

The Right To Respond: A META-REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF XENOPHOBIA AND THE XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE PRIOR TO AND INCLUDING MAY 2008

by Matthew J. Smith



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THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA'S
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A review of researchers who have critiqued the role of the print media leading up to and including May 2008 has found that while the evidence is convincing that the print media in South Africa has been xenophobic during this period, this does not necessarily imply that the print media was complicit in the events of April/May 2008. Further evidence-based research is urgently needed to understand more fully the effect that the print media has on attitudes and perceptions in South Africa. Furthermore, if, as most researchers have called for, there is going to be a concerted campaign to lobby and thus convince the press to develop a more analytical and informed view on migration then such a campaign should be based on a more informed view as to why the press has been xenophobic for more than a decade.

It is troubling to note the almost complete absence of civil society as a key variable in reviews of the print media, despite civil society's critical role in monitoring xenophobia, mediating between xenophobic factions in society, and responding exhaustively to the aftermath of xenophobic violence. Similarly, there is little evidence of any appraisal of the print media explicitly referring to gender.

In light of what was found during this review of research that has focussed on the print media, several recommendations (tabled below) have been made with specific emphasis on the role that

civil society can play in transforming mainstream media. Such an approach would do well to be driven by an empowered civil society that continues to:

- › Monitor and expose xenophobia in the media;
- › Intensify its research on the effects of the media on perceptions and attitudes towards migrants
- › Advocate and lobby mainstream media to transform its approach to reporting migrant issues;
- › Be proactive its communication regarding efforts to combat xenophobia;
- › Educate the public through effective utilisation of the media; and
- › Strengthen its own information exchange networks as an alternative to mainstream media.

Problems & recommendations

There has yet to be a systematic academic review of print media stories (or any other form of media) for the period April – May 2008

Research teams that have previously monitored the print media need to be supported to ensure:

- The print media is assessed for the period April/ May 2008 and beyond if feasible; and
- Attention is turned to other forms of media, in particular both the broadcast media and the impact of photographic images on shaping xenophobic perceptions and attitudes in South Africa.

Studies of the print media have displayed little awareness of gender

Urgent need for studies that are gender sensitive in their appraisal of the effect of the media on xenophobia in South Africa

The voice of civil society largely absent from the reviews of the print media

Build media capacities in civil society to:

- Develop pro-active communication strategies
- Provide journalists with consistent and reliable information
- Build mature media relations by designating and training a specialized spokesperson
- Produce media guides
- Develop and support media initiatives from within civil society as an alternative source of information to mainstream media (also promote/build information exchange networks)
- Encourage minority youth to pursue journalism as a career

The role of civil society as media monitors is apparent in the research that has been conducted, but not in how they challenged government with the information that was collected

Strengthen media monitoring capacity of civil society by:

- Developing skills and capacity to monitor media reporting
- Developing skills and capacity to interact with complaints bodies (e.g. press ombudsmen and press councils)

Insufficient evidence as to how South Africans are influenced by the media and how they use this information

Research by appropriate civil society organisation should be supported so that they can conduct necessary research to understand in far more detail how media messages are transmitted and amplified, how individuals translate such messages, the role that visual images play and so on.

The manner in which stories are chosen, highlighted and covered is viewed as problematic in South Africa

Media monitoring by civil society needs to be used, amongst other uses, to:

- Promote (through incentives such as awards) positive news stories; and
- Inform (possibly through a forum) media owners/ editors on the impact of media reporting on intercultural understanding

Insufficient attention has been paid to the context within journalists operate

Need for a more focussed study on the journalists themselves

Un-analytical nature of the print media

Sensitise and capacitate the media to undertake responsible reporting on migrants and migration issues. Such a programme could include ensuring the media understands:

- The different categories of migrants
- The various aspects of migration
- The rights and responsibilities of migrants
- The need for more comprehensive reporting

Xenophobic media

Promoting multi-culturalism through a variety of different ways including:

- Better representation of migrants in newsrooms through active recruiting and training
- More diversity in mainstream/ non- fiction programmes
- Making training in intercultural understanding a core component of journalist education
- Networking and sharing of best practice among media from different regions
- Promote increased dialogue between different ethnic/cultural/religious groups and the media
- Improved self-regulation and more initiatives by the media to promote ethical and professional standards in reporting

Whether the print media were complicit in the events of 2008 has still to be proved

Further research needs to be conducted to examine the effect print media has on society, particularly with regards to xenophobic violence, in South Africa in order to shape initiatives to combat xenophobia in the media

Prompt reporting by the media may have saved the lives of many

Civil society organisations need to give thought to how to develop an early warning system based on the gathering of information by means of both the formal media and informal/community based media

The purpose of this meta media review was to assess existing academic reviews of the manner in which the media portrayed the events leading up to, and including, those of April/ May 2008, with particular emphasis on the reporting by the media of actions taken by civil society.

However, before we attempt to address this purpose four points need to be made up front (all of which we will return to below). One, when we talk of academic studies done on the media, we are in fact talking about reviews of the print media and, more specifically, reviews conducted largely on the English language press in South Africa. Two, much of what is discussed in this article relates to reviews done prior to the events of April/May 2008. Three, very little research, either locally or internationally, has found a direct correlation between print media articles and subsequent violence¹. Four, it is important to note that whilst much of the research on the print media has been conducted either by civil society organisations or by those with strong links to civil society, very little research with respect to print media (or any other form of media) has focussed on the role of civil society in either transforming the xenophobic environment and/or responding to xenophobic violence.

¹ International research has largely been confined to extreme events such as those that unfolded in, for example, the Weimar Republic, Rwanda, and the old Yugoslavian Republic. Of course in those circumstances it is almost impossible to isolate the effect of print media from the effect of other types of media such as broadcast media.

Terms of reference

Utilising existing academic reviews of the print media this paper conducts a meta-review in order to assess the role of the print media in influencing the events of May 2008. In so doing this paper sets out to answer several related questions, in particular:

- › How accurately did the media portray the situation?
- › To what extent were the media seen toacerbate the situation (e.g. stigmatizing foreigners)?
- › What were the common myths perpetuated by the media?
- › What role did researchers/ academics play in the media, and was this role helpful to alleviating the situation?

This paper also set out to answer several questions relating to the way in which the media portrayed civil society, in particular:

- › How was civil society portrayed in the media during these events?
- › What lessons can be learnt for Civil Society with regards to how they were portrayed by the media during the violence?
- › Also how well or badly did civil society use the media, for instance some (like the Treatment Action Committee) got a very sympathetic hearing, but was this true throughout?

It also set out to answer similar questions with respect to gender, such as how were women portrayed in the media during these events and so on.

In order for the paper to speak directly to other components of the project, the paper provides a set of recommendations with respect to initiatives the could be conducted in order for civil society to engage in a more meaningful manner with print media in order to transform the dominant xenophobic ideology within the print media.

Methodology

The main reason for conducting a meta-review is to reconcile previously conducted studies, especially if they have produced inconsistent or different results². Moreover, such a review will not only “investigate the heterogeneity between different studies”, but may also be conducted in order to “generalize results of single studies”³.

Such reviews can range from a narrative review, which provides a qualitative summary of the papers assessed, to quantitative re- analysis of the original data used in each of the original studies being reviewed. The latter, whilst often seen as a more desirable and reliable approach to meta- reviews, nevertheless brings its own challenges including – obtaining cooperation with all the different

² Blettner M, Sauerbrei W, Schlehofer B, Scheuchenpflug T, & Friedenreich C (1999) Tradition reviews, meta-analyses and pooled analyses in epidemiology in *International Epidemiological Association*, 28: 1- 9.

³ Ibid: 2.

research centres who conducted the original research, ensuring similar inclusion criteria for the data, a unified definition of variables, valid statistical modelling and so on⁴.

For the purposes of this review, primarily because there are only a handful of existing research studies which focus on the media (as discussed below), it was deemed that a narrative review which provides a qualitative assessment of existing research was appropriate. To strengthen this approach specific care was taken to ensure that there was no selection bias (i.e. no research was ignored), and thus what follows is an extensive picture of the current state of research on this topic. Moreover, by utilising such an approach the research could be conducted within a short time frame and at low cost to the project.

The steps followed were relatively straightforward, and can be broadly summarised as follows:

- Defined a clear and focused purpose for the review, including the key research questions to be answered by the review
- Located all the studies (including published and unpublished) relevant to this topic
- Selected all the studies that were relevant to the inclusion criteria, specifically
 - Studies that focused primarily on the media (i.e. had conducted primary research on the media) with regards to xenophobia
 - Studies that focussed specifically on the events of May 2008 and either used the media as evidence and/or commented on the role of the media during the events of May 2008.
- Summarised the central arguments of each research study with respect to the questions outlined above
- Explored both the homogeneity and heterogeneity between the different studies, and then identified gaps in the existing research in preparing this paper.

Structure of this report

The remainder of the paper describes what the reviews of the print media tell us, and then it identifies what they do not. Then the paper discusses the key findings and draws some preliminary implications with particular reference to the relationship between print media and civil society. The final section of the paper provides several concluding remarks.

⁴ Ibid.

Overview

Researchers have been tracking the media (specifically the print media, and primarily the English speaking press) and the manner in which it portrays migrants and immigrant related issues since South Africa's independence in 1994. The major studies which systematically assessed South African print media using discourse analysis⁵ during this period can be tabulated as follows:

⁵ Researchers have relied on the electronic database set up by the Southern African Migration Project, whose vast collection of articles from the region goes all the way back to 1974 or the Media Monitoring Project's collection which has monitored more than 50 English and Afrikaans publications since 1994.

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Table 1: Research teams who have conducted comprehensive reviews of the print media in South Africa

Author	Period covered	Language of print sources	Sample Size	Other research methods used
Danso and Macdonald ⁶	1994 - 1998	English	132 articles randomly selected from 1,200 articles in total	-
Fine and Bird ⁷	1994 - 2002	English and Afrikaans	4,500 articles	-
Macdonald and Jacobs ⁸	mid 2000 – early 2005	English	294 articles randomly selected from 1,773 articles in total	4 editors interviewed
Bekker et al. ⁹	1994 - 2008	English and Afrikaans	4,000 articles reviewed	4 case studies (which included focus groups)

Whilst a number of other researchers have also commented on the role of the media, they have typically done so relying on the research conducted by those mentioned in Table 1 (for instance see Desai, 2008, and Hadland, 2008). It should also be noted that whilst Bekker et al. drew on the print media to test their hypothesis, their purpose was not to critique the media but rather to “develop an historical account of the run-up to, and current xenophobic violence in South Africa”¹⁰. Interestingly, bearing in mind how critical other researchers are about the biased nature of print media stories, Bekker et al. were satisfied that during the research they conducted that they had satisfactorily controlled for selection bias and description bias.

Crush et al. (2008)¹¹ also commented on the role of the media, but rely on other studies to formulate their conclusion with respect to the xenophobic nature of the print media. Moreover, the main thrust of their research is based not on print media stories but rather on a survey conducted in 2006 that was randomly given to 3,600 South Africans who were older than 18 years of age. Whilst the study provides detailed albeit depressing, evidence of how significant numbers of South Africans are not only xenophobic but would also turn to violence against migrants, the survey did not ask respondents to reflect on the origins of their attitudes towards migrants.

⁶ Danso R. & McDonald D. (2001) Writing Xenophobia: Immigration and the Print Media in Post-Apartheid South Africa, *Africa Today*, 48(3): 114 - 37

⁷ Fine, J & Bird, W. (2002) Shades of Prejudice: An Investigation into South African media's coverage of racial violence and xenophobia. Research conducted by the Media Monitoring Project.

⁸ McDonald, D.A., & Jacobs, S. (2005) (Re)writing Xenophobia: Understanding Press Coverage of Cross-Border Migration in South Africa, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23(3), 295-325.

⁹ Bekker, S., Eigelaar-Meets, I., Eva, G., & Poole, C. (2008) Xenophobia and Violence in South Africa: a desktop study of the trends and a scan of explanations offered, unpublished paper.

¹⁰ Bekker et al., 2008: 4.

¹¹ Crush, J. (2008) (ed) The Perfect Storm: The Realities of Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa. Migration Policy Series No. 50, The South African Migration Project.

So what do these studies tell us, or not as the case may be, about print media in South Africa? The following two sections briefly summarise what can be gleaned from this research.

What do the reviews of the print media tell us?

Several research studies have shown how the media has uncritically reproduced xenophobic language and statements, time and time again. The media has certainly been complicit in encouraging xenophobic attitudes among the population¹².

1. The key points that the studies are in agreement about are that the majority of print media articles:
 - › Are anti-immigration, or at least make negative references to migrants and immigrants;
 - › Of an un-analytical/ simplistic approach, with little in-depth analysis;
 - › Persist in using certain labels when referring to migrants such as “illegal immigrants”; and
 - › Perpetuate negative stereotypes about migrants using such terms as “job stealers”; “criminals”; and “illegals”.
2. Whilst different analytical tools were used, it is nevertheless instructive to examine the overall findings, summarised:
 - › Danso and Macdonald (2001) – “print media is largely un-analytical in its coverage of migration issues (70%) with another third of the coverage being blatantly anti-immigrant”¹³ Moreover, 56% of stories made a negative reference to migrants and migration (in the period 1994 – 1998).
 - › McDonald and Jacobs (2005) – “a shift towards more pro-immigration and analytical articles.... [but] a large proportion is anti-immigration and non-analytical”¹⁴. In addition, 44% of articles with negative references to migrants and migration (in the period 2000 – 2005).
 - › Fine and Bird (2002) – Comprehensively explore a range of issues related to racial violence and xenophobia (including incidents of violence, crime related incidents, use of weapons, location and so on), key findings of particular interest to this paper include:
 - “Stories relating incidents of xenophobia, as well as those discussing the issue of African migrants to South Africa, have been a consistent feature of media coverage....However,

¹² Crush et al., 2008: 42.

¹³ Danso & McDonald, 2001: 122-123.

¹⁴ McDonald & Jacobs, 2005: 301. Unfortunately whilst McDonald & Jacobs graphically illustrate the number of pro/anti – migrant articles and the number of analytical/ un-analytical articles they do not refer to the precise number in the text and it is not possible to read the exact figures of figures they use.

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the frequency with which these have appeared is dependent on the prevalence of high profile events¹⁵;

- Stereotyping tends to be “covert and subtle” rather than “an active intention of the media”¹⁶; and
- “Migrants, identified by a number of terms, do however still appear in the role of criminal perpetrator in a number of items, particularly in the case of arrest”¹⁷.

3. These extensive studies of the English speaking press convincingly demonstrate that for more than a decade newspapers have been running stories that are anti-immigration/ xenophobic and un-analytical. Suffice it to provide two examples of this. In the first, Fine and Bird argue that their extensive monitoring of the media has led them to conclude that the “media does indeed place prominence on incidents of a racial slant”. Moreover, that the media provides “an incomplete picture of incidents”, coverage is both simplistic “with minimal in-depth discussion of the issues raised”, and that the media persists in their patterns of labelling the majority of immigrants from Africa as illegal immigrants, even though their only crime is a lack of appropriate documents, and that little differentiation can be found in the media with regards to different categories of migrant¹⁸.

4. The second example speaks to the manner in which the press routinely perpetuated certain myths with regards to migrants. In this instance, the emphasis is on the widely reported notion that South Africa is being swamped by foreigners as the following illustrates:

“ According to estimates a large number of the African migrants living in the country came to South Africa without valid documents. However, there is no reliable data on exactly how many such migrants there are. Nonetheless, officials and academics seem happy to quote statistics. For example, one study in 1994 concluded that there were about nine million foreigners in the country, the equivalent of 20% of the population.... Academically accurate research, however, puts the number of foreigners at closer to six to 12%. Nor is there empirical support for the claim that about 3 million Zimbabweans have fled to South Africa. That would amount to one quarter of Zimbabwe’s population....nonetheless South African media are quick to pick up unreliable figures and turn them into sensationalist headlines....such as “invasion”, “hordes”, “waves” and “floods”¹⁹. ”

¹⁵ Fine and Bird, 2002: 59.

¹⁶ Ibid.: 59.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 59

¹⁸ Fine and Bird, 2002: 58 - 59.

¹⁹ Blank, 2008 “Nothing new, only worse”, D + C, <http://www.inwent.org/ez/articles/074543/index.en.shtml>

Studies conducted prior to 2008 (see for example Danso and Macdonald, 2001; Macdonald and Jacobs, 2005) nevertheless do however suggest that it is possible to discern an improvement over time in both the quality of the reporting and in the anti-immigration/ xenophobic nature of the stories. This decrease in xenophobia or what is referred to as “an increase in the polarization of coverage on migration” suggests that “there also appears to be a growing professionalism on migration issues, at least in some newspapers”²⁰. Of course hindsight is a wonderful thing and we now know that many from a broad spectrum of society would disagree with this point and argue instead that the media regressed during the events of April/May 2008, with some taking it further and arguing that the media inflamed the situation. We return to this in the discussion section below.

What do the reviews of the print media not tell us?

The first point that will strike the reader as to what the reviews of the print media do not tell us is that

despite an exhaustive review of stories in the print media prior to 2008, there has yet to be a systematic review of print media stories (or any other form of media) for the period April/May 2008.

This is despite the fact that a wide range of sectors (including government, civil society and the media itself) were highly critical of the reporting during the period April/ May 2008.

The second point with regards to what is missing is that whilst the intention of the paper had been to talk about the media, previous research has confined itself solely to print media. It should be stated up front that all of the studies referred to above acknowledge this limitation, but for the purposes of this meta-review this is a significant limitation. There simply does not exist any extensive review of the broadcast media in relationship to xenophobia in South Africa, nor has there been any extensive efforts to analyse photographs that accompany many of the xenophobic stories identified by the studies already mentioned. This needs to be urgently addressed²¹.

So whilst critics often refer to “the media as sensationalist” they are basing their evidence on a component of the media, and have simply not made any scientific attempt to critically assess other components of mainstream media such as radio and TV. McDonald and Jacobs cite evidence to counter this point by arguing that “the print media remains an influential source of news for policymakers (arguably the most influential medium in the region) and it impacts on other forms of media such as television and radio”²². Moreover, they also have argued that “English-language

²⁰ Macdonald and Jacobs, 2005: 308.

²¹ Interestingly the only “academic” piece that was found with respect to published photographs during the search for relevant research as part of this meta-review is the short piece that the then editor of the Sunday Times wrote defending the editorial decision to run the photograph of the burning man. For details see Hartley R (2008) The Burning Man Story, *Rhodes Journalism Review*, 28: 15 – 16.

²² 2005: 298.

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newspapers dominate circulation and are undoubtedly the most influential print medium in the region²³.

Danso and McDonald make a similar argument, but also recognize that because of high illiteracy rates in South Africa “there is clearly a large percent of the South African public that is not directly affected by print media reporting”²⁴. Whilst these are all valid points, and it is the researchers prerogative as to which sector of the media they focused upon, it does unfortunately mean that broadcast media has yet to be similarly comprehensively critiqued.

Why is broadcast media important in the South African context? According to the South African Advertising Research Foundation²⁵ who conduct an annual All Media and Products Survey (AMPS), and have been doing since 1974, in 2008 94% of adults²⁶ will have listened to the radio²⁷ during the week, 84% will have watched TV²⁸, and about 48% will have read a newspaper²⁹ on average per week. Thus regardless of the power of the print media, nearly twice as many adult South Africans are listening to the radio as opposed to reading newspapers every week. So until we have a better sense of the effect of radio and TV on the perception and attitudes of South Africans with respect to xenophobia it is arguably not possible to make sweeping generalisations about the media based only on an analysis of the print media.

A third point with respect to what current research does not tell us is

the complete absence of any gender awareness in any of the existing studies.

Very little research on the media has for example, disaggregated their analysis by gender, explored how women are portrayed in incidents and so on. Instead the research on the media simply does not differentiate between women and men, old and young and rather talks generally about the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans.

The only evidence of a print media review displaying aspect of gender awareness can found in the work of Fine and Bird, who noted that in their review of the media between 1994 – 2002 that

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 2001: 118.

²⁵ <http://www.saarf.co.za/>

²⁶ The SAARF AMPS universe is those aged 16 and above in South Africa, which at the time of their 2007/2008 survey equated to a population of 31,303.00.

²⁷ Commercial radio attracts the most listeners (about 91% as opposed to community radio which has approximately 18% of all listeners), the major stations on average per week are Ukhozi FM (18.8% of all adult listeners), Metro FM (14.2%), Umhlobo Wenene FM (14.7%), Lesedi FM, and Thobela Fm (8.8%).

²⁸ SABC attracts the bulk of adult viewers per week on average - SABC 1 71%, SABC 2 60.2%, and SABC 3 47.7% of viewers. However, eTV gets 57.7% and DSTV has 15.2% of adult viewers per week on average.

²⁹ Top 5 daily newspapers in terms of adult readership on average per week – Daily Sun 16.4%, Sowetan 7.1%, The Star 3.6%, Isolezwe 2.1% and Die Beel 1.8%. Of those focused on in many of the reviews the Business Day has 0.5%, the Cape Times 0.9%, the Citizen 1.7%, Die Burger 1.6% of adult readership on average per week. Top 5 bi-weekly/ weekly newspapers on average per week – Sunday Times 12.8% of readership, Sunday Sun 9.8%, City Press 8.1%, Soccer Laduma 8% and Sunday world 6.1%.

Perpetrators and victims were represented as being predominantly male. The coverage is noteworthy for lack of attention given to female victims. In terms of victimisation generally, black women present as a vulnerable group in South African society, and their absence from the items monitored is notable³⁰.

There is clearly an urgent need to conduct appropriate research to provide a more nuanced understanding from a gender sensitive perspective of the events that unfolded both prior to and during 2008. Such research could use as its starting point the global gender monitoring project that was recently launched to map media representations of women and men and thereby “provide gender and communication activists with a tool to lobby for more gender-sensitive communication policy in their national and regional contexts”³¹.

Similarly, researchers in their analysis of the print media have largely ignored civil society. When researchers do refer to civil society, it is primarily based on their own fieldwork (such as interviews), rather than on stories in the press. For instance, Desai, in speaking warmly of the role that civil society played (as the following quote illustrates) draws on evidence from non-media sources (in this instance an affidavit and TAC’s website):

The most sustained and organised response from civil society was in Cape Town, with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) at the forefront... forming themselves into the the Western Cape Civil Society Coalition (WCCC), a considerable amount of resources went into health assessments of the camps... the coalition also took to the streets holding protests close to the Mayor’s residence, a sit-in and sleep over at the Cape Town Civic Centre, demonstrations outside the provincial legislature...it also made a significant court application against the provincial government and the City of Cape Town protesting the standards of shelter and other relief given to the victims of xenophobia.³²

Similarly Misago et al. base their important recommendation with respect to civil society and the media on their own fieldwork (again which did not involve a review of either the print media or any other form of media). Their argument is that civil society needs to play a more active role in using the media as a platform to tackle xenophobia, thereby urging activists and advocacy groups to “find ways to use the media and other available platforms to disseminate research results that may counter such misconceptions”³³. The lack of a civil society voice in the existing reviews of the print

³⁰ Bird and Fine, 2002: 60.

³¹ This phenomena is not unique to South Africa. A global campaign has recently been launched to collect data on selected gender specific indicators in the media. For more details see <http://www.whomakesthenews.org/gmmp-2009-2010.html>.

³² Desai, 2008: 14 – 15.

³³ Misago et al., 2009: 5.

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media, suggests that civil society need to do far more to ensure they are rewritten back into these studies, both in terms of building capacities in civil society and strengthening the capacity of civil society to monitor the media.

Before listing a number of obvious recommendations that speak to the gaps identified above, it is worth reminding ourselves of the conclusion reached by Fine and Bird after analysing 4,500 articles over an eight-year period, namely that “research in this report must be supplemented and enhanced through follow-up and ongoing monitoring and reporting of current trends in media representation of inter-racial violence”³⁴. The time is obviously ripe for a follow-up study to their work to examine the media portrayal of events of April-May 2008.

With respect to the gaps identified above, the following recommendations have been made:

Problems & recommendations

There has yet to be a systematic academic review of print media stories (or any other form of media) for the period April – May 2008

Research teams that have previously monitored the print media need to be supported to ensure:

- The print media is assessed for the period April/ May 2008 and beyond if feasible; and
- Attention is turned to other forms of media, in particular both the broadcast media and the impact of photographic images on shaping xenophobic perceptions and attitudes in South Africa.

Studies of the print media have displayed little awareness of gender

Urgent need for studies that are gender sensitive in their appraisal of the effect of the media on xenophobia in South Africa

³⁴ Fine and Bird, 2002: 62.

The voice of civil society largely absent from the reviews of the print media

Build media capacities in civil society³⁵ to:

- Develop pro-active communication strategies
- Provide journalists with consistent and reliable information
- Build mature media relations by designating and training a specialized spokesperson
- Produce media guides
- Develop and support media initiatives from within civil society as an alternative source of information to mainstream media (also promote/build information exchange networks)³⁶
- Encourage minority youth to pursue journalism as a career

The role of civil society as media monitors is apparent in the research that has been conducted, but not in how they challenged government with the information that was collected

Strengthen media monitoring capacity of civil society³⁷ by:

- Developing skills and capacity to monitor media reporting
- Developing skills and capacity to interact with complaints bodies (e.g. press ombudsmen and press councils)

³⁵ Ideas taken from Conference Report (2006) Racism, Xenophobia and the Media: Towards respect and understanding of all religions and cultures. An EU Seminar in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Vienna, 22-23 May 2006

³⁶ An obvious example of this would be supporting and expanding the South African Civil Society Information service, www.sacsis.org.za

³⁷ Ibid.

This section of the paper is divided into three parts. It begins with a brief overview of why researchers believe the role of the media is critical in relation to shaping xenophobia in South Africa. It then reflects on the reasons researchers have given for the media being so xenophobic, and it ends with a discussion on whether a direct correlation can be found between stories in the print media and the violence that unfolded in 2008. Throughout recommendations are made with respect to the role civil society can play in improving the print media's response to xenophobia.

The role of the media³⁸

“ There are two basic dilemmas related to the issue of xenophobia and media stereotyping. First the media can disseminate hatred, xenophobia, prejudice, negative stereotypes etc but they can also teach people about other cultures and provide information to overcome stereotypes and xenophobia. The dilemma is in ensuring it does the second and not the first. The second dilemma is related to the two basic legal norms relevant to the issue of xenophobia in the media: freedom of the press and the prohibition of the dissemination of racism and racial hatred³⁹. ”

The media play an important role in disseminating information about foreigners to the South African public and also offer a platform for the public to comment on foreigners through letters to the editor, talk shows on television debates⁴⁰. Contemporary research shows that the media do not just transmit information to the public, but rather, they also produce certain ideologies and discourses that support specific relations of power. It is therefore important not only to look at the media as a means to gauge public perceptions of foreigners, but also the manner in which perceptions are created. It is not simply about whom the press quotes or gets to comment on migrant issues but it is also “the way in which these comments are framed and presented that is also significant”⁴¹.

This is further expanded upon by Bird and Fine, who note an interconnectedness between society and the media. Whilst “the press responds to news and reports on incidents as they occur, thereby reflecting issues pertinent to the broader societal context ... the press also shapes and influences social issues in the ways in which news is chosen, highlighted and covered”⁴².

This resonates with the work of Berg, writing about the xenophobic press in Sweden, who has argued that it is not just about the media constructing reality, but that there is sometimes an almost invidious element to this reality:

³⁸ For a useful quick overview of media theory since the 1960s see Hadland, 2009. Drawing on his earlier work for his PhD thesis he notes that there are ostensibly two schools – Liberal and Marxist. The Marxist tradition can broadly be defined to include those who advocate a structuralist approach, those who prefer to emphasise a culturalist approach, and those who embrace a political economy approach. Within the Liberal school the debate typically revolves around what effect the media has on society.

³⁹ Fluckiger, KM (2006) Xenophobia, Media Stereotyping, and their Role in Global Insecurity. Geneva Centre for Security Policy Brief No. 21.

⁴⁰ Harris, B (2001). A Foreign Experience: Violence, crime and xenophobia during South Africa’s transition. *Violence and Transition Series*, Vol 5, August 2001. Published by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

⁴¹ Harris, 2001: no page numbers provided in the report.

⁴² Fine & Bird, 2002: 10.

The media helped maintain the invisibility of the paradigm by constructing a perception of diverse opinion through standards such as balance objectivity and fairness. This masks what was in reality a narrow range of perspectives reported in the media, which accounts for striking similarities among news text⁴³.

Another critical point as to the importance of the media in shaping the opinions of both policy makers and the general public. Recent work in the USA, specifically on the events of 9/11, demonstrates this. In times of national trauma people turn to media for information, particularly electronic media which provides the public with "an immediate experience of national trauma by collapsing time and geographic space from around the world"⁴⁴. Through TV, for example, viewers are "there whilst it happens"

However, literature from the USA "rejects the simplistic model of the media directly influencing public opinion...rather that the question is not whether but how media content influences or is used by its audience. This moves beyond the notion that views the public as passive consumers of content"⁴⁵. This last point is critical and certainly needs to be better understood in the South African context – how do we as South Africans assimilate/ interpret and make meaning of what we read in the print media? Existing research within the South African context tends to favour the view that many are passive and this places greater responsibility on the media, as the following suggests:

A journalist language conveys messages through the complex associations and implications of its metaphors an unstated assumptions. If journalist's language violates the experiential reality of a minority or identifiable group within a society, it creates a conflict between public reality and the personal experiences of those who come to be identified as deviant. The effects of news reporting are therefore of particular importance in assessing the ideological consequences of public reaction to foreign migration in South Africa. The press translates the dominant ideology into public opinion and by doing so helps structure public perception and legitimises the actions of state institutions.... It is both in their potential role in creating moral panics and inciting anti-foreigner sentiments, and in their ability to reproduce ideologies and shape popular perceptions, that the print media player and important role in issues of smuggling, drugs and clandestine migration in South Africa⁴⁶.

⁴³ Berg, P. (2003) More Multicultural than Thou: The News Paradigm and the Sjobo Affair in the Swedish Press. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Marriott Hotel, San Diego, CA. Article accessed 18/08/2009 – <http://www.allacademic.com>

⁴⁴ Spirek, M (accessed 18/08/2009) "A meta analysis of the correlation between media consumption and the 9/11 Jetliner crashes and public opinion about those who live within and outside the United States" Paper presented at the Democracy and Homeland Security: Strategies, Controversies, and Impact Conference (<http://upress.kent.edu/Ammar/11%20Spirek.htm>).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Danso and Macdonald, 2001: 131.

Current research also suggests that not only does the print media have a moral responsibility because of its important position in society, but that its responsibility framed by the legislative context within which they operate, as argued by Fine and Bird:

Media practitioners and institutions are governed by the policy and legislative frameworks of the country in which they operate, as well as by complex set of self regulating ethical principles. In South Africa, the Constitution and a set of legal instruments including the equality act, the broadcasting complaints commission of South Africa, the press ombudsman, and the various acts including the Independent broadcasting authority act of 1993 and the broadcasting Amendment Bill 2002 governing the role played by the Independent Communications authority of South Africa, guide the media in its reporting and editorial approaches...such pronouncements clearly a straight extent to which the international community, including journalists themselves, recognise the power of the media in forming in influencing public opinion. It is evident that the media should not just refrain from half harmful, discriminate your reporting and erroneous stereotyping in racial profiling, but also has a duty to actively inform and educate the public about non-racialism non-discrimination. The media has a role to support an entrenched democracy, especially in times of social and political conservation⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Fine & Bird, 2002: 13 – 15.

The effect that the media has on society in South Africa, especially in respect to xenophobia needs to be better understood if an effective strategy for civil society is to be developed to transform the media. With this in mind the following recommendations can be made:

Problems & recommendations

Insufficient evidence as to how South Africans are influenced by the media and how they use this information

Research by appropriate civil society organisation should be supported so that they can conduct necessary research to understand in far more detail how media messages are transmitted and amplified, how individuals translate such messages, the role that visual images play and so on⁴⁸.

The manner in which stories are chosen, highlighted and covered is viewed as problematic in South Africa

Media monitoring by civil society needs to be used, amongst other uses, to:

- Promote (through incentives such as awards) positive news stories; and
- Inform (possibly through a forum) media owners/ editors on the impact of media reporting on intercultural understanding

Xenophobic print media

// The scarcity of ordinary voices in the dialogue both suggests an official script, and it is an important aspect of these texts sameness. Relying overwhelmingly on elite voices, the press constructed a bureaucratic monologue rather than a popular chorus⁴⁹. //

Whilst the research referred to earlier is convincing in its condemnation of the print media for its xenophobic and un-analytical stories, few researchers have systematically canvassed either the editors or the journalists themselves in order to understand why the articles were written in this fashion. Albeit that Crush et al. note that journalists are not always open to critically reflecting on either the content or the effect of their articles as the following suggests:

⁴⁸ Glenn, I. (2008) The Watchdog that never barked. *Rhodes Journalism Review* No. 28, pp. 18 – 20.

⁴⁹ Berg, 2003: 20.

Journalists at SAHRC – SAMP workshops on responsible reporting of migration issues in 2000-1 were extremely unresponsive to any suggestion that they played any role in encouraging xenophobic attitudes. Many remain so, protected by a misguided belief that all they are doing is reporting “the facts”. They would not uncritically report the opinions of every racist they come across. No more should they uncritically tolerate the opinions of xenophobes⁵⁰.

As the above quote refers, extensive work was conducted from 1998 onwards with journalists as part of the *Roll Back Xenophobia Campaign*. The campaign was launched in December 1998 in response to the rising levels of xenophobia particularly targeted at African migrants and refugees in South Africa. Conducted in partnership between the South African Human Rights Commission, the National Consortium on Refugee Affairs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the campaign attempted to facilitate accurate, factual and truthful coverage of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. To this end, workshops with journalists were held in Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, Durban and Cape Town in 2000 “to sensitise the media to the issues facing refugees and migrants, and to produce more informed coverage of their issues”⁵¹.

However, as Crush et al. suggest working with journalists has its challenges. Moreover if it is the aim to lobby the print media to play a more constructive and insightful role in shaping public attitudes it is critical that any such initiative should be based on a nuanced understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of print media journalists towards issues relating to immigrants.

In their interviews with 4 editors Macdonald and Jacobs found several reasons for ongoing xenophobia in the South African print media, these included⁵²:

- › Media coverage reflects every day reality of life in South Africa;
- › The print media’s reliance on officials for official comment, some of whom continue to display ongoing/ openly xenophobic attitudes;
- › The over reliance on wire services, which by their very nature tend to provide the basics and little analysis; and
- › The growth of the tabloid press which as evidenced elsewhere “latch on to reactionary and sensational issues and attitudes that help to sell newspapers”⁵³.

Other studies when commenting on why the print media is xenophobic, typically endorse a political economy approach to understanding the media (see for instance Crush et al.), and thus emphasise the notion that the print media is controlled by an elite which “shapes and reproduces ideologies in order to reinforce dominant class interests through the discursive medium of the press”⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ Crush et al., 2008: 43.

⁵¹ Parsley, J (2002) “We are not treated like People: The Roll Back Xenophobia Campaign in South Africa” *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, Issue 17. <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2208>

⁵² Discussed at length in Macdonald and Jacobs, 2005: 305 – 308.

⁵³ Macdonald and Jacobs, 2005: 307.

⁵⁴ Macdonald and Jacobs, 2005: 297.

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It is also worth noting that media stereotyping and portraying immigrants in a negative light is not restricted to South Africa and evidence can be found across Western Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Reasons given are remarkably similar to those cited by researchers in South Africa, and they included⁵⁵:

- ▶ Reporting simply mirrors the prejudices of their readers;
- ▶ Incentives to mirror stories around events that sell well – especially negative stories about crime, xenophobic violence and so on; and
- ▶ Selective use of sources for stories (e.g. only talking to officials about immigrant issues rather than the immigrants themselves).

Nevertheless it is unfortunate that little work has been done on canvassing the opinion of those who work directly in print media. Where it has been done elsewhere, for example in Sweden, the results have been illuminating, as noted in the following:

“ This study reveals a self-conscious tension between, on the one-hand journalists individual perspectives toward their work and the stories they cover, and on the other, the professional routines and societal taboos that govern their work. This refutes the notion of journalists as gatekeepers with authority to select the version of reality audiences will view. Instead, journalists were trapped inside the paradigm powerful enough to constrain texts within normative and professional boundaries, even though the paradigms has failed to remain invisible⁵⁶. ”

The implication for civil society is that if it is to play a key role in “rolling back xenophobia” in the media it needs to build a campaign based on a solid understanding of “the world of journalism” before it can educate and ultimately transform the nature of reporting on migrant related issues in South Africa. Such an approach by civil society would need to consider the following recommendations

⁵⁵ Fluckiger, 2006.

⁵⁶ Berg, :23.

Problems & recommendations

Insufficient attention has been paid to the context within journalists operate

Need for a more focussed study on the journalists themselves

Un-analytical nature of the print media

Sensitise and capacitate the media to undertake responsible reporting on migrants and migration issues⁵⁷. Such a programme could include ensuring the media understands⁵⁸:

- The different categories of migrants
- The various aspects of migration
- The rights and responsibilities of migrants
- The need for more comprehensive reporting

Xenophobic media

Promoting multi-culturalism through a variety of different ways including⁵⁹:

- Better representation of migrants in newsrooms through active recruiting and training
- More diversity in mainstream/ non- fiction programmes
- Making training in intercultural understanding a core component of journalist education
- Networking and sharing of best practice among media from different regions
- Promote increased dialogue between different ethnic/cultural/religious groups and the media- Improved self-regulation and more initiatives by the media to promote ethical and professional standards in reporting

⁵⁷ Misago et al., 2009: 6.

⁵⁸ Ideas drawn from Crush et al., 2008.

⁵⁹ Ideas taken from Conference Report (2006) Racism, Xenophobia and the Media: Towards respect and understanding of all religions and cultures. An EU Seminar in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Vienna, 22-23 May 2006.

Causality

“ The literature is, in general terms, underwhelming about the linkage between the mass media and violence. While there is a connection between violence in the media and aggression and/or violent behaviour, it is a complex, multi-faceted and variable connection. Studies that look at non-fictional violence are generally predicated on anecdotal evidence and are almost always broadcast-oriented⁶⁰. ”

Proving a direct link to what was printed in the press and the events of 2008 has yet to be achieved by researchers in South Africa, and it is extremely difficult to do so as the Migrant Media Project (MMP) discovered when it went to the Press Ombudsmen to complain about the *Daily Sun*. In conjunction with several other partners, the MMP complained to the Press Ombudsmen that the *Daily Sun* in its reporting of the events of April/ May 2008 had not only contributed to the xenophobic climate by it consistently referring to foreign nationals as “aliens”, but that it also “portrayed violence as an understandable and legitimate reaction to this state of affairs”⁶¹. However, whilst the MMP received extensive support from those across civil society and within government for pursuing this matter, the original charges against the *Daily Sun* were not proved and the case was dismissed. As Hadland has noted:

“ As convinced as some have evidently been with regard to media complicity in the xenophobic violence, scholarship in media studies, psychology, sociology and anthropology has long mulled over the extent of mass media influence on human behaviour. In general, there does seem to be a link between fictionalised violence (on television or in film) and aggressive behaviour, though this is contested, but nothing more than anecdotal evidence that suggests a causal, linear relationship between mass media non-fictional content and violence. Few studies attempt to measure the impact of print journalism on aggression or violence⁶². ”

Certainly most researchers in South Africa have been careful to emphasise that a direct correlation cannot be made between what has been written in the press and acts of violence, for instance:

⁶⁰ Hadland, 2008: 14.

⁶¹ For more details see the ruling by the Press Ombudsmen Thloloe, J. (August 8, 2008), The Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CorMSA) vs *Daily Sun*, accessed from <http://www.presscouncil.org.za>.

⁶² Hadland A (2008) Shooting the Messenger: Mediating the public and the role of the media in South Africa's xenophobic violence, paper presented at CODESRIA, 12th General Assembly: Governing the African Public Sphere, held in Yaounde, Cameroun 7-11 December 2008, p. 7.

Although it is impossible to draw direct causal links between this kind of any anti-immigrant media coverage and anti-immigrant policy-making and xenophobia in South Africa, the paper does argue that the two are mutually reinforcing and that the print media has a responsibility to be more balanced and factual in its reporting on the issue⁶³.

However, whilst many studies have shied away from arguing that the media is complicit, not all have. For instance, in introducing their paper McDonald and Jacobs have argued that “we draw on the long-standing recognition in the academic literature on the press that media is both a reflection of racism and xenophobia as well as an instigator”⁶⁴.

Moreover, there is evidence, albeit limited (and thus needs to be explored further), from interviews on the ground which suggests that there may be a direct link, as the following notes:

There is, however, evidence that the media played a significant role in triggering violence in areas such as Tembisa, Masiphumelele and Du Noon. Respondents in these areas believe that the violence was triggered by what people saw and read in the media about attacks in other townships, such as Alexandra. Images and media reports of attacks; of people successfully looting foreign-owned shops and of the helpless police and authorities, were certainly encouraging to the ill-intentioned. Criminals and opportunists then organised themselves and mobilised other community members to emulate what was happening elsewhere⁶⁵.

Notwithstanding this account, the evidence for establishing a direct link between print media and xenophobic violence remains under-researched, to say the least. In other research carried out, for instance by Misago et al. (in this case interviews with more than 400 people “on the ground”), the research team make no direct reference to the media. Whilst this can be seen simply as an omission (the instrument used may not have allowed respondents to talk about the effects of the media). It does beg the question as to why the media was not mentioned sufficiently by those interviewed as a causal factor for the violence, to warrant its own explanatory variable.

This resonates with Hadland’s finding that when he conducted focus groups (and he recognises that such findings cannot be generalised) respondents made very little reference to the print media. Hadland reports that in the nine focus groups the HSRC conducted the media was mentioned 24 times, of which “overwhelmingly most media references were to television programmes”⁶⁶.

⁶³ Danso and Macdonald: 2001: 115.

⁶⁴ Macdonald & Jacobs, 2005: 296.

⁶⁵ Misago, JP with Landau, LB & Monson T (2009) Towards Tolerance, Law and Dignity: Addressing Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa. International Organization for Migration, Regional Office for Southern Africa: Pretoria, p. 32.

⁶⁶ Hadland, 2008: 15.

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Nevertheless, whilst complicity may be difficult to prove, Desai makes the important point that “what becomes clear though is that by the time of the May 2008 attacks a powerful xenophobic culture had been created and state organs were geared to hounding African immigrants, the media to stigmatisation and stereotyping, while in many townships African immigrants lived under threat of scapegoating that carried within it the use of violence”⁶⁷.

One further issue that merits attention in this regard is an alternative view taken by the Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative, namely that whilst the media's

*Insensitive reporting of immigration issues might have contributed to the violence... the prompt reporting this time may have saved lives. It allowed migrants to take appropriate steps to ensure their security amid genuine concerns and brought the plight of targeted communities to the attention of the South African government, civil society and the international community*⁶⁸.

So whilst there is insufficient evidence yet to prove causality between the print media and the events of 2008, this does not let the print media off the hook, and it is therefore recommended with respect to civil society the following needs to happen:

Problems & recommendations

Whether the print media were complicit in the events of 2008 has still to be proved

Further research needs to be conducted to examine the effect print media has on society, particularly with regards to xenophobic violence, in South Africa in order to shape initiatives to combat xenophobia in the media

Prompt reporting by the media may have saved the lives of many

Civil society organisations need to give thought to how to develop an early warning system based on the gathering of information by means of both the formal media and informal/community based media

⁶⁷ Desai, A. (2008) 'Hell is waiting for them': The aftermath of the May 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa, unpublished paper. P.6.

⁶⁸ Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative (2009) Tolerating Intolerance: Xenophobic Violence in South Africa, p.17).

“ Educational campaigns to address xenophobia in the press will need to take into account this complex (and shifting) terrain. There are no easy explanations for why the problem exists, and no easy solutions. What is required is a multifaceted and highly contextualised approach⁶⁹. ”

Such an approach would do well to be driven by an empowered civil society that continues to:

- ▶ Monitor and expose xenophobia in the media;
- ▶ Intensify its research on the effects of the media on perceptions and attitudes towards migrants
- ▶ Advocate and lobby mainstream media to transform its approach to reporting migrant issues;

⁶⁹ Macdonald and Jacobs, 2005: 321.

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- Be proactive its communication regarding efforts to combat xenophobia;
- Educate the public through effective utilisation of the media; and
- Strengthen its own information exchange networks as an alternative to mainstream media.

A review of researchers who have critiqued the role of the print media leading up to and including May 2008 has found that while the evidence is convincing that the print media in South Africa has been xenophobic during this period, this does not necessarily imply that the print media was complicit in the events of April/May 2008. Further evidence-based research is urgently needed to understand more fully the effect that the print media has on attitudes and perceptions in South Africa. Furthermore, if, as most researchers have called for, there is going to be a concerted campaign to lobby and thus convince the press to develop a more analytical and informed view on migration then such a campaign should be based on a more informed view as to why the press has been xenophobic for more than a decade.

It is troubling to note the almost complete absence of civil society as a key variable in reviews of the print media, despite civil society's critical role in monitoring xenophobia, mediating between xenophobic factions in society, and responding exhaustively to the aftermath of xenophobic violence. Similarly, there is little evidence of any appraisal of the print media explicitly referring to gender.