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Monitoring the media since 1993

## The media and crime

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Print and broadcast media should provide viewers, listeners and readers with information about the world that is fair, balanced and accurate. It is equally important for the media to challenge and interrogate government performance on fundamental issues including poverty, HIV/AIDS and the safety and security situation. These principles have seemingly been in conflict in recent crime coverage.

There is no doubt that crime in South Africa is a crucial issue that warrants extensive and prominent coverage in the country's media, as it deals with fundamental rights of safety and security. There is also no question that the media is required to raise and highlight the failure of the government to protect and to safeguard the South African population, particularly in reaction to the statement made by the country's president about crime in the country. The proclamation was that most South Africans do not believe that crime was 'out of control' in South Africa.

It is essential that media undertake ongoing coverage of crime, viewing it from various angles. However, dramatic coverage without context means that media is failing in their duty to educate and inform their audience.

### Ongoing crime coverage

Media consistently provides high levels of prominent coverage on crime. Much of this coverage is not referred to as crime per se, but the particular crime committed. For instance, at the end of 2006, cash-in-transit robberies were prominently covered. The media covers dramatic and exceptional crime on a consistent basis, sometimes at the expense of more systemic, less striking crimes such as gender based violence. It seems that such abuse needs to culminate in a family murder for it to be featured in the media. Similarly, rape is covered when there are multiple victims or multiple child victims.



Coverage of crime more generally, seems to have peaked in reaction to the President's remarks. This coverage was typified by an article in the *Saturday Star*, foregrounding the attitudes to crime of the three men at the helm of safety and security issues in South Africa - President Mbeki, Safety and Security Minister, Charles Ngcakula and Police Commissioner, Jackie Selebi, headlined "Crime: What's the Fuss?" (*Saturday Star* 27 January 2007, p1).

Recent crime coverage has also illustrated a clear agenda, on the part of the media, to seek out and present evidence in an effort to discredit government claims on the drop in the crime rate. While it is not unheard of for the media to operate from such a clear agenda, it is quite unusual.

While crime does indeed warrant extensive coverage across the South African media, recent patterns of coverage have shown a tendency on the part of the media to largely provide basic levels of information, without sufficient attention given to discussing and analysing the issues involved. Recent crime coverage also tends to be reported without due consideration of the wider context. Of particular concern is a lack of focus in the coverage on the patterns of crime nationally, regionally and locally, the responsibility of the government and the general public, and on issues in the justice system. This is concerning, because it is crucial for crime coverage to be undertaken within the broader social, political and legal context. In addition, the issue of crime in the country is multifaceted, requiring detailed discussion of the matter in all its complexity. In particular, the high levels of inequality in the country.

Many editions of the country's most widely-read newspapers and television news broadcasts have featured, over the past few months, stories on specific incidents of crime and general commentary on the matter. The *Beeld*, in a series of crime-focused front page stories and editorials exclaimed that "Ja, dit is so erg" ("Yes, it is so bad", *Beeld*, 17/01/2007, p.1), and that "SA in erge spervuur oor misdaad" ("SA is in serious crossfire over crime", *Beeld*, 29/01/07, p.1). The newspaper also asked the question, "Nie so erg?" ("Not so bad" 17/01/2007, p. 8), and presented the SABC SMS anti-crime initiative which resulted in "400 000 SMS'e teen misdaad" ("400 000 SMS's against crime, *Beeld*, 30/01/07, p.1) as a worthy illustration of the feelings of the South African populace.

Another example that typified the crime focus of some media entities is provided by the front-page story in the *Beeld* on the 18/01/2007, under the headline, "Voel ons Pyn" ("Feel our pain"). It illustrates the extent of the "crime problem" through the inclusion of photographic representation of a number of South Africans across the racial, gender and age divide who have been victimised by crime. *The Star* also included a story of an extended family where every member had been personally affected by crime.

Although such coverage is good as it presents a human face to the crime statistics, it is important to report within the context of crime statistics. Similarly, a previous Media Monitoring Project (MMP) article pointed to a trend by the media to sometimes present opinion and pass it off as news. During monitoring, the MMP found that, in the wake of the arrest of Netshisaulu Avhatakali's wife for his murder and her depiction as a "black widow", it was the media that actually created the

idea of women as greed-fuelled husband killers despite evidence to the contrary ([Upsurge of women who kill for money?](#)). In the same vein, questions need to be asked as to whether the recent crime coverage was fair or whether the media agenda prevented strict adherence to statistics.

This increased coverage of crime by media coincided with the President's State of the Nation address. Extensive arguments were presented over the need for the President to include crime fighting as a central component of his speech. Much of this coverage reflected public calls for a greater commitment from the president to eradicate crime. In addition, there were many post-speech perspectives that Mbeki had not gone far enough in dealing with the crime issue during the address. There was an excellent opportunity to examine the complexities of crime provided by the President's comments on the difficulties associated with solving the crime problem, but few media picked this up.

While the majority of coverage failed to adequately inform and educate the South African public, a couple of opinion pieces from socio-political experts were however noted, which approached the matter from a more informed and analytical perspective. In this regard, for example, the *Business Day* ran two noteworthy pieces, the first written by IDASA research associate, Steven Friedman, under the title, "Protecting poor should be SA's crime priority, for all our sakes" (*Business Day*, 21/02/2007, p. 20), and the second from a senior researcher at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), David Bruce, on the need to "Acknowledge the violence of disparity" in discussing issues of inequality and crime (*Business Day*, 21/02/2007, p.20).

### Coverage of David Rattray Murder

The media agenda to challenge the government on crime coincided with the murder of renowned historian and tour leader David Rattray, on 28 January 2007. This would serve as a case study to examine the coverage of crime in the past few months. There was a lack of context, a tendency to focus on dramatic crime rather than systemic crime and the deliberate attempt to portray crime as out of control.

The Rattray murder coverage showed a number of patterns consistent with the trends noted by MMP in the period preceding his murder. Firstly, it failed to be framed by discussions surrounding crime and violence patterns in the northern KwaZulu-Natal region where he lived and worked, and in South Africa more generally. Secondly, the Rattray incident illustrated the tendency of the media to focus on dramatic violent crime. This is opposed to the minimal coverage provided to gender based violence, child abuse and other crime perpetrated within the home or by perpetrators known to the victims. These crimes constitute a extremely high proportion of criminal acts committed in South Africa. Finally, it was apparent that the key issues raised by many media outlets often overflowed into deliberate attempts to represent crime as out of control. This was in order, it would appear, in an effort to force increased government action. Such a response would seem to be as a result of the perceived failure of the government, through the Minister of Safety and Security, Charles Ngqakula and the President to tackle the "crime issue".

The theme of crime as out of control was illustrated best in a piece included in the *Sowetan* on the 08/02/2007, (p. 14), which explicitly maintained in its headline that "Crime (is) out of control". In addition, media organs such as *The Star*, *The Citizen*, *Sunday Times*, *Sowetan*, *Business Day* and the *Beeld* have provided extensive and dramatic headline coverage of "rampant crime" in the country. In many instances, the media appeared to be the voices and the mouthpieces of the disaffected South African public, presenting the angry perspectives of those who are fed up with the supposed lack of government's progress in curbing high levels of crime in South Africa.

Earlier crime coverage was principally focused on the extensive and bitter public reaction towards the statements made by President Mbeki. It was particularly the murder of renowned historian David Rattray and the subsequent trial of one of his murderers that seemed to galvanise the South African media and public into frenzied activity surrounding the crime situation. Media debates surrounding crime become even more heated following the furore over the cancellation of the R10 million First National Bank anti-crime advertising campaign.

### Human face of crime

Within the context of all-encompassing coverage on crime, the Rattray murder presented a perfect opportunity to highlight and foreground crime in South Africa, and to provide further proof that anyone and everyone could become a victim of crime. It would appear as if the dramatic personalised story provided by the Rattray murder gave the media a ready-made opportunity to present their views on crime to a supposedly fed up South African populace. In such a context, it would seem as if Rattray was utilised as the media's human face for arguments about crime.

Eulogies for Rattray were noted in:

- *The Citizen*, under the headline, "A man steadfast and true despite his successes" (*The Citizen*, 29/01/2007, p. 4);
- *Sunday Times*, in the article, "David Rattray: Stirring historian, community-minded raconteur" (*Sunday Times*, 28/01/2007, p. 16); and
- *The Star*, which bade "Farewell to an African legend who lived in the past" (*The Star*, 29/01/2007, p.6).

Coverage covering Rattray as the face of evidence in this regard were provided by coverage in the immediate aftermath of the murder in:

- *The Citizen*, which presented the shocked reaction of the National Police Commissioner, Jackie Selebi to the Rattray murder ("Murder shocks Selebi", *The Citizen*, 29/01/2007, p.1);
- *The Star*, in presenting their views on the "Rattray murder mystery" (*The Star*, 29/01/2007, p. 1);
- The *Beeld*, in repeating his dramatic last words, ("Sy laaste woorde: 'Moenie my skiet nie!' ("His last words: 'Don't shoot me!', *Beeld*, 29/01/2007, p. 4); and

- The *Sunday Independent* which led with claims of assassination by one of Rattray's close friends ("Friend convinced Rattray assassinated", *Sunday Independent*, 28/02/2007, p.1).

The item in the *Sunday Independent* went further in exclaiming that the "murder of (this) internationally famous South African historian hits world headlines and rubbishes claims that the government has crime under control", ("Friend convinced Rattray assassinated", *Sunday Independent*, 28/02/2007, p.1). While *The Citizen* included an opinion piece comparing SA's murder rate to US casualties during the Vietnam War ("SA's Vietnam is the crime wave," *The Citizen*, 31/01/2007, p. 12).

### Dramatic coverage

In addition, in keeping with the previous patterns of crime coverage noted earlier in the year, the discourses surrounding coverage of both the search for the killers of Rattray and the memorial service tended towards language that favoured the dramatic, at the expense of being educational and informative.

Thus it was noted that the *Sunday Times*, for example, referred to the "Hunt for (the) mastermind and trigger man in Rattray murder", (04/02/2007, p.9). In similar fashion, the *Sunday Independent*, focused on the "Chilling confession of Rattray's final moments (which) bring closure to his family" (04/02/2007, p. 2). The *Business Day* coverage followed similar patterns in reporting on the funeral, when describing that the KwazuluNatal "Premier puts brave face on crime at David Rattray funeral" (02/02/2007, p.4).

The *Beeld* highlighted the fact that Prince Charles, a close friend of Rattray would not be at the funeral ("Charles nie by Rattray begrafinis," "Charles not at Rattray funeral," 31/01/2007, p. 10). It also presented the views of Rattray's wife that the family and friends should continue with his life's work ("Rattray se vrou se hulle moet aangaan," "Rattray's wife says they must go on", *Beeld*, 30/01/2007, p. 4)

The funeral and memorial service for Rattray was covered in similarly dramatic form, with a number of media, taking their lead from the mourners, utilising the occasion to severely criticise the government on their policies surrounding crime. Examples here would include the *Beeld* and *The Star*. The former repeated the pleas of the mourners for action on crime "Rouklaers: Dis nou genoeg-Talle by Rattray-begrafinis pleit om misdaad-aksie" ("Mourners: It's now enough-many at Rattray funeral plead for crime action". *Beeld*, 02/02, 2007, p.9), while the latter reiterated that the "Government (was) slated over crime at Rattray funeral" (*The Star*, 02/02/2007, p.10)

### Patterns of crime

The media certainly provided extensive coverage to the Rattray case, with virtually all the major print and broadcast entities including a large number of stories on the matter. While some of the stories merely reported on this specific case or profiled Rattray in positive and heroic terms, there were a number of items which extrapolated from the Rattray incident to high levels of crime.

The *Sunday Times*, for example, exclaimed that "We are at war with ourselves" (*Sunday Times*, 28/01/2007, p.1), and asked the question in an opinion piece, "Why the outcry over one white man's death? I'll tell you why" (*Sunday Times*, 28/01/2007, p. 20).

The *Beeld* also used the Rattray murder to call for increased government action on the crime rates. In this regard they represented the views of Britain on the crime situation in the country ("Britte kap Mbeki oor misdadaad," Brits attack Mbeki over crime", *Beeld*, 29/01/2007, p. 1). They also commented on the impetus provided by the murder for further action against crime ("Moord op Rattray is n 'werkroep" ("Murder of Rattray is a call to action", *Beeld*, 29/01/2007, p. 4).

The *Business Day* included an item revealing the views of the head of the Scorpions that "No-one is safe any more" (02/02/2007, p. 1). While no mention is made of the Rattray murder, and his comments were directed at the attack of Business against Crime executive, Alan McKenzie, the opinions provided by the Scorpions director do seem to be a direct consequence of the murder. In addition, the item does include a photograph of the Rattray family and friends at his funeral at Michaelhouse school outside Pietermaritzburg.

In addition the period also saw a number of stories depicting other high profile South African victims of crime, such as singer Anton Goosen. When taken together, this highly dramatic coverage seemed to imply that South Africa is becoming ungovernable, rather quickly.

### Justice served

The quick action by the SAPS and the justice system in the investigation, arrest and trying of the Rattray murder suspects was, seemingly, universally praised. Virtually all media monitored were quick to represent the arrest and court appearance as justice being served. However, the media were also quick to point to the Rattray murder case as an exception in bringing perpetrators to book so quickly, and to ask why such swift action is not commonplace in the South African justice system.

For example, *The Citizen* reported that the "Rattray gang (were) bust" ("02/02/2007, p. 1) and praised the justice system for the swift action in ensuring that the "Rattray killer (was) jailed" (06/02/2007, p.1). Similar sentiments were apparent in the *Beeld*, which highlighted the emotional reactions to the quick arrests "Rattray-moord: 2 vasgetrek-Stortvloed emosie begroet vinnige arrestasies" ("Rattray-murder - 2 caught-outpouring of emotion greets quick arrests", *Beeld*, 01/02/2007, p. 4).

*The Star* also praised the "Swift justice" (*The Star*, 06/02/2007, p. 1) meted out to the first suspect in the case. Such positive reaction was also apparent in the *Sowetan* ("Killer gets time - 25 years for murder of historian Rattray, *Sowetan*, 06/02/2007, p. 4), and the *Daily Sun* ("Rattray suspect to plead guilty!", 03/02/2007, p7; "Rattray killer awaits fate!" 05/02/2007, p2, "Rattray's killer gets 25 years", 06/02/2007, p. 4).

## Conclusion

With the extensive and prominent coverage afforded to crime in the local media over the past few months, the Media Monitoring Project felt it necessary to assess this coverage. This includes the successes and challenges faced by the media in providing crime coverage that is fair, balanced and accurate and which provides information that is both informative and educative.

The coverage of the high profile murder of historian David Rattray served as a useful illustration of the manner in which crime continues to be covered in the South African media. There is no doubt that crime continues to account for a large proportion of news stories in both the print and broadcast media in South Africa. As explained above, recent monitoring would seem to indicate interesting trends surrounding crime coverage. This includes a number of media products seemingly intent on representing the country as rife with and overwhelmed by crime, as a result of inadequate government attention in curbing the "crime problem".

As illustrated by the media coverage surrounding the Rattray murder, the monitoring has also found that much of the coverage continues to be overly dramatic discourse. This discourse is illustrated with personal stories, in an attempt to buttress anti-crime messages with a human face.

Coverage of the Rattray murder case, furthermore points to the tendency of the media to represent crime as totally out of control, with the government out of touch with reality, and everybody a potential crime victim. The praise provided for the unusually swift arrest and conviction of the murderers seems to indicate that the media plans to continue to challenge perceived government inaction on crime, questioning why such actions do not accompany other criminal incidents in South Africa.

In conclusion, it is clear that while crime continues to significantly affect South African society and thus, warrants media attention, it is imperative for the media to cover crime within the framework of human rights and in line with its public service responsibilities to provide informative and educative coverage. It is also crucial for the media to provide coverage to a broad range of issues and concerns that affect the South African populace, including, but not limited to crime.

--- By Jack Fine

*Comments, queries, suggestions?*

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