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Monitoring the media since 1993

## Africa in SA Media: a snap survey

Reporting on Africa is a complex, as Africa is a continent with about 800 million people, with 54 countries of which South Africa is the southern tip. Such diversity would seemingly warrant good background data to allow the newspaper readers to understand the context of events. However, from this brief monitoring exercise, it seems that many of Gauteng-based media have not had the editorial commitment to cover Africa often and have ignored the complexities of various situations.

In order to understand patterns of coverage of Africa, all articles about Africa and African countries, with the exclusion of South Africa, were monitored in the period from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June till the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. All Gauteng-based large commercial media were monitored<sup>1</sup>.

In looking at the coverage of Africa, the research sought to answer various questions. Do reports mention relevant legislation, such as the African Charter of Human and People's Rights, in conflict situations? Is, in general, sufficient background information provided to the reader? This would allow the reader to arrive at their own opinions on the various situations, detailed in the reports<sup>2</sup>.

Findings show that coverage of Africa has been limited, with only the *Citizen* and *Business Day* offering systematic coverage on African news. *Citizen* and *Business Day* are to be commended for the amount of coverage they gave to news in Africa. *Daily Sun* also gives daily coverage on events in Africa, in the form of a brief description of them. This is mostly of disasters and tragedies throughout the continent, without adding depth, from which many of these stories would give the reader a greater sense of the situation.

The monitoring revealed that some subjects received a substantial amount of coverage. For purposes of clarity, the following subjects are dealt with in separate sections.

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<sup>1</sup> Business Day, City Press, Daily Sun, Mail & Guardian, Sowetan, Sunday Times, The Citizen, The Star, The Times, The Sunday Independent, and The Weekender.

<sup>2</sup> It must be acknowledged that the in-depth information, which may be provided on conflicts may have appeared in various newspapers outside the monitoring period.



1. Zimbabwe: the coverage of Zimbabwe focuses mainly on the attempts of the Zimbabwean government to manage the economy, which is plagued by hyperinflation.
2. African Union summit: most of the coverage focused on the future of the African Union; whether to focus on continental or regional economic integration. Other topics of discussion are barely mentioned.
3. Conflicts: the conflicts in Darfur, Somalia and Western Sahara are the most reported on conflict areas in Africa. Less attention was given to the violence against politicians in Lesotho.

The research found that coverage was very fragmented and overwhelmingly negative. Barring a few exceptions most of the reports, and certainly the individual newspapers as a whole, give the impression that Africa is a continent that is plagued by corruption, inept leadership, conflict, disregard for human rights and laws. Such coverage could conceivably fuel xenophobia in South Africa as many people from other African countries both live and work in South Africa.



Considering the levels of xenophobia in South Africa, news media have a duty to inform the public in a responsible way. This includes addressing human rights violations as such and contextualising stories so that the reader gets a good picture of the context.

### ***Zimbabwe: the economic basket case***

Of all the African countries, Zimbabwe received the bulk of newspaper coverage since the 11<sup>th</sup> of March. On that day opposition groups tried to attend a staged prayer rally, but the rally was suppressed by the police. Reports suggest that unrest, in one form or another, has been a constant since. Most of the coverage in the monitored period was on the possible economic breakdown of the country and the attempts of its government to manage it. Zimbabwe offers a particular challenge to journalists as the current situation needs to show the historical context, but it also provides a good platform to educate the reading public about human rights.

Although much coverage inferred human rights abuses, few media stated outright that this was the case. The key issue was the state of the economy and government-imposed food price cuts. In-depth coverage of the Zimbabwean economy was provided by *The Citizen* (02/07/2007, p. 12), which looked at rapid prices increases as a result of shortages, and how the informal sector currently prevents total economic collapse. The article was informative, and served to give a better understanding of the current working of the Zimbabwean economy. The reader was informed of why the price hikes occurred and how the Zimbabwean government attempted to control the economy. Other coverage was provided in *The Times* (04/07/2007, p. 6), which reported on the effects of

<sup>3</sup> Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



the instituted price controls: it led to the clearing of supermarket shelves. *The Star* (29/06/2007, p. 3) reports that some retailers have chosen to withdraw their products as a result of the price controls, and some manufacturers have stopped production. *Daily Sun* (22/06/2007, p. 6) reported that the economic breakdown of Zimbabwe led to an increase of goods smuggling.

In general, there seemed to be a lack of human rights focus in the economic stories and it was not always clear how the people were effected and how, with the exception of *The Citizen* story, people survived in the midst of the economic breakdown. Not only would this have been an opportunity to consider the state's obligations in terms of economic management, but would have provided interesting reading of people's lived experience. This could have provided greater understanding of Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa.

Other coverage on Zimbabwe dealt with the ongoing talks between Zanu-PF and the MDC, with minor attention being paid to possible human rights' violations. *Weekender* (23/06/2007, p. 3) among other papers, reported on the breakthrough in the talks between the two parties, as a common agenda had been agreed upon.

Mention of (possible) human rights' violations by state sanctioned officials was made, and this included legislation that violates basic human rights. *The Citizen* (20/06/2007, p. 12) reported on legislation that would allow the police to intercept any communication without court orders; it would severely impair citizens' and media's freedom of expression. Mugabe was referred to as a 'tyrant'. *Business Day* (25/06/2007, p. 6) reported on a treason trial staged in Harare, and gives the account of a doctor who reported on life-threatening injuries one suspect sustained while in custody.

Coverage on Zimbabwe gave the impression that the country is in a hopeless position as a result of the economic policies. Human rights could have been highlighted more and personal stories of Zimbabweans could have brought the economic pressures home.

## ***African Union summit: the latest failure***

The African Union, which consists of all African countries with the exception of Morocco, held a summit in the Ghanaian capital Accra, from the 1st of July until the 3rd of July. On the agenda was the discussion on whether to attempt and create a federal government for the continent now, or focus on regional integration first.

Although there was no major breakthrough on the summit, that in itself was not a failure as the project itself is highly complicated and ambitious. A relevant comparison could have been made with the European Union, but none of the monitored media made such a comparison. Rather than balancing the coverage with the complexity of the situation, most media chose rather to use the opportunity to criticise Africa's history of not finding African solutions to African problems. For example, an opinion piece by Mohau Pheko in the *Sunday Times* (01/07/2007, p. 25) mentioned various damning criticisms of Africa consisting of many dictatorships, fake democracies, catering to Western imperialism, and



suppressing their own people; and the way forward is to do away with the African states, and create an African union based on African values. Similarly, *The Weekender* (23/06/2007, p. 8) reports under the headline "Poor leadership sinks Nepad", that African leaders show a lack of leadership, no commitment to mutual accountability. Conflicts were also mentioned to show how AU initiatives were not solving problems. For example, *Business Day* (29/06/2007, p. 10), and *Business Day* (02/07/2007, p. 6)

Seemingly, the only tangible success of the AU meeting was reported by *The Star* (29/06/2007, p. 13), which mentioned the creation of a diplomatic passport for government officials valid in all of Africa. None of the above-mentioned articles mentioned human rights violations as such, or made reference to relevant international legislation.

One does not get an immediate impression that the continent is presented as hopeless, when reading articles about the African Union summit. However once its foundation principles, or other past projects under its wings, such as Nepad, come under scrutiny, one does get the sense that the continent is marred by conflict, human rights' violations, corruption and a lack of leadership.

### **Coverage of conflicts: business as usual**

There were a number of conflicts during the monitoring period in Africa, of which some were covered. The most prominent of the conflicts is Darfur in Sudan.

A lack of context contributed to the impression that conflict in Africa is business as usual. For example, *The Citizen* reported (20/06/2007, p. 16) that the Sudanese government was forced into accepting the deployment of UN troops in Darfur. A spokesperson of the main opposition party said, this was not because it is committed to protecting Darfuri civilians. The report makes no mention of the causes of the conflict. Other reports, such as *Business Day* (26/06/2007, p. 7) focused on the failure of the international community to resolve the conflict; this included the EU and the US as well. The AU refused to attend a G8-meeting to address the conflict, on grounds that the meeting "was a duplication of existing effort" (*Mail & Guardian*, 29/06/2007, p. 16). The same lack of context made the conflict in Somalia difficult to understand. For example, the fighting in Somalia was briefly covered by the *Daily Sun* (22/06/2007, p. 6). *Sowetan* informed us that a suspected bomb blast killed five women in the capital Mogadishu (27/06/2007, p. 13). Human rights abuses were not covered as such, in any of these articles.

In contrast, better coverage was provided of Lesotho. According to the *Mail & Guardian* (22/06/2007, p. 17), the government of Lesotho accused some sections of the opposition of involvement in attacks on government officials. Opposition groups contested the validity of seat allocation after parliamentary elections in February. Coverage by the Mail & Guardian seemed to give the reader a good indication on the situation. *The Citizen* (22/06/2007, p. 16), reported that former Botswana President Masire had been appointed to ease the tensions in the country, by mediating between the parties.



Mention of the conflict on the long-disputed Western Sahara receives some coverage, seems to have been made after Jacob Zuma offended Moroccan diplomats. *Mail & Guardian* (22/06/2007, p. 16) reported on the release of a restricted United Nations report, which objected to the Saharawi people being denied their right to self-determination, and being severely restricted in exercising other rights as well.

None of the articles, barring the earlier mentioned *Mail & Guardian* article on the Western Sahara conflict, drew explicit attention to possible human rights' violations, despite the nature of the situations described in the various reports – let alone held the respective governments accountable for the consequences. Consequently, the impression one gets is that conflicts in Africa is nothing else but business as usual, as no one is held accountable for (possible) human rights violations. Again, no mention was made of the African Charter of Human and People's Rights, to which 41 African nations are signatories.

### **Other coverage**

There was some coverage on democratic processes in the monitoring period. Except for the elections in Mali and Congo-Brazzaville, there was also news on Kenya changing election days, to allow for more voters to cast their votes (*City Press*, 24/06/2007, p. 10). Coverage of these elections and events was minimal: Only *Citizen* (02/07/2007, p. 9) reported on the Malian elections – but this may be due to the fact that the results may not have come in before the end of the monitoring period. Coverage on the Congolese elections was done by several newspapers, such as *Business Day* (26/06/2007, p. 9). The poor organisation of these polls drew much criticism from opposition parties and independent observers alike. All such matters are important, because they may improve or threaten the respective democratic processes in these countries.

Charles Taylor, former President of Liberia, is being tried for war crimes and crimes against humanity in The Hague, in the Special Court for Sierra Leone. *Business Day* (26/06/2007, p. 9) informs us, that his trial was suspended, after Taylor demanded a top lawyer from one of the Commonwealth countries, as he was unhappy with the offered lawyers on legal aid, on which he is dependent.

One of the few encouraging items on Africa, was published by *Mail & Guardian* (29/06/2007, p. 15), on the release of a militant hero, Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, of the Ijaw people. This spells hope that the conflicts which have been waging in Nigeria may be resolved in the future.

### **Conclusion**

In general, coverage on Africa was fragmented and did not provide readers enough information to understand the respective situations sufficiently. The effect is perpetuating the idea that Africa is out of control and that African rulers are incapable. Most of the coverage did not point to human rights abuses, when



there was reason to suspect abuses to have happened. In addition, there was a lack of drawing on international law, various treaties and international bodies which are involved in human rights protection.

The coverage of Africa reflected in newspapers during the time period would function to support xenophobic attitudes in South Africa, this could conceivably lead to more human rights abuses.

