

# Thumbsuck

What's race got to do with it? Lots. But also less than we might think. The media's ailment, very often, isn't only the racialism — it's afflicted by another 'ism', viz. the journalism.

Our problem isn't just prejudice. It's that compounded by basic reporting blapses — and nowhere better demonstrated than in the sloppy and racialised coverage of the HRC media hearings.

It's an irony that our coverage of media racism was racial. It's exacerbated irony when we're so inaccurate and unprofessional. Such a double achievement deserves recognition. So, for scoring so highly in screwing up the facts, and for stamping right upon the racial landmines we're supposed to be lifting, here are the **Rat Race Ratings for South African Scribes**:

Top prize for **Slanted Reporting** goes to the *Sowetan* for its claim (only corrected after criticism by the HRC) that white editors staged a walkout during the hearings. (In fact, it was only journalism educator Pedro Diederichs and two visiting Dutch journalism students who made their apologies and had to leave early). The real story — which the *Sowetan*, and everyone else, missed — was worse. The white editors couldn't walk out because they hadn't in fact even pitched up to hear their African counterparts.

SABC takes the **Crass Confusion Award** for its coverage. Radio 2000 stitched its live coverage together with summaries of the proceedings. And proceeded to ascribe various legal objections raised by *Mail & Guardian* advocate, Azar Cachalia, to none other than the HRC's evidence leader — advocate Dabi Khumalo.

While competence was conspicuous by its absence in coverage of the hearings, racial frames of mind were certainly present.

There are too many candidates to issue the **Golden Prize for Racial Labelling**.



*Sunday Times'*  
Mike Robertson

■ The *Sunday Times* rushed to highlight that its editor, Mike Robertson, had grown up coloured and discriminated against, all in response to an offensive parliamentary dubbing Robertson a "black in drag".

■ The *Mail & Guardian's* editor Phil van Niekerk — the so-to-speak white *bête noire* of the HRC — was branded a white by most journos. Had they bothered to check, they'd have discovered that his forebears are coloureds forced to 'pass for white' under apartheid.

■ Rhodes University journalism lecturer Lynette Steenveld, who bristles at any racial assignation, was most unimpressed to be reported at the hearings as a white academic: her family's coloured classification saw them being dispossessed under apartheid.

All this raises the colourful question of who called themselves "black" at the Hearings, and how the Fourth Estate reported on them. The **Citation for True Colours** here must go to *Daily News* editor Kaizer Nyatumba, who let it be known that he spoke not merely as black on the outside, but also on the inside. To which, *Business Day's* Nomavenda Mathiane pointed out that not all blacks are the same — some have uterus! (An aside: If a black journo — of any gender — can be white on the inside, then why wasn't anyone urging white journalists — of any gender — to develop an inner black identity? Or is that we're all just mix-n-matches?)

Gender and race were also reported upon by *City Press*, which scores the **Medal for Provoking Enraged Reader Feedback** — the readers in this case being editors Kaizer Nyatumba and Cyril Madlala. In the form of letters from the Durban duo, *City Press* came in for a thorough bashing. *CP's* features reporter, Andile Noganta, had published a piece quoting a woman journalist who criticised Kaizer and Cyril for failing to give her a job. The article declared: "meantime there's hardly an African in their newsroom, let alone a female." Noganta had failed to get comment from either of the accused — prompting Nyatumba to call him "one-sided" (though whether this has any bearing on Noganta's in-side or out-side remains unclear). Madlala wrote: "I would be happy to furnish your newspaper with the facts should it wish to redeem itself".



*Daily News'*  
Kaizer Nyatumba

The next award for rolling together incompetence and racial nonsensibility goes to *The Star*. Its very own rising star, Robert Brand, wrote that five African editors had blasted the SA National Editors Forum (Sanef) in their testimony — showing that he'd missed completely the carefully-crafted way in which the group precisely avoided doing so. Accordingly, the **Trophy for Not Letting Nuances Negate a Right**

**Racial Rift**, goes to the *Joburg* daily. A special **Racial Insensitivity Rosette** also goes to the same paper, not for impatiently pre-publishing the submission by its editor, Peter Sullivan, but for using an entire page to do so — and for running the text around a huge photo of yet another white man haranguing the hearings (Rhodes' Guy Berger).

Prizes for **Press Paranoia** go to most of the media for panicking at the Inquiry and portraying Barney Pityana as the reincarnation of Joe McCarthy. Prizes for **Press Preciousness** need to be issued to *Business Day* editor Jim Jones and *Financial Mail's* Peter Bruce for refusing to take the oath in their testimony. Peter, however, receives a commendation for explaining his part in that grand conspiracy of white editors who are able to sabotage the Minister of Finance internationally. He wrote: "I have always been aware of these strange powers, but used to think it was because I was clever, and not merely white."



*Business Day's*  
Jim Jones



*Financial Mail's*  
Peter Bruce

The **Racial Rip van Winkle Decoration** nearly went to Nyatumba's *Daily News*, which a bare six weeks after the hearings, ran a front page Zimbabwe story with four; (subs: yes four) credits in the byline (including three newsagencies). It still neglected to give the names of two black victims alongside the identified white farmer.

However, the paper that takes home the Racial Rip Reward is the *Eastern Province Herald*. Months after the hearings, the paper published a letter expressing a reader's disappointment that a beauty competition run by the EPH had featured only white women and white judges. The appended comment by editor Ric Wilson was effectively: sorry pal, Next Year we'll ensure that the event is more representative! In other words, let's roll over and snooze a little longer (it's only seven years since the new SA was supposed to have left white-centrism in the old country.)

Not to be ignored is researcher Claudia Braude, the native who caused all the trouble. It turns out that she's not only a media monitor and meddler, but also an actual media maker. The **Stork, Crow and Dodo Award** goes to the website she built to promote her research into media racism. If you clicked on her button marked "links", you got to...exactly no-where.



Claudia Braude

One award that goes to almost every hack is the **Narcissism@MediaCentrism.Com** email address. It's for navel-gazing, uninspired, self-absorbed coverage of the hearings. Did any journo ask any of the beleaguered receivers of our messages what they thought about racism and the media? Ag, who cares about audiences anyway?

The malady of South African journalism isn't only racial. It's racial plus.

| NOW ... AND THEN   |  |
|--|--|
| Map your memory: draw a link from each item in the left-hand column to the related item in the right-hand column |  |
| HRC 2000   | TRC 1997   |
| Media violation of right to dignity  | Research role of Freedom of Expression Institute blasted by Thami Mazwai     |
| Chaired by churchman Pityana   | Racial reconciliation raised   |
| Emphasis on what the media <i>should</i> do  | SABC the scoundrels of apartheid   |
| Afrikaans press participates   | Indignant white liberal journalists under fire                               |
| Subpoenas issued to make media attend (then withdrawn)   | Subpoena for PW Botha, not the press   |
| Indignant white liberal journalists under fire   | Afrikaans press boycotts, 114 individual journalists do a personal statement |
| SABC heroes of transformation  | Emphasis on what the media <i>did</i> do                                     |
| Racial rupture results   | Chaired by churchman Tutu  |
| Research role of Claudia Braude and MMP blasted by many media  | Media contribution to climate of gross human rights violation                |

July 31 2000

**BARNEY PITYANA TO EDIT MAIL & GUARDIAN**

MAIL & GUARDIAN

SMALL COLUMNS OF TEXT WITH UNRECOGNIZABLE HEADINGS

Barney Pityana is the new editor of Mail & Guardian. He will be taking over from Peter Sullivan. Pityana has worked for the newspaper for many years. He is a well-known journalist and has been involved in many of the newspaper's most important stories. Pityana is a member of the National Editors Forum and has been a vocal critic of the government's handling of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Pityana is a member of the National Editors Forum and has been a vocal critic of the government's handling of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Commemorating its 15th anniversary in July, the *M&G* finally tossed in the towel. Guest speaker at the occasion, Dr P, now keeps a copy of this poster on his door