

Race, Rugby & Everything Else

While South Africa's leading papers would have one believe that the South African media has come a long way in the struggle for unbiased reporting especially when it comes to race issues, the Geo Cronjé debacle has showed us that there certainly is still a lot of room for improvement. Given the continued existence of racism in SA it is positive that racism receives prominent coverage, more so in extreme cases such as this one. Yet at the same time, the coverage of the Cronjé incident flies in the face of efforts to eradicate racial stereotypical reporting.

The Cronjé incident and coverage thereof raises two prominent issues. The first of which is race and how it and racism are represented in the media and secondly, the issue of trial by media. Quite recently in a much-publicised attack on the media and various other parties, prominent politicians such as Jacob Zuma and Mac Maharaj have highlighted the unfair trial they have been given in the media as to their innocence or guilt, involving them in the multi-million arms-deal. One could argue that Geo Cronjé has been tried in the media in similar fashion. While these incidents have occurred in different spheres they are nonetheless linked by virtue of the fact that the media have essentially failed to give the respective subjects an opportunity to prove their own innocence or guilt – in the case of Geo Cronjé, noticeably guilty until proven innocent.

It is evident from the first reporting on Thursday 28 and Friday 29 August that the media was only too eager to confirm Cronjé in his status as racist Afrikaner. Many newspapers accepted Cronjé's guilt of so-called racist behaviour without question. For example, in the editorial of the *Sowetan* (29/08/03, p. 24) it is argued that: "lock Geo Cronjé was rightly expelled from South Africa's World Cup training squad after allegation of racism was levelled against him". While mention is made of "allegations" there is nowhere any indication that these allegations could be false. Various other papers took the same route by referring to the "alleged incident" in a manner that focuses on his likely guilt and not innocence. For example, the *Star* (29/08/03, p. 1) focuses on "rehabilitation" efforts proposed if Cronjé is found guilty, while *The Citizen* (29/08/03, p. 1) points out how Cronjé's younger brother will "now probably play under a dark cloud for the remainder of his career". Others called for his lifelong ban from all forms of rugby, arguing that: "he needs to be made aware that there is no place for people like him in the new South Africa" (*City Press*, 31/08/03 p. 18). Interestingly *City Press* did place an apology (page 1) for its comments in its editorial regarding Geo Cronjé on 31 August 2003. Unusually however, *City Press* put this apology in the same paper as its editorial. It is not exactly clear why the paper still chose to print the editorial as it already came to light that the racism allegations are not as watertight as previously believed. Would the paper not have done less damage by not printing the damning editorial rather than just including an apology?

It is this type of journalism that will run with a story despite the consequences that wholly contributes to the imbalanced, unfair and inaccurate coverage race and racist incidents get in South Africa. Once again the Geo Cronjé incident illustrates how important it is for journalists and editors to "get it right". Despite monitoring seven papers during the initial stages of the incident it has been virtually impossible to get clarity on the issues. Single source reports without verification have been the order of the day. What "actually" happened is still unclear and while it is evident that the media are also uncertain about the events, it is essential that there is a diversity of opinions that is accurate and verified. Thus providing the readers with the knowledge that what they are reading, at least, seeks to deal with the incident in a conscientious manner.

What may or may not have "really" happened is certainly by now a moot point as the label of racist has already stuck firmly in the minds of many readers, the team has been chosen and South African rugby might never recover. However, as a discerning audience we have to examine the way in which this matter has been handled by the media – or not at all. When covering a story such as this one, taking into consideration the South African legacy of apartheid is paramount. Racism in South Africa does not come without considerable emotional attachments. Nor does it exist separate from personal experiences or race particular stereotypes. As such it is unacceptable, not to mention ill advised to, as in this case, label an incident racist by making it a "white and black" issue. Suddenly we are once more reading about white and black rugby players instead of a united Springbok team. At the same time the majority of papers seemingly deem it necessary to have a "black" player validate Cronjé's apparent non-racism – very much reminiscent of that old, much loved acknowledgement: "I have many black friends", which served as undeniable proof.

It is also worrying that racial stereotyping has been rife in the media's coverage of this case. By making reference to Geo Cronjé's beard – unfortunate as it might be – (*Beeld*, 29/08/03 p. 1, *Citizen*, 29/08/03 p2, *City Press*, 31/08/03 p. 18, *Saturday Star*, 30/08/03 p. 1, *The Star*, 29/08/03 p. 1) and the fact that he speaks Afrikaans, and then equating this with the stereotypical physical and cultural manifestation of "a racist", the media not only promoted racial stereotyping but also actively contributed to the reproduction of racism.

The way in which this incident has been handled by the media calls not only for self reflection by the media but also intensive research once more regarding the reporting on race and racism by the media. For if the media could get it so horribly wrong with a high profile story such as this one, one has to question the media's judgement in reporting on other, less prominent stories as well. The Media Monitoring Project, as on numerous occasions before, urge the media to not only commit to fair, balanced and accurate reporting but also, proactively put this process in action. It is the view of the MMP that it is not enough to be merely cognisant of the issues, emotions and legacy –

rather the media should be actively engaged with it in an informed and responsible manner.

MMP, 1 September 2003