



Synthesis Report:

THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF XENOPHOBIA AND THE XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE PRIOR TO AND INCLUDING MAY 2008

by Matthew J. Smith

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Introduction

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 analysis¹ during this period include Danso and Macdonald (2001)², Fine and Bird (2002)³, Macdonald and Jacobs (2005)⁴, and Bekker et al (2008)⁵. Whilst a number of other researchers have also commented on the role of the media, for instance see Desai, 2008, Hadland, 2008, and Crush et al. 2008)⁶, they have typically done so relying on the research conducted by those already mentioned previously.

Why is the media important when it comes to examining xenophobia in South Africa? 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

¹ 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.

² Danso R. & McDonald D. (2001) Writing Xenophobia: Immigration and the Print Media in Post-Apartheid South Africa, *Africa Today*, 48(3): 114 - 37

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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C. (2008) Xenophobia and Violence in South Africa: a desktop study of the trends and a scan of explanations offered, unpublished paper.

⁶ Desai, A. (2008) 'Hell is waiting for them': The aftermath of the May 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa, unpublished paper.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

shows on television debates⁷. Contemporary research shows that the media do not just transmit information to the public, but rather, they also reproduce 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”⁸. The same would of course apply to the use of visual images in the press, the captions associated with the images, the positioning of the images on the page and so on.

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”⁹.

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:

“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 text”¹⁰.

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

Main findings

“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 population”¹¹.

⁷ 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

⁸ Harris, 2001: no page numbers provided in the report.

⁹ Fine & Bird, 2002: 10.

¹⁰ 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>

¹¹ Crush et al., 2008: 42.

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'.

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 provide little analysis of the subject. It will suffice to provide one example of this. 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 simplistic "with minimal in-depth discussion of the issues raised", and "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 migrant¹².

With respect to what the reviews of the print media don't tell us, a couple of key points can be made. One, 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 nevertheless 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 addressed¹³.

Two, the complete absence of any gender awareness or of civil society in any of the existing studies. Very little research on the media has for example, disaggregated analysis by gender, explored how women are portrayed in incidents and so on. Instead the research on the media does not differentiate between women and men, old and young and rather talks generally about the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans as if they were an homogenous group. Similarly, researchers in their analysis of the print media have largely ignored civil society and no researcher has used civil society as a variable in their analysis.

In addition, the existing research as so far failed to demonstrate that there is a direct link to what was printed in the press and violent xenophobic incidents in South Africa. It is extremely difficult to do so, as the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) discovered when it went to the Press Ombudsmen to complain about the Daily Sun in 2008.

¹² Fine and Bird, 2002: 58 - 59.

¹³ 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.

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”¹⁴. 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 violence*¹⁵.

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:

*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 issue*¹⁶.

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”¹⁷.

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”¹⁸.

¹⁴ 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>.

¹⁵ Hadland, 2008: 7.

¹⁶ Danso and Macdonald: 2001: 115.

¹⁷ Macdonald & Jacobs, 2005: 296.

¹⁸ Desai, 2008: 6.

Conclusion

A review of researchers who have analysed 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 contributed to the development of a xenophobic environment**, particularly in the manner in which the media has stigmatized those from outside South Africa's borders, **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.

More specifically the review noted a number of gaps in the analysis, in particular 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. We would therefore recommend that the Research teams that have previously monitored the print media need to be supported to ensure that the print media is assessed for the period April/ May 2008 and beyond if feasible; and that 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.

Moreover, it was noted earlier that there is insufficient evidence as to how South Africans are influenced by the media and how they use this information. It is therefore recommend that there is a need to support further research by appropriate civil society organisation 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.

It was also noted above that studies of the print media have displayed little awareness of gender.

It is therefore recommended that there is an **urgent need for studies that are gender sensitive in their appraisal of the effect of the media** on xenophobia in South Africa.

Similarly, it was found that the voice of civil society is largely absent from the reviews of the print media. To address this gap, it is recommended that capacity is built within civil society in order for it 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), and encourage minority youth to pursue journalism as a career.

Furthermore, with respect to civil society, it was found that 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. Therefore it is recommended that the media monitoring capacity of civil society is strengthened by developing skills and capacity to monitor media reporting, and developing skills and capacity to interact with complaints bodies (e.g. press ombudsmen and press councils).

Research referred to earlier also found that in certain instances prompt reporting by the media may have saved the lives of many. It is therefore recommended that 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.

Also with respect to media monitoring, the evidence produced by this process draws attention to the problematic manner in which stories are chosen, highlighted and covered in South Africa. It is therefore recommended that 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.

Media monitoring projects also emphasize the weak analysis found in most stories found in the print media. It is therefore recommended that civil society initiate campaigns to 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, various aspects of migration, and the rights and responsibilities of migrants.

However such campaigns do need to pay more attention to the context within which journalists operate in order to ensure any campaign to promote multi-culturalism in the media is well grounded. Promoting multi-culturalism in the media could include better representation of migrants in newsrooms through active recruiting and training, making training in intercultural understanding a core component of journalist education, networking and sharing of best practice among media from different regions, promoting increased dialogue between different ethnic/cultural/religious groups and the media, and supporting self-regulation initiatives by the media to promote ethical and professional standards in reporting.

In conclusion, several recommendations 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.