



PO Box 1560, Parklands, 2121 • Tel +2711 788 1278 • Fax +2711 788 1289
Email mmpinfo@mediamonitoring.org.za • www.mediamonitoring.org.za

Violence in the media
Broadcast: 18 November 2007

You are with SAfm my name is Xolani Gwala in for Jeremy Maggs this Sunday morning. Time now for the media monitoring project, SA Fm and open society foundation radio conference and here with me in the studio to give us details thereof is William Bird is the director at the Media Monitoring Project, very good morning to you William?

William: Good Morning thanks for having me.

Xolani: Nice having you on the show this morning, just give us a bit of a background why is it necessary that there should be such a [00:30] conference?

William: Well i mean in terms of kinds of issues we like to raise there always got some direct link to human rights especially in terms of media and media practice and we thought of you mentioned this before the break the front page of the Sunday times which for those who haven't seen it says 'Our children are raping each other' aside from the abuse element to that story it's an incredibly violent story and it says a huge amount of violence in south Africa and our history is being characterised by violence direct, physical violence, sexual violence psychological violence and there's a huge amount of those things.

And I guess the thing we interested in looking and unpacking in this particular conference this morning is what is the role of media in this particular issue in terms of violence we know that the media has to tell this stories it's essential for media to report on violence to tell the kind of story that's on the front page of the Sunday times this morning. But how do they do this what are the ways they are doing this are either some good things or are there are some bad things how can we make sure it's better because from our perspective if we trying to build a constitutional democracy it's essential that everyone in South Africa and media to a large degree should support this necessarily would support this necessarily we would be saying violence in whatever form is not acceptable to South Africa because it goes against the very fundamentals generally speaking of a democratic country.

The second question is not just about the news media it's also about he violent content in our television programmes we did a quick overview of our children programmes that are available to our children in South Africa to see how much violence they are being exposed to in terms of their programmes so I think it's

quite of important to unpack this issues and look at the different levels of violence, it's impact etc.

Xolani: Let me just ask some of the challenge the news media has in writing about this kind of stories, do they understand the impact it has on society?

William: Well you see am not sure that they do I think violence is something that's so much engrained in our daily lives people live in fear of crime they live in fear of being attacked or being mugged very often so there is very much a link between fear am sure some of our guest will come and unpack some this things more. But certainly I think if you look at some media they do have responsible approach for example in a round up to this conference we looked at about twelve different media and we just took down there crime and violent headlines for the week for ten days and only one of the newspaper one of the major newspaper we were looking at had very very few crime items. And that was the business day so clearly they have some ideas of what counts as news for their particular readers but also it does say something I think about their approach and understanding of violence the rest of the print media certainly were riddled with violent headline.

(Audio Insert: Examples of headlines)

Xolani: And those are the examples of headlines over the past how many days?

William: Over the past 10 days.

Xolani: Ten days?

William: I got a pile here over about fifteen A4 pages just of crime headlines we had to pick out some of the ones that we thought typified our crime and violence headlines and of course we selected them on the basis of the fact it's very often a gender angle to these things and there's very often a direct angle focused directly on children if we are considering the issues around violence we need to think about the impact that repeatedly exposure to this kind of headlines to these kind of stories has on all of us as citizens and also on children particularly because we need to remember they are afforded special protection constitutionally and these kind of things do have an certain impact on children there's no doubt.

Xolani: You have mentioned and having looked at all these headlined over the past ten days what went through your mind?

William: Well some of my staff were joking and saying they thought they would have to get some trauma counselling because it's one thing reading the paper on a daily basis it's another thing being asked to specifically focus on these particular issues and headlines. I think it confirms what I think we know generally speaking is that we do have an incredibly violent society and I think it's time we started looking at violence not just in terms of the individual incidents that happened that constituted these stories but in terms of some of the broader issues in terms of saying one of the key challenges we face in South Africa aside from succession rate aside from HIV aside from poverty etc aside from crime directly we deed to be looking at violence and it's impact on all of us as citizens.

Xolani: At the end of the day having looked at these things what should the media be doing because the question becomes should the media reflect it as it is or should the media be responsible in how we report these issues?

William: Reflecting it as it is I don't think the media does that actually they will say they are telling it as it is a media headlines have that as their by-lines actually but the fact every time they choose to use a photograph to use on their front page if we look at some of the tabloids for example the Daily Sun for example will say we are just telling it as it is, this is why we use lots of dead bodies on our front page well there are a lot of people who die everyday but we choose not to necessarily show those in such gruesome details on our front page.

SABC is particularly good at its editorial guidelines about the use and portrayal of particular gruesome and brutal images especially in their news and then there are other kinds of programmes. So they have a principled approach that says given our history given where we have been we choose not to show these things unless there is a material interest unless it drives a story forward unless it's relevant to the story, compare that to the Daily Sun where recent headline was called something like now it's pupils justice and there was a picture of a dead body in the front page and the school children had been involved in this not only does that glorify vigilante acts but it also suggest that somehow that violence is not only a good thing because it got rid of a thug, but it also says that it's just if you think about the kind of message that's going on there it says violence is not only acceptable but in this instance it's the best way of resolving your problems and it's particularly unthought-of through and it's particularly problematic.

Xolani: Lets welcome on the line Amanda Xolani Acting centre for the study of violence and reconciliation good morning to you Amanda.

Amanda: Good morning.

Xolani: Well William and I have just played headlines over the past ten days and William tells me that his staff were saying to him that they may as well need counselling after having read some of the headlines around crime do you think this is a nation that might perhaps may need counselling given the coverage we give crime in this country?

Amanda: I think it's not only the coverage we give to crime but also the experience I think a lot of people are the primary victims and of primary experiences of violence but we also hear about it all the time in our daily communications with people we hear about crime stories what happened to your neighbours what happened to people at a dinner party and so on so we sort of discuss crime stories perpetually and I think that feeds to a notion of being under siege in terms of crime and I think that's a very real issue we do need to tackle.

Xolani: Primarily we discussing this morning the role of the media what do you think the role of the media should be and is in as far as violence in our society is concerned?

Amanda: Well I think that William has already outlined some of the ways the media could be responsible in the way violence is reported in the way that identifies particularly key concerns that is sensitive to the readers and doesn't overburden them with stories of bloodshed and Xolani violence etc and also not instil feelings of fear unnecessarily and I think what the media needs to do is reflect on positive stories with the police or the society or whoever have made very positive gains and I hesitate to say, in the fight against crime we need to reflect on we need to what we can do in order to reduce the levels of violence.

William: Amanda it would be curious in terms of given South Africa's history as to your views as to what continues to make South Africa such a violent society and what would be some of the ongoing causes of the ongoing violence that we have become Xolani to as you said.

Amanda: Well I think if you look at the history of violence there's a number of issues and factors that contribute to the high levels of violence in South Africa and there's obviously no one cause I think that they are very interlinked so if you look at history South Africa has had a very historic violent history even pre apartheid during apartheid where violence was a legitimate weapon that was used against the minorities by the majorities in order to oppress them but it was also seen as legitimate use in the struggle against apartheid and so a number of people use violence in that level in their Xolani but also some are generalised to the personal lives as well where violence was used in domestic events social intercourse etc and then I think we also had a look at issues around democratisation Xolani and transforming societies we often find that there are high levels of violence and this is often as a result of a new morality that introduce a loosening of restrictions of laws and structures of society which creates an environment of uncertainty and where people feel they can take advantage of the new status of being and together with that I think that we also find a rapid reurbanisation and changes in the way people live their lives lifestyle Xolani and moving into and the breakdown of family structure and so people don't rely so much on traditional structure and morality but start developing new ones or there's a n absence of morality and new codes of conduct and together with that we have to look at globalisation which has resulted in the opening of borders between South Africa and it's neighbours and also internationally and this has facilitated in the greater transaction of drugs and weapons and money and so has also created an opening of a criminal market and some of those criminal market places as well as the people engaged in the criminal act are extremely violent in undertaking the criminal act in protecting the criminal market and another thing we have to look at is the availability of guns in South Africa and this is also reflecting on the historical violence in the region and then I think the one part that is particularly on growing and of concern is the socio economic factors and here researches differ on the whether the extent to which socio economic factors do have an impact on violence on society but in South Africa we had an historical gap between the wealthy and the poor and this has been racialised in the past, that racial delineation is diminishing somewhat but it's still largely still racialized but despite the development in South Africa in the last ten years we see that the gap between rich and poor is widening instead of closing and that Xolani indicated is a cause of violence of a growth in violence not only in terms of crime and this is i think one of the interesting areas to explore why do violence increase when the gap between rich and poor has increased and

think one of the things is that there's a greater level of dissatisfaction of poor people or even people in the middle classes where they see the access to wealth is extensively open to all but the routes to obtaining the wealth are still extremely difficult and so people resort to other methods to gain that wealth and also to gain status but also these levels of dissatisfaction are also generalised in to social interactions between friends but also particularly at domestic level where people seek some kind of Xolani outlet for their aggression and the dissatisfaction that they feel. So those are some of the kind of arguments people are thinking and people are bringing to the table and here are all very complex and that require diff strategies to address them.

Xolani: Okay Amanda Xolani thank you very much for coming this morning.

Amanda: Okay, thank you very much.

Xolani: Amanda Xolani acting director for the centre of the study of violence and reconciliation, Professor Julian Xolani violence expert school of human and community development at Wits university on the line good morning to you professor Xolani?

Julian: Good morning

Xolani: Hi, nice having you on the program. You have listened a little bit to Amanda a little earlier talking about some of the reasons behind violence in this country but before I talk to you about the psychological facts of exposure to violence acts, I want to bring in your view on gender based violence what would be behind this then?

Julian: I think Xolani sought of the sixties and seventies certainly started to bring in the idea that in fact partly about the way power relations differ between men and women and men are accustomed to having authority over women and in many instances that extends to an assumption that they are entitled to discipline women in whatever ways they choose and certainly one hears that terminology been used amongst young men sometimes but the purpose of violence is to discipline women particularly women who are cheeky or women who appear to step aside there expected role so I think there is a Xolani assumption that infact to some extent if women don't listen to men they are entitled to use more coercive forms of violence and infact it was a very old rule that got out of law but basically the rule of thumb which was about the fact that men were not allowed to beat their women with a stick that were bigger than the diameter of the thumb but I think that again it indicates that infact to beat a women was something that was smaller than you thumb was fine I know one point person who did research on KZN where they were looking at domestic violence at particularly situations where partners were beating their wives and that many instances parents or families of those women confirmed that it was infact the mans right to beat the woman if he saw the woman had been disobedient or somehow given him trouble in trouble so I think it's still a perception that infact that form of violence is not so extraordinary there is also some research that indicated the changes in women roles and the fact that many instances women are becoming primary bread winners or acted to more income for example through child care grants etc that men who feel imasculated in their relationships who feel their power or their potency is not for example in the economic sphere

may in fact resort to physical violence where they are able to exert dominance and they are more powerful to exert some kind of force or power.

Xolani: But professor given the fact that we all agree that there is unprecedented level of violence in our society if you will. What are the psychological effects of being exposed to this kind of violent acts?

Julian: There are again a number of different effects I think the most commonly understood in terms of psychiatric understanding there's certain terminology that are used in soap operas and are becoming part of a popular consciousness' is the notion of post traumatic stress disorders that when people are exposed to violent situation particularly life threatening or situations that threaten physical harm that it is very common for people to have those kind of reactions that one would see with extreme stress and that would be potentially post traumatic stress disorders or acute stress disorder and in most people what you will see more of a acute stress kind of presentation basically within the first 2 hrs or sometimes two days people are often quite disoriented almost in a state of shock and to some extent sort of seen sort of childlike in a certain way they look to other people to make decisions for them and they may be very fearful, they may struggle to sleep, those sort of things and then Xolani with both acute stress and post traumatic stress disorders you have three main groups of symptoms that people have the first symptom are symptoms of intrusion that people have nightmares of the event or find images of the event coming into their mind or they are constantly thinking about it in way it's actually disturbing or distressing for them and the second group of symptoms are mostly to do with avoidance so they are almost the opposite of intrusion and that will be people trying not to think about it, trying to lock out thoughts about it sometimes not having memories or parts of what happened and also avoidance in their behaviour for example if you were in a shopping centre when an armed robbery took place you might start avoiding shopping centres or if you were hijacked while driving you might avoid driving or avoid driving at certain times and then the 3rd main group of symptom are mostly things to do with increased vigilance or arousal we would call it, it's almost as if your body and mind feels that there is still danger around so you have problem with concentration Xolani vigilance is people are very watchful they are anxious with people approach them suddenly and are baffled with relation to loud noise and often people become quite irritable and may even become explosive in their anger and these things people don't often link them to trauma but they are very common response to trauma.

William: Very often particularly tabloids they say they use these images to shock in order to get some kind of reaction I think maybe shock in the first instance may have an impact but what kind of impact is there if you are again exposed to those kinds of things on a repeated basis?

Julian: I think beyond the more psychiatric symptoms that I have talked about there is a lot of psychological literature on facts that exposure to violence and trauma changes people meaning system or their belief system and in that respect I think one sees a quite strong response in terms of what is called indirect traumatisation or Xolani traumatisation and although that mostly means Xolani in relation to for example to family members and friends who have been victimised are thinking there is an increase in interest in the fact that even more distance forms of exposure for example reading newspapers and articles or seen images

on TV that has an impact and I think particularly in South Africa at the moment, what we are seeing is a very general change to people's belief system and a lot of that has to do with increasing disillusion, negativity, bitterness certainly in a lot of former victims, one of the things I have become particularly interested in is how being victimised seems to feed into racial stereotypes in certain groups of people or xenophobia in other groups of people and I think again one is also seeing that in some of a general response in terms of media coverage I think the issue is sort of whether in fact these papers should or shouldn't be printing really gruesome images is a difficult one to think about to some extent the media wanting to present the citizens the reality of what is happening out there but I think it is also a tendency to shock and many instances to sought of emphasise the truly horrific kinds of crime and I think for example for the programme talking about the case in which the woman in Craig hall park who was sort of tortured by intruders for many hours and eventually died from her injuries and I think certain type of communities in South Africa in Johannesburg many people spoke about that woman spoke about her story and it frightened them and it became part of their experience living in South Africa and I think it sort of Xolani that kind of fear and I am sure in other news there are different other kind of stories that become iconic in a way that become stories that people hold in mind and I think there is a perception at the moment that government is really struggling to keep on top of crime and linked to that, there is a general feeling of both disillusionment and quite a lot of anxiety about whether in fact this is a country which one is going to be confronted with danger so I think it later sort of general level of agitation, irritability, anxiety in the society.