Desperately desiring attitude change

The news media and the country's image abroad

by Wadim Schreiner

The International Media Forum South Africa could not have come at a better time. Barely a week after the first incidents of xenophobic violence in South Africa, the conference in May undertook to analyse the reasons for South Africa's declining international reputation and the role of the stakeholders involved, particularly the media.

I attended the conference both as a presenter and participant, and was surprised by the robust engagements of both media and government. Having expected the classical media-government bashings ("you media never report anything positive", "you government never talk to us openly"); I was pleasantly surprised by the constructive debates that emerged both in the presentations from media and government, as well as behind the scenes during the many networking opportunities.

Following the introductory speech by Essop Pahad, Minister in the Presidency, I kicked off the day with Media Tenor's research on the international media coverage of South Africa in the last two years. The findings probably did not come as a surprise to the majority of participants as they confirmed already existing expectations about the type of international media coverage on South Africa: Zimbabwe, corruption allegations against Police Chief Jackie Selebi, the dissolving of the Scorpions, Polokwane, Eskom, and again Zimbabwe. Corporate representatives would have noted that it is the good business news that is keeping South Africa's overall media reputation at somehow acceptable levels in most months. The results also showed a difference between the Western media and African media, although the latter did not necessarily show a greater share of positive news, but were just less explicit in their criticism of SA in their headlines.

The presentation was followed by the "journalist" slot: Barry Moody, the African Editor of Reuters, considered the efforts of the agency to provide content on Africa, and the use of their website and feeds. Similarly, the Africa Editor of BBC News Joseph Warangu shared his experience at the BBC in developing content on Africa. Both journalists emphasised the importance of their respective media companies in spreading the word on Africa.

The problem I saw, particularly with agency content, was that it is one thing having the content available, but still another to convince other sources to use the content. Just because it is there, does not necessarily mean it makes a meaningful contribution towards changes in perception. That is less a criticism of the agencies, but more of those media who are connected to the agencies: how can you convince them to report on Africa other than in the usual stereotypical way? It would still need qualified and experienced journalists on the ground, digging for those stories and finding new angles and sources.

Speaking of sources, Caroline Lambert of the *Economist* used the platform of the conference to take the government of South Africa to task over their lack of communication skills. Her 10 dos and don'ts of how to treat a journalist were, although not new, nevertheless refreshing, particularly when observing the angry rejections of the comments by government officials following the presentation. Lambert's first lesson ("Why do government members have cellphones if they never answer them?") was followed by "if you promise to get back to us, please do so".

Later in the day, Government Communication and Information Services CEO Themba Maseko bravely acknowledged the lack of resources, skills and possibly wrong attitudes by some governmental members towards the media. Maseko in particular impressed me, as the number of times government actually acknowledges something wrong without pointing fingers at someone else, is very rare. Even more impressive, Maseko highlighted what government intends doing about its lack of media relation skills. With little of the usual government lingo, he convinced me that government indeed seems to care about its media coverage.

On the second day, the discussions continued with members of the international media fraternity starting with John Chiahemen, the editor of the Reuters Africa website, who took us through their web platform for news on and from Africa. He emphasised the importance of the new media in a faster and more current new world and highlighted the new features on their website.

In particular he emphasised the interactive discussion features BBC News has on their website, which allows "Africans to participate in the discussions". Great idea, I thought, but how many Africans can readily access the Internet, and "interactively" discuss things?

Somehow I was starting to doubt if indeed new media would make any change to the news flow theories that have been in existence for decades. I heard so much about blogs, but what impact do they have on the perception of countries? Would blogging prevent a war, a famine? Would it make any difference if international media websites had interactive discussion forums on the outcome of the elections in Zimbabwe? Would developing countries have the resources and personnel to participate in these debates with the goal to swing those millions of people's attitudes (and wallets)? In my opinion, and taking the vast number of blogging sites into account, these bloggers must either be jobless or spending their employers' bandwidth on endless stereotypical discussions on Africa.

I was glad that Doug de Villiers, the CEO Africa of Interbrand Sampson presented the audience with a more strategic and realistic assessment of how governments can "actively manage their image and media to communicate their core values". His comments surely did not go down well with the executives of the International Marketing Council as well as government. But De Villiers did not place the responsibility solely on government to manage the country's reputation, he also emphasised the importance of business as a contributor to perceptions.

The day was dominated by the impact of the xenophobic attacks. We were particularly impressed by the address by deputy president of the ANC Kgalema Motlanthe and particularly the Q&A that followed.

Maybe as this session intimated there would, after all, be a change in government communications with a new government next year?

Other than networking, the conference was stimulating. I realised that government still does not know how media are operating, and that often they don't seem to care. Which for me raised the question: who needs whom more? Media don't really need government, they can write the stories without their input. Sure, it would give some good sound bites, but it would not necessarily change the story. But government really needs journalism as it is a more convincing, more trustworthy source than its own issued

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press releases. Media have the ability to reach those whom government would struggle to reach directly. If this is the case, should government then not do everything in its power to "conform" to the way media operates? And if it does, would it really change the way journalists report? I also realised that international media still often display the same arrogant attitude they have been holding historically: if you don't co-operate with us the way we want you to, don't be surprised if the story does not go your way.

Being involved in media research for the past 10 years, my opinion was confirmed that media are indeed very powerful, and that stakeholders are aware of that. What it also confirmed is that media do not always know how to deal with this power and that instead of utilising it for fostering understanding, it often is used to get a particular point across – no matter what the consequences.

This was impressed on us further during and following the xenophobic attacks in this country in the past few weeks. Why had the reasons for the attacks largely remained undetected by the media prior to the social eruptions? Were media too busy chasing a particular story? Possibly the same story everybody else was chasing?

It still remains a huge challenge for developing countries to break stereotypes in coverage even though the content to do this is supposedly there, from wire feeds to interactive discussion platforms to radio waves with international media located in Africa, and reporting with their own personnel from Africa.

Why is it, then, that India and China no longer get the negative coverage they had received just 10 years ago, but Africa still does? I pondered that they probably have something to offer, something that other countries wanted: India offers highly qualified people and IT and China is an endless consumer market with cheap labour.

Media Tenor's research of Chinese media reporting on South Africa shows a large change in attitudes particularly since the ICBC deal with Standard Bank: Chinese media previously focused on crime, but seems now unable to stop highlighting what a great country South Africa is – and the rest of the African continent. Is it because China now has a vested interest?

For South Africa the 2010 World Cup is around the corner. Yet the world does not stop turning after 2010. What is the country going to do once all the visitors have returned without the great financial impact we have been made to expect?

Will international media stop reporting on us? I hope that the third International Media Forum South Africa, which should be taking place in 2010, will take a further critical look at what will have changed between now and then.