



A Toast to 'Charles' Shifting notions of stereotypes in SA advertising

From apartheid ethnic separation in the 70s, to affirmative depictions of blacks in the 80s through to subtle denigration of whites in the 90s, **Alexander Holt** takes a look South African advertising.



THE TERM 'RACIAL STEREOTYPING' is usually understood to refer to negative or pejorative depictions. In advertising, there is no racial stereotyping, because no sensible advertiser would wish to offend the target audience or indeed lose the goodwill of any potential other buyers. Or is there?

On closer examination racial stereotyping does occur but racial stereotyping which is overtly pejorative is rare. It generally arises in adverts where members of a social group other than the target audience are depicted as secondary characters. Quite likely, the people who are making the advertisements will identify with a social group that is more empowered within the social structure than those who are represented in negative stereotypical roles. So it may not seem that character representations have been created or selected which amount to racial stereotypes. Stereotypes are group concepts; therefore different groups might regard the same stereotypes either as positive or negative.

Producing communications that draw upon the characterisation of people from any social group is always bound to

what might be termed "conventional racial stereotyping" did occur. A possible example would be a commercial for Dixie Dishwashing Liquid, where a black woman employed as a domestic servant exclaimed 'Hau Madam!'

after the effectiveness of the product had been demonstrated to her. Of course, this depiction was consistent with ethnographic veracity, as a great number of white households in South Africa had domestic servants whose real life roles corresponded to the depiction in the advertisement.

However, in an apartheid (and post-apartheid) context, given the sensitivity of a large majority of economically and socially disadvantaged groups, this depiction can be offensive.

After the introduction of TV2/3 (aimed at 'black' audiences) in 1982, conventional forms of racial stereotyping became quite rare. It was the absence of blacks in TV1 commercials and the absence of whites in TV2/3 commercials that became the underpinning ideological principle.

During most of the reformist apartheid era the broad-

'Hau Madam!'

of advertising reinforced ethnically derived forms of stereotyping that were not pejorative in the sense that racial stereotyping is usually understood in the West. Indeed, it was

sometimes argued that the objective of the ethnically designated apartheid broadcasting dispensation was to protect the cultural topography of South Africa from European cultural imperialism.

However, media messages based upon ethnic characteristics tend also to reinforce a parochial past. When directed at urban dwellers who are trying to compete in an industrialised society, such stereotypes are arguably regressive. On the other hand, a strong case can be made that by allowing easy comparisons of lifestyles, the pejorative racial stereotyping of the time acted as a catalyst to make the aggrieved groups seek equality. Apartheid social planners had devised their Bantustan policy in order to counter the longer-term integrating processes of a market economy. However, economic dependence upon blacks as labour and as consumers for manufactured goods was unavoidable, and by the 1980s constituted a major structural contradiction in the apartheid state.

There has been a transition in the depiction of blacks in South African advertising from ethnic to westernised or

be a tricky business. Despite the cautious nature of the work, the prevailing climate of reception can sometimes be misjudged, resulting in the publication of depictions that are more pejorative than had been planned or intended.

The historical context in which any media message is produced and consumed is important in determining the nature of the representation and its reception. In the South African context, one finds that the conventional definitions of racial stereotyping, as understood in the West, do not always readily fit some of the depictions of blacks in South African advertising over the past 20 years or so.

When television advertising was first introduced in 1978, a few instances of

cosmopolitan and middle class. These depictions are likely to be decoded as positive and evidence of change

casting dispensation, largely dominated by the SABC, continued to support forms of ethnic stereotyping consistent with the conception of 'separate nations' underpinning the Bantustan project. In some instances, particularly where urban black consumption of a product exceeded that of whites, it would have been more practical for advertisers to make use of a single commercial produced in English.

'white bagel'

However, the language stipulation of the different SABC TV channels was strictly enforced. To make use of the TV2/3 channels it was necessary for advertisers to make separate commercials for what were deemed the 'different racial groups'. These streams

A yet more complex situation arises if one broadens the definition of racial stereotyping to include depictions that are not overtly pejorative or even depictions that are intended to be affirmative. As reform gathered pace during the 1980s, some of the large business organisations began to contest the ethnic media dispensation by producing English-language commercials depicting blacks stereotyped in middle-class roles interacting with whites without displaying any aspects of ethnicity. From the mid-1980s onwards, such affirmative black depictions in the advertising for certain products arguably contributed to social change. Initially, such commercials could only be broadcast on the white

to page 57 ►

What is happening?

MEDIA DIVERSITY



Print Media SA established a Print Development Unit (PDU) in February 2000 to:

- 1 Provide support to emerging print media to assist in their growth and sustainability.
- 2 Increase diversity of ownership in print media.
- 3 Widen the range of voices in South Africa.
- 4 Broaden the culture of reading.

To assist emerging publishers the PDU has implemented:

- 5 A pilot study involving the in-depth development of two publications to serve as a development model for PDU support.
- 6 A development programme providing comprehensive individual assistance to emerging publishers. This includes drawing up detailed business plans, training, facilitating access to loan finance and after-care support.
- 7 A mentoring programme providing guidance in business, marketing and editorial skills to emerging publishers.
- 8 A training programme offering courses on developing practical business skills, financial analyses, advertising and marketing, editorial and design, printing and pricing, and information technology.

For further information please contact: Natasha Stretton, Print Development Unit, Tel: 011 447 1264, Fax: 011 447 1289, Email: natashas@printmedia.org.za

A Toast to 'Charles'

◀ from page 44

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.

ALEX HOLT is a lecturer in cultural studies, film, and advertising. His doctoral dissertation studied racial stereotyping in SABC-TV commercials during the period of reform. He is co-ordinator of the World Conference Against Racism Film Festival due to take place in Durban from 29 to 31 August and 2 to 7 September 2001.

Fighting for Fairness

◀ from page 49

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.

The Trouble with Race

◀ from page 43

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.

GUY BERGER is Professor and head of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

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.

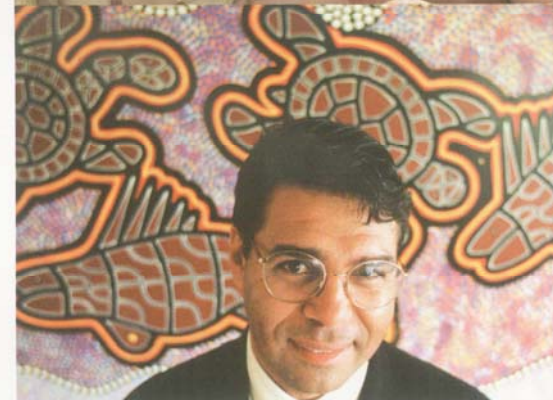
Others take on racist media directly: a campaign led by FAIR and others got the ABC radio network to reconsider including openly racist host Bob Grant in their lineup. Activists have encouraged local public TV stations to air documentaries on, for example, the role of US blacks in World War II.

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.

JANINE JACKSON is programme director of FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), a media watch group based in New York. She is also host/producer of "Counter-Spin", FAIR's radio show.