other educational reasons, as a public broadcaster should, for example. Like so many issues, pandering to audience desires is a matter of degrees. Some areas are generally deemed clearly unacceptable by society. There may be, for instance, an audience who would like a media publication to provide child pornography and even tips and suggestions on child trafficking. In this and other cases, even though such a media may be commercially viable, there are valid laws and regulations that would prevent them from being sold on our street corners.

In terms of the media, the degree to which they can “pander to their audiences’ every desire”, as well as the degree to which they can ensure their credibility and professional standards is neatly set out in the broadcasters’ code and licence conditions and in the SA Press Code for print media. For print media, the code is implemented through a process of self regulation.³

A core assumption that underpins the need for such a code and self regulatory system is the need for accountability. Thus, when people have a concern or complaint there is a fair process in place to ensure that media can be held accountable to that code.

The principle of accountability is central to media best practice. Holding government to account is one of the key democratic functions of media. One of the strengths of the *Daily Sun*, and there are many, is that they often succeed where others fail, especially in holding members of government to account. Often such accountability takes the form of following up on service delivery stories, or Department of Home Affairs disasters where people have waited for years to get an ID. The *Daily Sun* steps in and a few days later the problem is resolved and the relevant person rapped over the knuckles or subjected to disciplinary proceedings.

In just the same way as the *Daily Sun* holds government to account, it is equally important that they too, as well as other media, are held accountable when they err. This means more than adhering to the code and rulings of the press ombudsman, but also setting an example and abiding by the standards to which they judge public institutions, particularly in terms of taking responsibility for their actions.

Perhaps the most fundamental reason for rejecting the argument that a medium is simply giving their readers what they want, lies in understanding and accepting that the media doesn’t ever simply reflect reality, but versions of it. If media portray xenophobic, racist and or sexist stereotypes, they are doing more than simply reflecting views that may be held by some of their audience. They are also creating and perpetuating them. Not

only are such stereotypes at odds with the fundamental values of our constitution, in doing so they undermine other rights, including the intent and limits of freedom of expression.

Tabloids like the *Daily Sun* have introduced millions of readers to newspapers. They have great power and the potential to make a significant contribution to realising the values enshrined in our Constitution. To do so, however, they need to find ways of being sensational and colourful, without undermining peoples’ dignity and humanity. With the possibility of a Media Appeals Tribunal being set up, let us all hope they can.

Endnotes

1. (A copy of MMP’s full complaint can be found on <http://www.mediamonitoring.org.za/tabid/60/ctl/ArticleView/mid/375/articleid/251/Media-Monitoring-Project-submits-complaint-about-Daily-Sun-reporting-on-xenophobia.aspx>).
2. Credibility is not however the most important element of commercial success for tabloid media. Children of the target audience who read the *Daily Sun* told MMP that they like the *Daily Sun* because, “... it isn’t true,” and that they liked it because, “it spices things up.” (Child participants at an Empowering Children and the Media workshop, May 2008) These comments speak to a range of other issues but also suggest quite clearly that the reason people may be buying the *Daily Sun* is not for reasons of credibility.
3. Self regulatory mechanisms may have significant limitations but in spite of these, they offer, when implemented fairly, one of the most viable solutions to ensuring media adhere to fundamental principles and ethics and at the same time ensure that the right to freedom of expression is protected and promoted. It is for this reason that by the time you read this the complaint MMP and its partners submitted will hopefully be resolved.

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any meaningful way. The paper hardly reaches places like Cape Town where violence broke out powerfully. In their wide-ranging research into the attacks, the HSRC found that relatively few respondents mentioned the media as any kind of causative factor in the violence.

Not one respondent, in any of the four major trouble spots investigated (Alex, Mamelodi, Tembisa and Imizamo Yethu), mentioned the tabloids. Several did mention broadcast news, particularly the SABC, as influencing their perceptions, suggesting that this needs further investigation. What is peculiar or surprising in these mentions is that some of the media pieces mentioned might have seemed likely to produce sympathy for Zimbabweans rather than hostility. *Special Assignment*, for example, covered the plight of Zimbabwean refugees on South African farms in March this year, yet several respondents mentioned this programme as one shaping negative perceptions.

This makes sense only if we see that local black South Africans feel so disempowered and resentful that they do not react to the plight of poor Zimbabweans forced to work for a pittance on South African farms in the way that middle-class television producers or viewers might, but with a double sense of anger: that these workers continue to fuel an exploitative system, and that the South African media, instead of dealing with the plight of locals at a time of enormous economic hardship, instead concentrate on the plight of others with, in their view, less claim to sympathy or consideration. After all, as several sardonic respondents put it, if President Mbeki keeps assuring us that all is well in Zimbabwe, why are the migrants here?

We need, in terms of media and media analysis, far greater engagement with the issue of how all South Africans get information. We simply do not yet know enough about the recent violence and the role of personal influence (to recall Katz and Lazarsfeld) in transmitting and amplifying messages, or the role visual images and indigenous languages have played.

What we can say fairly surely is that the major sin was one of omission, not commission. This is a story of the watchdogs that never barked in the night – because the property and interests they protect seemed far away.

I would like to acknowledge an honours paper by former UCT student Tarin Brown which I have pillaged for some references; our arguments, however, differ in almost every respect. I am also indebted to Adrian Hadland of the HSRC for giving me a preliminary indication of their findings.