

Sniffing out racism



BY GAVIN STEWART

INVESTIGATIONS into the media have a depressing history in South Africa. While the topic of perceived racism in the media undoubtedly deserves constant scrutiny and ongoing debate, I am extremely wary of any attempt to measure it “objectively” and to “eliminate” it.

A major difficulty facing the Human Rights Commission is that the terms “racism” and “racist” in the political discourse of the new South Africa occupy the same role as the terms “communism” and “communist” in apartheid South Africa. The words are used like blunt clubs to beat opponents into silence and to numb all rational debate on a subject.

The HRC media release of 14 January 1999 is headlined “Human Rights Commission announces investigation into media racism”. The document dated 19 January, available at sahr@org.com, is headlined “Procedure for the investigation into racism in the media”.

The difference between these two headings is the same as between “sports club racism” and “racism at sports club”, the one implies the approval of the club, the other does not. The HRC is planning to “investigate the incidence of racism in the media” by “what is produced and disseminated”. Then it will make findings and recommendations contributing “to the elimination of racism in the media”.

The HRC is using the UN definition of racism (General Assembly resolution 2106 A (XX) of 21 December 1965 and the “Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice” adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 27 November 1978). The problem is that the HRC must convert these definitions into an operational definition amenable to measurement.

To do this the HRC will invite submissions and undertake its own research. Those who saw any part of the media hearings before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will recall that many of the speeches were passionate and some moving, but their truth was never tested. Only questions from the panel were allowed, and those accused of various transgressions were given no opportunity to respond. The trappings of fair trial without the appropriate procedures are extremely misleading.

The only way to discover what is “produced and disseminated” in the media is to conduct an analysis of media content. This is fraught with all the problems of theory, assumption and sampling which beset such research. This is fair enough for research presented to academic con-

ferences and workshops for debate, but it is a very insecure base for policy-making and some form of control of the media — which the word “eliminate” must entail.

Content analysis requires samples, categories and occurrences. If the findings are to have any validity at all, the same samples and categories and occurrences would have to be applied to all the media examined. Comparative studies will be required to detect trends.

Since it is impossible to analyse the entire content of “the media” any content analysis requires a sample. This involves choosing the type of media to be analysed — daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, consumer magazines, trade magazines, specialist magazines, radio, television, etc. — and choosing a sample of the medium selected by year and within the year: six issues a year, 12, 24, 52 ...

Assuming the researchers wanted to compare 20 daily newspapers and 10 weekly newspapers for the five years 1994 to 1999, at 12 issues a year (an adequate sample, but too small for any statistical conclusions) this would involve an examination of 30 x 12 x 5 newspapers, or 1800 newspapers. Assuming the average newspaper contains 100 separate reports, the study would have to examine 180 000 items.

Other ways of examining content — such as the methods of critical studies, semiotic and structural analysis — encounter similar problems. The insights they provide are often dazzling, but they are very largely in the eye of the believer.

There is virtually no prospect of arriving at a generally acceptable measure of the “impact” or “effects” of media content. Debate on the subject probably goes back before the 15th century when block-printed horror comics were widely available in Europe. The view prevailing at any time since then has vacillated from very powerful media effects to minimal effects.

A local example is the media coverage of the liberation movements from 1960 to 1990. For these 30 years it was illegal to publish anything favourable to the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress or any other banned organisation. Newsrooms and libraries kept boxes of green, pink and white cards, indicating “banned” people, “listed communists”, and members of banned organisations. Reporters and sub-editors routinely consulted the cards to ensure they were not in breach of the Suppression of Communism Act, later designated the Internal Security Act.

At the same time, the SABC and later SATV were routinely used to vilify these organisations and their leaders. Programmes like Current Affairs and News Background and the Sunday night lectures on television were specifically designed for this purpose.

Yet, after 30 years, the ANC emerged unscathed as the most popular political organisation by far among the South African public. Nelson Mandela, after 27 years of absolute pub-

HRC investigation into media racism

THE investigation promises to provide an objective and honest assessment of the incidence and effects of racism in the media. It will also help South Africans with the process of engaging openly in a dialogue about the lingering effects of racism in our society.

“According to the draft terms of reference, the investigation will examine the manifestations of racism in the products of the media, including newspaper articles and television and radio broadcasts. While the investigation will not focus on examining racism in the structure and workplace of the media, the investigation will explore those issues if they are cited as causes of racism in the product of the media. The terms of reference allow for the examination of all products of the media, regardless of the size of the media producer.”

The HRC will:

- call for written submissions, commission independent research
- convene public hearings to hear reports
- publish a report with findings and recommendations

lic silence on Robben Island, emerged as indisputably the most popular political leader.

What can we say about the impact and effects of the media? We use media to confirm our prejudices, whatever they attempt to say I have attempted to run a non-racial newspaper in East London for five years, I have observed no significant effects.

A further difficulty arises in the material media publish. The news media attempt to reflect the world in which we live and, particularly, our own country. The reporting of daily events involves the coverage of incidents which might be termed racist. The letters pages of newspapers routinely carry letters from black and white readers which appear blatantly racist. Is this to be treated as “racism in the media”? It is racism in the media, but it is not racism by the media, and it is presumably not what the commission intends to investigate. But how will we distinguish it from the rest?

If a newspaper reports “racist” speech, even “hate speech”, is that racism in the media? Or is it an honest attempt to tell readers about their country? How can we know?

What is reported and pictured is more closely a reflection of the readers, or the target market as seen by the publishers, or (in the case of glossy magazines) a reflection of the readers’ dreams of themselves. How do we calibrate our research to account for the “real world”, the accessible world, and the published material?

At one time the Rand Daily Mail considered placing an image of scissors at the end of every report which it felt had been censored, or which it felt it had been obliged to censor. The scheme was abandoned, in part because there was no way of knowing, in a time of ubiquitous censorship, what had been censored and what not.

How do we avoid racism in the media in a time of ubiquitous racism?

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