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**Shooting the messenger: Mediating the public and the role of  
the media in South Africa's xenophobic violence**

**Adrian Hadland**  
Democracy & Governance Research Programme, Human Sciences  
Research Council



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## **Abstract**

In the wake of the recent outbreak of xenophobic violence in South Africa, in which 60 people died and tens of thousands were displaced, a fierce debate has erupted around the role of the media. The focus of the criticism has been South Africa's newly-established tabloid press which is accused of fomenting violence and exacerbating tension by publishing inflammatory headlines and posters. But to what extent can the tabloid press really be blamed for intervening in the conflict? The scholarly literature on media effects suggests direct causality is hard to prove. The accusation says much, however, about media-state-society relations in post-apartheid South Africa but also raises questions about the state of the public sphere and the role of the media within it. Fieldwork conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in four South African informal settlement areas affected by the recent violence indicates the tabloids certainly can't be blamed directly for fanning the violence. But it does seem to confirm what thousands of protests in the past year have strongly hinted at: there has been a communications breakdown in South Africa at a local level between communities and the state, as well as within communities, that lies at the root of much of the anger and violence. By failing to respond to this breakdown and act out its liberal imperative to provide a "voice for the voiceless", the media may be more complicit than it, or the literature, is willing to acknowledge.

## **Author**

Dr Adrian Hadland, Director, Democracy & Governance Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa

## **Introduction**

The mass media constitutes an undeniably powerful and complex component of the public sphere. Its power to shape, inform and direct derives from the media's multifaceted and, in the modern world, universal character. The media provides a range of technology-based platforms from internet, broadcast and film to print and mobile, which constitute the means by which the public sphere is most commonly articulated in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is as true for Africa as it is for other parts of our converged, technology-driven world. These platforms allow for trans-national, trans-continental interactions which have led to the formation of what Anderson famously described as "imagined communities", each with their members, needs and agendas (Anderson, 1983).

The public sphere, the concept based on Jurgen Habermas's inquiry into the functioning of what he called bourgeois society (Habermas 1989), is ubiquitous in contemporary media scholarship (Jacobs 2004, Hallin 2005, Herman & Chomsky 1989), just as the mass media is central to the notion of the public sphere itself. The differentiation theory espoused initially by Durkheim, then by Talcott Parsons, Jeffrey Alexander, Niklas Luhmann and others, envisages the increasingly specialised functions of a complex modern society being undertaken by increasingly specialised social bodies (cited in Hallin and Mancini 2004, 77). This requires an ever-greater role for an independent and effective communication system (the media). The work of Habermas, Alexander and Bourdieu, which were derived from the initial explorations of Parsons and Durkheim, continued to excavate the role of the media in the expression and definition of the public sphere.

Bourdieu's critique of Habermas suggests that the public sphere operates not as a rational, democratic space but serves to undermine and silence certain classes of opinion. The public sphere becomes a theatre for elites in which mass viewpoints, collectively or individually, are quashed. Other scholars too have described the distortions to the functioning of the public sphere generated by class and gender interests.

In South Africa, in May 2008, the public sphere became so contaminated or dysfunctional that a sudden contagion of violence erupted. It broke out initially in the township of Alexandra near Johannesburg. It spread rapidly across the central province of Gauteng and, within days, reached

KwaZulu-Natal in the east of the country and the Western Cape in the south. By the time the wave of violence had lulled a week later, 60 lives had been lost and tens of thousands of people had been forced to leave their homes and give up their possessions and businesses. The principal, but by no means sole, focus of this deadly aggression and anger, was African immigrants. The targeting of immigrants from African countries led to the violence being described as “xenophobic”, an inexact characterisation of a phenomenon that affected many South Africans and non-Africans.

It was clear that in such circumstances, the public sphere had somehow disengaged from the opinions and communicative needs of the masses. Instead of an organic, Habermasian zone of communal engagement in which communicative rationality prevails, the public sphere had become distorted and reflective only of the chatter of an elite preoccupied with grander conceits than the welfare and security of the people. Given the intimate connection between the public sphere and the media, the question then arises: what was the media’s role in this process of corruption?

The debate over media complicity in violence brushes off an old and enduring media studies enquiry: to what extent can the mass media be said directly to affect human behaviour? And, even more specifically, what is the correlation between the mass media and violence? The debate has become particularly relevant to Africa where recent experiences have highlighted the role of the media in political instability and added weight to calls for tighter governmental regulation. Similar allegations of fanning ethnic hatred and fuelling violence were levelled at Kenya’s media, particularly its local language radio stations, following the violent aftermath both of the 2007 general election and following the 2005 referendum campaign (Ismail & Deane, 2008). In Kenya, too, a formal government investigation into the role of the media is contemplated. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 also saw *Radio Mille Collines* infamously urge its listeners to participate in the mass murder (ibid, 324). Clearly, the allegation of media complicity in violent political crises is becoming more commonplace on the continent.

In the weeks following the South African violence, scholarly pondering on the role of the media became rooted in reality when a formal complaint was laid against the media by a non-

governmental organisation, the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) accusing a particular newspaper of complicity in what had just occurred<sup>1</sup>. The complaint was later rejected by the Press Ombudsman, South Africa's self-regulatory agency for the print media, and though an appeal was being launched at the time of writing, a vigorous debate has been underway in recent months among media scholars, government and other interested parties attempting to assess the degree to which the media has been complicit in the violence.

The accusation presents two opportunities. First, it allows us to investigate whether the media in general, and a newspaper specifically, can justifiably be accused of fomenting violence. This then permits a discussion of what the parameters might be for the media's interface and influence on the public sphere itself. This paper undertakes four tasks. It recounts the nature and scope of the allegations made in the wake of the xenophobic violence in South Africa concerning the role of the media in fomenting and condoning violence. It examines the body of literature both from media studies and from related disciplines that has investigated the correlation between the media and violent behaviour by media consumers. The paper offers some insights by communities affected by xenophobic violence into the role of the media as a result of a series of focus groups held in the immediate aftermath of the South African violence. Finally, a number of explanations are offered that aim to locate the sudden urge to shoot the messenger into the specific context of contemporary South African politics. These are linked back to the functioning of the public sphere and the location of the media within it.

## **Discussion**

In a letter dated May 28 2008 the MMP together with its partner, the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, and various endorsing organisations complained to the Press Ombudsman, Joe Thloloe, that the *Daily Sun* had violated the South African Press Council Code. The code states that the press is obliged to report news truthfully, accurately and fairly, that news should be presented in context without distortion and that the press should avoid discriminatory or denigratory references to people's race, colour, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or preference, physical or mental disability, or age.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full ruling, see: <http://www.presscouncil.org.za/pages/posts/the-media-monitoring-project-mmp-and-consortium-for-refugees-and-migrants-in-south-africa-cormsa-vs-daily-sun20.php>

The complaint stated that the newspaper, in a series of articles published between April 8 and May 21 2008, made “the xenophobic violence understandable and justifiable”. It said the paper had failed to condemn the attacks, had perpetuated negative stereotypes and had consistently presented foreign nationals as “aliens” who had manipulated the state in securing unfair access to resources. *The Daily Sun*, in other words, had been a material contributor to the xenophobic violence and was complicit in the tragic events that unfolded at that time. The complaint gained support from a range of forces including government, civil society and even from within the media itself.

Deputy foreign minister Aziz Pahad was one of several senior government officials who publically criticised the South African media for sensationalising the xenophobic attacks and for failing adequately to investigate its causes (*The Times*, 21 May 2008, p20). While at a Department of Home Affairs workshop on xenophobia in August, a commission was established specifically to discuss “the role of the media” during which calls were made for editors and journalists to be made personally liable for inflammatory content.<sup>2</sup>

Civil society, too, has voiced its concern. The Institute for Democracy in South Africa conducted a survey of press coverage of cross border migration in 2005 (McDonalds & Jacobs). It found that 22% of the 950 reports it examined associated migrants with crime while 20% referred to migrants as ‘illegals’. The report concluded that “xenophobic writing and editorialising (in the South African media) remains a concern” (McDonald & Jacobs, 3). Ann Bernstein, the head of one of South Africa’s most influential policy consultancies, the Centre for Development and Enterprise, called on government to appoint an independent, expert commission to investigate, among other things, the question: “did media reports encourage attacks?” (*Financial Mail*, July 18 2008, p18). Even Anton Harber, former editor of the anti-apartheid paper *The Weekly Mail* and now director of the Journalism and Media Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand agreed the *Daily Sun* had come “close to legitimising attacks on foreigners” by

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Home Affairs xenophobia imbizo, July 21-22, 2008.

giving its front page over to telling why South Africans have reason to hate foreigners (Harber 2008, 3).

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.

The field, which has debated the connection between mass media and violence for more than four decades, has reached few areas of consensus. In media studies, where this article is located, theoretical approaches range from Marxist media analysis and the culturalist approach to media effects and political culture theory. The divergent frameworks and their frequently contradictory findings have resulted in “see-sawing estimates of media power”(Curran et al 1982, 22) which have characterised media analysis over the years. The absence of agreement occurs, in part, due to the very nature of the media. Newspapers, for instance, are a combination of diverse components: language, text, ideology, culture, which in themselves have been subject to debate and controversy. Measuring the impact of such a phenomenon as a newspaper on its social and political environment is naturally fraught with difficulty because of the many variables. Indeed it is, arguably, not possible. Of all the approaches, it is perhaps media effects theory that has worked hardest at trying to prove the direct, causal and linear impact of the mass media on human behaviour.

Until the 1940s, at the hands of the Frankfurt School, there was “broad consensus ... that the mass media exercised a powerful and pervasive influence” on their social and political context (Curran et al 1982, 11). Underlying this context, argue Gurevitch, Bennett, Curran and Woollacott, were a number of notions perceived to be characteristic of modern society: urbanisation and industrialisation had created a “volatile, unstable, rootless, alienated, manipulable society (ibid, 11)”; urbanised people were inherently vulnerable to propaganda as

they were no longer anchored in the stable network of pre-industrial social relations; mass audiences had been gathered on an unprecedented scale through new technologies. Newspapers were thus powerful propaganda weapons to be used on a helpless, alienated, urban community and media analysis was geared to measuring the “depth and size of penetration through modern scientific techniques” (ibid, 12)

From the 1940s to the late 1960s, this position was reversed. The “mass society” view, involving helpless, alienated citizens, was rejected (within several disciplines including political, social-anthropological and psychological theory) in favour of an account of stable networks of group, family and peer supports. People, it was argued, exposed themselves and remembered information selectively and newspapers, therefore, had little direct influence or bearing (ibid, 12).

Media theory since the 1960s has split essentially into two camps: liberal and Marxist. However, “the conventional characterisation of liberal and Marxist traditions in mass communications research as constituting two opposed schools tends to obscure both the internal differences within each of these traditions and the reciprocal influence which each has exerted upon the other (ibid, 15). Marxist media analysis is essentially divided into three, not necessarily mutually exclusive, areas of interest. The Structuralist approach is founded upon the semiotics of Roland Barthes and Lacan’s re-working of psychoanalytic theory which focuses on “the systems and processes of signification and representation” (ibid, 25). The nature of ideology as a system of themes and representations through which people relate to the real world (as discussed initially by Althusser and the Frankfurt School) is of particular significance to the Structuralists.

The second Marxist method is the Culturalist approach of writers such as Raymond Williams, EP Thompson and Stuart Hall. It investigates newspapers as a means of what has been famously termed manufacturing consent (ibid, 4). For Hall, the important questions are: “How does a dominant discourse warrant itself as the account and sustain a limit, ban or proscription over alternative definitions: How do (newspapers) responsible for describing and explaining succeed in maintaining a preferred range of meanings in the dominant systems of communication?” (Hall 1982, 67).

The third Marxist method, the political economy approach, attempts to consider questions of the power of the press in terms of a “concrete analysis of economic relations and the ways in which they structure both the processes and results of cultural production”. The ideological or cultural message, as evidenced by the existence and contents of a particular newspaper, is assumed to be a product of the underlying and complex patterns of ownership, control and economic location. The Marxist and neo-Marxist literature, while broadly sympathetic to the power of propaganda and perhaps also to the notion of a mass media in which prevailing class interests might spawn relevant relations, has not attempted to link content directly to short-term (aberrant) behaviour.

Liberal theory, deriving particularly from developments in positivist theories of political culture, has attempted to be more empirical in its investigation of the press. The major analytic tool used during the 1960s and 1970s by liberal theoreticians has been the media effects theory postulated by writers such as Melvin De Fleur, Joseph T Klapper, Walter Schramm and J.D. Halloran. As DeFleur has explained: “The all-consuming question that has dominated research and the development of contemporary theory in the study of mass media ... is ‘what has been their effect?’” (Chimutengwende 1978, 125). The answer, at that time, was ‘not very much’. As Elihu Katz, probably the foremost contemporary media effects theorist has described, the findings of the Klapper era studies were so disappointing they led to a flight from the field and the demise of what was known as the Chicago paradigm (Katz 2001, 271). Katz argues this collapse was premature and that re-reading important effects texts, such as those by Paul Lazarsfeld, maps new opportunities for the reinvigoration of effects theory (ibid). Media studies work that falls broadly into the effects theory school tends to analyse broader, more social trends – such as voting patterns – over the longer-term rather than the more direct, linear, causal connection between media content and violent or deviant behaviour. It is this connection, however, that is the cause of most anxiety among commentators and policy makers when considering the role of the media in both South Africa’s xenophobic violence and in violent responses elsewhere on the African continent.

Media studies has been far from the only discipline engaged in work linking mass media to violence. Indeed Katz has been foremost in arguing for a metatheoretical agenda that anticipates a convergence in approaches to the study of media processes among different disciplinary

orientations (Livingstone, 1980, 19). Important work has been carried out in related disciplines such as sociology, psychology and anthropology, where predispositions, behaviour and causal relationships to stimuli are more frequent avenues of scholarly enquiry. The importance of imitation, for instance, is emphasised by social learning theory, a well-established approach in social psychology (Felson 1996, 104). In this field, it is indeed a common argument that children imitate the violence they see on television. Centerwall's 1989 study on exposure to television and violence found that not long after the introduction of television in American households, "there occurred a dramatic increase in violent crime" (Felson 1996, 104). This led some scholars to see a causal connection, according to Felson.

In the United States, concerns have abounded over the media-violence connection for more than five decades leading to several major government investigations and reports (Anderson et al 2003). These have included the 1954 Kefauver hearings, the 1969 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, the 1972 Surgeon General's report *Television and Growing Up* and the 1982 National Institute of Mental Health report *Television and Behavior* (Anderson et al 2003, 82). The 1969 report is a compendium of sociological, psychological, demographic and economic data on the structure, functions, audience and effects of media – particularly television – in the United States (Roschco 1970, 308). It is also inconclusive, in spite of the massive amount of violence (which occurred in 81% of all programmes analysed over a two week period) and the "enormous quantities of specialised literature" (309).

According to Felson, the relationship between exposure to media violence and aggression has been examined using laboratory experiments, field experiments, natural experiments and longitudinal analyses based on correlational data (105).

Conclusive evidence of linear, causal relationships has been absent in all methodologies. Laboratory experiments generally examined the short-term effects of media violence but failed to demonstrate whether media exposure acts as instigator of aggression or merely as a facilitator (105). Field experiments frequently suffered from serious methodological limitations and the results were generally inconsistent. The same methodological problems are applicable to natural experiments – comparing countries or communities with no television with those that do – where substantial differences between comparison groups "increase the risk that the relationship

between the introduction of television and increases in aggression is spurious” (108). In fact, argues Felson, “the methodological limitations of these studies make it difficult to have confidence in causal inference about media effects” (ibid,108).

Felson reports that some evidence of short-term media effects has been forthcoming from longitudinal surveys. Eron et al (1972) found a causal link between violence and aggressive behaviour in a series of studies of children’s exposure to television violence. However, there were measurement problems in the work and follow-up work produced only complex and inconsistent results (Felson 110). “There was no evidence that any of the measures of exposure to television violence produced changes in aggressive behaviour over time... one must conclude that longitudinal studies have not demonstrated a relationship between the amount of violence viewed on television and subsequent aggressive behaviour.” (Felson, 111)

In one of the most comprehensive studies to date, Anderson et al’s *The Influence of Media Violence on the Youth* (2003), the multiple authors suggest the evidence is so unequivocal that “media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour in both immediate and long-term contexts” that the scientific debate “is essentially over” (Anderson, 80). However, they also acknowledge, “as we and others have frequently noted, the weight of evidence indicates that violent actions seldom result from a single cause; rather, multiple factors converging over time contribute to such behaviour” (Anderson, 82).

There is a further set of difficulties around making a persuasive comparison of the South African situation with a laboratory or other experiment. The work cited in the literature generally used fictional violence as a central factor and frequently focused on children, often young children, as the subjects. In the xenophobic case under discussion here, the subjects are generally young men (identified as the overwhelming majority of protagonists of the violence in HSRC 2008). Media representations of violence were also not fictional, nor were they all broadcast. In fact, it is print stories (in tabloid papers) that have been identified as the most complicit.

The literature raises a number of findings that add depth to the complexity of assuming a causal connection between media violence and actual violence. Meta-analyses of exposure to violence

have demonstrated that the effects of media violence on antisocial behaviour were just as strong as the effects of media violence on violent behaviour. A contrarian view from Messner suggests that because watching television reduces the opportunities for potential offenders and victims to meet, watching television can actually reduce the incidence of violence (cited in Felson, 116). Dimmick argues that if young adults watched more television, their activity of violence would be lower due to the routine activity approach (ibid, 116). The evidence that most offenders are versatile (in the range of offences they commit) challenges the notion that violent offenders are more violent because of a special proclivity to engage in violence, due to exposure to media violence or any other factor, argues Felson (1996, 117).

He goes on to say there are four reasons why viewers might be expected to learn aggressive behaviour from the media: they might learn new behaviours they might otherwise not have considered, they may be encouraged by the legitimation and vicarious reinforcement they receive from watching violence on the television, they may have become desensitised to violence and therefore be more willing to engage in violent activity, and, people may get a false idea of reality from observing a great deal of violence on television developing unrealistic fears as they go (1996). Felson debunks each of these assumptions with the findings from recent studies, though the first scenario is the most compelling for this article.

Quite persuasive if anecdotal evidence does exist to support the possibility that unusual and dramatic behaviours on television are imitated by viewers ('modeling' or the contagion effect) who might never otherwise have imagined engaging in such behaviours (Felson, 118). "Modeling can also be used to explain contagion effects observed for highly-publicised violence, such as airline hijackings, civil disorders, bombings and political kidnapping ... the tendency for such events to occur in waves suggests that at least some viewers imitate real events that are reported on television" (ibid, 118). Simón found that the double assassination attempts on US President Gerald Ford, for instance, resulted in an increase in the number of assassination threats for several months thereafter (Simón 1979). Anderson et al agree that there have been many anecdotal reports of people imitating fictional violence citing the claim that the movie *Taxi Driver* led directly to John Hinckley's attack on Ronald Reagan.

Despite the frequency of these presumed instances of a “contagion of violence” ... there has been relatively little research examining how news stories of aggressive events affect behaviour” (Anderson et al, 89)

In the case study described in this article, one group of subjects do suggest the violence in South Africa was mimicry of events portrayed on the television news. But in relation to the overall body of testimony and evidence offered by all the participants, this represented a very small proportion. Like other studies, the evidence remains anecdotal and arguably worthy of deeper investigation. Certainly the violence spread extremely rapidly from one informal housing area to the next, from one town and province to the next. But this was true of the violent protest against the school system in South Africa in 1976. In that case, hundreds died and virtually every town in the country was affected. At that time, South Africa had only just introduced a limited television service and tabloids were still almost 30 years away. Clearly, violent contagion is not exclusively a mass media-inspired event.

Anderson notes that most investigations into modelling have been time-series field studies that have compared data on a community’s violence rate before and after some highly publicised news of a violent occurrence: “On the whole, these studies support the notion of a contagion effect” (2003, 89). Anderson writes that some of the best studies proving the contagion effect deal with the suicide of a well-known person increasing the likelihood that other people will take their own lives (ibid, 89)). Other studies have shown a rise in violent crimes following high-profile murder cases and increases in violent crimes following televised boxing fights (ibid, 89). The latter study has not been widely accepted due to methodological challenges, reports Anderson.

But what begins to look like promising and relevant work in non media-studies fields is undone by a fundamental premise of the work done to date: “The central argument about the relationship of viewing violence on television and viewers’ aggressive behaviour focuses on fictional events” (Felson, 118). Of course, the relationship between reading a tabloid story about violence and violent behaviour is even less well examined and further undermines the assumptions of causality.

The literature is, in general terms, underwhelming about the linkage between the mass media and violence. While there is a connection between violence in the media and aggression and/or violent behaviour, it is a complex, multi-faceted and variable connection. Studies that look at non-fictional violence are generally predicated on anecdotal evidence and are almost always broadcast-oriented. This raises the question of why the mass media, and in particular the tabloid press, as

Sutter (2000) has described, continues routinely to attract the finger of blame in a social or political crisis? Is it a case of shooting the messenger? or can a sufficient degree of complicity be identified to merit a regulatory (or other) response? This article suggests a number of possible reasons, some of which are specific to South Africa's own unique political trajectory and some of which may be more universally applicable.

But prior to the consideration of reasons, one last test is offered. This is the case study. It attempts, in a qualitative, ethnographic way to see if the media was identified by affected communities as a relevant "cause" or factor in the outbreak of xenophobic violence in their areas.

#### CASE STUDY - Methodology

The case study formed part of a rapid response investigation into the causes of the xenophobic violence conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in May 2008 (HSRC 2008). Fieldworkers conducted focus group discussions within a few days of the violence breaking out in three communities that were seriously affected by the violence: Alexandra, Mamelodi and Tembisa all in Gauteng. Interviews were also conducted in Imizamu Yethu in the Western Cape, though these were mainly with stakeholders rather than residents and were held in a township in which there was no violence. This served as a control and is not included in this case study. The nine focus groups comprised just over 60 people in total and each group comprised an average of 6-8 people. The groups were divided by age (18-23; 26-33 & 33 upwards), and by gender. Since the study was focused on gaining an understanding of the views of community members about 'foreigners' and xenophobia, the focus groups recruited only South African citizens.

Focus groups were conducted in the language of the participants where possible, and translated into English. Facilitators were briefed to spend a considerable time (in excess of 40 minutes) discussing the question: what do you think led to the violence happening in your area? Participants were not prompted to discuss the media or the media's role (see appendix 1 for methodology, brief and instrument). All participants gave their informed consent.

#### CASE STUDY – results and conclusions

The media was mentioned on 24 occasions by participants in the nine focus groups. Overwhelmingly, most media references were to television programmes. When programmes were named, they were shows ordinarily considered sophisticated viewing: investigative, documentary programmes such as *Carte Blanche* on MNet and *Special Assignment* on ETV. A *Special Assignment* broadcast depicting unfettered, rapid migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa was cited twice (possibly three times though the programme was not named in the third citation) and clearly aggravated viewers. A handful of references were made to news stories that were identifiable. These mostly concerned President Thabo Mbeki or the political crisis in Zimbabwe. One or two references were made to specifically print media stories, including one illustration of police corruption captured by a *Sunday Times*' story on a corrupt Durban policeman living in a multimillion rand home.

No mention was made of a tabloid newspaper nor a story that was easily identifiable as being one that appeared in a tabloid. No focus group participant referred to foreign migrants as "aliens", the common, pejorative label adopted by the *Daily Sun*. Only one focus group (women in Mamelodi) discussed the possibility that the violence in their area had been caused by people trying to get famous by attracting television coverage:

*Maggy: We like looking like others – (it's a )competition and (we like) thinking we are like Alex(andra).*

*Moderator: So that is how it started, competition?*

*Sibongile: Mamelodi's people wanted to be on TV too.*

*Rockstar: These people (migrants) are making our lives easier. I don't go to shoe shops, I go to the guy on the street.*

*Sibongile: These things has seen on TV and they did it, and so they do this.*

*Masego: They want fame, they don't know how to get (on) TV, and so they do this.*

Aside from this last discussion, which hardly follows the classic thesis that violence on television encourages aggressive and violent feelings, the focus groups did not assign any complicity either to the media in general nor to tabloids in particular when it came to the fomentation or exacerbation of violence in their areas.

Admittedly, the size of the sample is small and participants were not specifically prompted on the role of the media. However, conducted just a few days after the violence had broken out, the focus groups give a fairly authentic account of how people perceived what had just happened in their communities. These perceptions, by and large, did not assign to the media a substantive or even influential role. Far more weight was given to issues such as housing, corruption, employment and to gender specific grievances (see HSRC 2008). Underpinning all of these, however, was a palpable frustration over the lack of communication between government and the residents of informal settlements. In the recommendations of both HSRC reports, a strong emphasis was placed on this factor: the improvement of government-community-stakeholder communications, not just on the issue of xenophobia but on other, important matters.

### **Shooting the Messenger**

There are several reasons that may be posited to explain why the media was singled out as being complicitous in the 2008 xenophobic violence. These fall into the broad categories of media-state, media-society and media-media relations. The relationship between the democratic, post-apartheid state and the South African media has been a fraught and difficult one. This was perhaps inevitable with the regime change from an apartheid state to democracy and with the subsequent shift in role for the media. It is clear in retrospect that both media and state have struggled to come to terms with their new roles and responsibilities. The consequence has been heightened tension between the majority party in government, the African National Congress (ANC), and the media. Johnston identifies a series of “points of conflict” that have developed between the ANC and the print media and characterises these as follows: “At best, the ANC’s

relationship with the political press has been distant and neurotically suspicious; at worst, pathologically hostile” (2005, 13).

A number of developments serve to illustrate this shift of relations. They include the state’s growing willingness to intervene in the media in various ways, its reluctance to reform legislation affecting the media (Barratt 2006), its entrée into mass newsletter publishing and the establishment of a variety of clientelist-type bonds between government and the nascent community media sector (Hadland 2007). At the ANC’s annual conference in 2007 at Polokwane, the party resolved to push for greater regulation of the print media through the establishment of a statutory media appeals tribunal. This follows a series of court cases launched by senior ANC officials, including the ministers of Home Affairs (libel) and of Health (invasion of privacy) against the press in the last 12 months. None of these lawsuits were waged against the tabloids, however.

While xenophobic tensions have been rising and violent incidents have occurred periodically since 1994, few were prepared for the scale of the outbreak in 2008. Several elements served to amplify media-state tensions. The violence constituted the first major damage inflicted on post-apartheid South Africa’s international reputation as a triumphant bastion of racial reconciliation. This jarred against what scholars are referring to as South African “exceptionalism” (Alexander 2008) and multiplied the impact of the shock. Second, the violence caused deep embarrassment to South Africa’s political hierarchy, many of whom were welcomed and cared for by neighbouring states as they escaped into exile during the armed struggle against apartheid. It is the citizens of these very states, especially Zimbabwe, who bore the brunt of the violence in 2008. This high-level embarrassment together with the very clear governmental complicity in the outbreak of the violence through a breakdown of communications with communities, failed migration policy and corruption (HSRC 2008) made the identification of a scapegoat all the more urgent.

It is feasible, in other words, that the “blame” being heaped on the media in general and on the tabloids in particular for the xenophobic violence has its roots in the suspicion and tension that currently characterise the relationship between media and state in South Africa. As evident as

tensions are, however, this does not explain the active participation of civil society in the denigration of the media's role in the violence.

Society too has had to adapt to a media that has changed dramatically since the apartheid era that ended in the early 1990s. Until 1990, the South African media operated in sanctions-induced isolation. The print media was largely controlled by four major corporations and the broadcast media was a state monopoly. The deregulation of the broadcast sector, the arrival of foreign investors in the print industry, technological advances, an injection of black capital and the launch of the country's tabloids all contributed to a revolution in the local media environment. This changed the structure, products and audiences of the media business.

As popular as South Africa's new tabloids have become (*The Daily Sun* is the country's largest daily newspaper), they have prompted criticism and complaint from many quarters of civil society. Private citizen Jessica Samson launched a bid initially to the South African Commission on Gender Equality in 2005 to prevent the paper running its weekly "Page 3 girl" on the grounds that it infringed Constitutional rights of women to dignity and equality. The complaint was referred to the Press Ombudsman which dismissed it. Other complaints have also been heard by the Ombudsman concerning the tabloid press's alleged invasion of privacy. In one instance, this was upheld (*Daily Voice* vrs Bloom family, 2006).

The success of the *Daily Sun* has invited the launching of similar tabloid titles such as the *Sunday Sun*, the *Son* and the *Daily Voice*. Similar to their British predecessors, the South African titles were all aimed at the blue-collar market: in this case, lower-middle class black and coloured readers. This has led defenders of the tabloid phenomenon, including the editors themselves, to suggest that there is a class dimension to the criticism. The conservative black middle class is the fastest growing and most collectively powerful stratum in post-apartheid South Africa. One of the allegations contained in the MMP complaint against the *Daily Sun* was that it failed to present alternative strategies to the violence. But Katz has pointed out that one of the strongest arguments of critical theory is that the media upholds the status quo and deliberately omits alternative ways of thinking (Katz, 273). This too suggests a hegemonic co-option of the media.

Annette Hill argues that a process of social amplification takes place by which various interests use the opportunity of public concerns over media violence to put forward their own agendas (2001). This agenda was often a class one.

*As early as the 1850s, the popular press and social commentators expressed concern over media violence (Pearson, 1983). Concerts and theatres were seen to corrupt the young and new popular media were described by one professor in 1904 as having the same kind of 'evil effects as syphilis or leprosy (Murdock, 1997, 77). As Murdock (1997, 68) points out: "Commentators were quick to see [media violence] as both a potent symbol of moral decline and a powerful new incitement to anti-social behaviour" (Hill, 211).*

Hill also argues that as media violence is commonly perceived as a 'stigmatised' form of popular culture with horror, crime and action movies in particular receiving much criticism (210): "The physical risks of media violence remain steadfast in the public's mind, despite the existence of conflicting scientific information. Hill suggests too that media violence is perceived as symptomatic of a general lack of moral values. "The moralisation of risk is a means to amplify the real and symbolic risks of media violence. Levels of violence in the media and society are amplified so that the issue of media violence becomes one of law and order and social welfare" (214) She goes on to argue that the "media risk repertoire" flows through multiple communication networks; social and political groups, such as non-governmental organisations and professional groups allowing them to adopt and reinvent the risk even for their own political and social gain" (214).

The appearance of tabloid newspapers in South Africa in 2003 riled not just the political establishment and civil society, but the mainstream media (and several prominent media scholars) too (Glenn & Knaggs, 2008). The role and value of the tabloid press has been hotly debated within media studies in South Africa and prevailing opinion tends to dismiss the journalistic integrity of the tabloids while doubting their contribution to the consolidation of democracy. *The Sowetan*, a tabloid but of more sober habits than its counterparts, patted itself on the back following its coverage of the violence in May 2008 and desecrated its counterpart *The Daily Sun* in an editorial: "It is pleasing to say that, on the whole, our media deserve kudos for the professional way in which they have covered the unfolding human catastrophe. Only one xenophobic down-

market national daily panders to the bloodthirsty mobs that are hellbent on cleansing the country of 'the alien terror' (*Sowetan*, 23 May 2008, 16). A degree of revisionism is underway, among the scholarly community at least. Nicola Jones et al (2008) along with Glenn and Knaggs (2008) have argued that the tabloid press in South Africa plays a constructive and reflective role, arguably more so than their mainstream counterparts. It is likely, though, that the mainstream media has itself been complicit in constructing a sympathetic background that has failed to discourage social hostility to the tabloids. This is in spite of the very tangible evidence (circulation figures, for instance) of their popularity and influence.

There is thus much in South Africa's contemporary political, social and economic environment that contributes to profoundly negative public opinion about the role of the media. The media industry itself has its part to play in this even though it is frequently the mainstream media that attracts legal and regulatory sanction rather than the tabloids. The case studies cited here bear that out again as they reflect a far deeper awareness of television programmes than anything emanating out of the print world.

## **Conclusion**

The media clearly cannot be blamed for directly 'causing' the xenophobic violence that broke out in South Africa in 2008. The literature and the case study data are emphatic on this. However, while the media may not be culpable of acting as *agent provocateur*, there are charges it may still have to face. It may be the case, for instance, that the media was complicit in an act that, for society's long-term health, is almost as invidious and more far-reaching. The media may have endeavoured to shape the public sphere (in alliance with other forces) so that it functions in a way that prevents the articulation of public opinion, suppresses grievances and inhibits the transference of knowledge. The only logical outcome of such a systematic capping and subversion of public needs and wants is perhaps inevitably anger, aggression and, when all other channels have been closed off, even violence.

This complicity is not only manifested in the content of the South African news media, but in its structure, its class and gender chauvinism and in its lack of linguistic and cultural diversity. More than 6,000 protest actions that have taken place in communities across South Africa in the last 12

months. They are a sign, together with tragedy of May 2008, that the public's need to express itself has been stifled. Bourdieu has argued there is a variance between the opinions of elites and the space that the masses require to democratise their societies and improve their lives. He also contended that there is a fundamental complicity between agents in a field that leads and supports that domination of that field as well as that field's domination over other fields. Thus is the public sphere distorted.

There have clearly been cases in media history in general and in Africa in particular where the mass media has played an unambiguously malevolent role in the exacerbation of tensions and perhaps in the resulting contagion of violence. The literature suggests that while there does seem to be a connection between the mass media and violence, this relationship is complex, multi-faceted and at times contradictory. Studies done on the effect of real (news) violence rather than on fictional violence are few and mostly reliant on anecdotal data little of which is explicable or replicable.

The focus groups case study described here suggests that the media were not a key factor in the instigation or spread of violence in three of the localities most affected. The data reflect the prevailing scholarly understanding that if any medium is likely to provoke a short-term emotional response, it is broadcast rather than print and it is likely to impact on children rather than adults. The overwhelming body of scholarly research has concerned itself with examining the effect of television, film, videos and, more recently, the internet.

However, the data does suggest that while the media were not necessarily the trigger for the violence in 2008, they may have contributed to the stifling of public debate and the distortion of the public sphere that arguably did lead to the violence. The first world congress on communication for development in 2006 was unambiguous about the centrality of communication in human development. In its Rome Consensus, it was stated: "Communication is essential to human, social and economic development. At the heart of communication for development is participation and ownership by communities and individuals most affected by poverty and other development issues" ([http://www.uneca.org/africanmedia/documents/Recommendations\\_Rome\\_Consensus.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/africanmedia/documents/Recommendations_Rome_Consensus.pdf)).

The breakdown of communication between the state and communities and between local and newly-arrived communities was arguably the key factor in the xenophobic violence that exploded in South Africa in May this year. These cleavages in the public sphere were widened by existing but fractured power relations between media, state and society. The end result was a public sphere that became so clogged and fragmented, it was rendered temporarily inoperable.

The media has long claimed that being a “voice for the voiceless” is one of its *raison d’être*, a fundamental objective based on centuries of liberal democratic philosophy. If there is a lesson in South Africa’s experience, it is that this duty has never been more important. Differentiation theory, as I indicated in the introduction, envisages an ever-greater role for an independent and effective communication system. If this fails to develop, however, it will inevitably result in a greater and deeper deficit. This, as usual, will impact more heavily on the developing world. In an emerging democracy where resources are limited and structures and institutions are new and vulnerable, stifling the voices of the angry will not only lead to development bottlenecks, it will lead to disaster.

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## **Appendix A:**

### Case Study Methodology and Instrument

The study focused on a sample of areas most affected by xenophobic violence. These were consistently informal settlements. It also, for comparative purposes, considered one area- Imizamu Yethu in the Western Cape, which had not seen an immediate outbreak of xenophobic violence in this current wave, and from which insights could be drawn.

Focus groups were conducted in Alexandra, Mamelodi and Tembisa on the East Rand. The focus groups were divided according to gender and age in order to facilitate as open a conversation as possible and to be able to disaggregate opinion according to these two variables. Six focus groups were conducted, three in each area. The focus groups comprised an average of 6-8 people, and were divided by three age ranges: a young group of between 18 and 23; a middle group of between 26 and 33, and an older group of 33 years and upwards.

We used relatively open-ended questions to enable people to express in their own words their understanding of the situation and their sentiments toward migrants. The focus groups were conducted in partnership with Professor Patrick Chiroro from the University of Pretoria, who oversaw a team of interviewers.

Conducting focus groups and interviews in the midst of a violent conflict posed a number of challenges. A two-day scan of the identified communities was conducted to ascertain whether appropriate conditions existed to conduct research, relating both to the safety of the interviewers and interviewees. Venues were chosen mindful to allow participants maximum anonymity. Informed consent was given by participants.

### Case Study Questionnaire

### **Focus Groups Questions for a Survey on the Xenophobic violence in Alexandra, Mamelodi and the East Rand**

Key Brief-To understand the *causes* of the violence

**Facilitator: Welcome and introductions**

Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my colleague's name is \_\_\_\_\_ . Thank you very much for coming to this Focus Group Discussion

We are from the HSRC and we would like to discuss various issues relating to the recent violence involving foreigners in some parts of the country.

Please feel free to express your opinions since there is no right or wrong answer. We are also not going to share what we talk about with people who are not part of this group. Also do not judge what others are saying. During this discussion we are not going to use our real names, in order to remain anonymous. Your participation in this study is voluntary; you are free to withdraw at any stage during the group discussion.

The discussion will take about an hour to an hour and a half.

**Participants:** Requested to introduce themselves to the group, using pseudonyms of their choice

**Facilitator explains how the discussion will be conducted, highlighting the following issues::**

- The role of the moderator (facilitator) and rapporteur
- The need to use a tape recorder in order to capture the information accurately
- Consent required before proceeding to record;
- Importance of only one person talking at the same time in a clear voice
- Outline the ground rules with the group members after explaining how the FGD should proceed
- If participants are reluctant to be recorded due to the emotive nature of the study, be prepared to take down some detailed notes.

**1) What have you heard people saying about the violence in this area and what have you seen yourself? [10 minutes]**

**(Prompt-**this question to be kept very open. Allow people to talk freely about what they've seen and heard.)

## 2) What do you think led to the violence happening in your area?

[40 minutes]

(This question should take up a substantial part of the discussion)

### Prompts

- Again allow people to talk generally about what they think caused the problem.
- We need to see **whether people think that the violence is completely sporadic/random or whether it was ‘instigated’ or organised. If so by whom?**
- It would be important to understand and note the key underlying issues that emerge around the causes of the violence eg; housing, crime, lack of service delivery and then if time allows probe further on these issues.
- It would be useful to **unpack the category ‘foreigner’ i.e. to understand exactly who people think is the problem. Are there some foreigners people feel are more of a problem, e.g. Zimbabweans, Nigerians etc, and what about people from South Africa who have been attacked? Or is there generally a problem with ‘outsiders’ coming to the township?**

*Specific issues to look out for include*

#### a) **Housing** (‘foreigners have taken our houses).

- We need to understand why people think this, is it just an impression, did they hear a rumour, do they have an actual example where this took place?
- What are their experiences of trying to access housing, do they feel they have been prevented from getting houses because of foreigners.
- How do they think foreigners get access to houses illegally e.g. bribery, corruption, other?

#### b) **Jobs** (‘foreigners are taking our jobs’).

- Is this a general impression or do they have direct experience of this?
- Why do they think foreigners get the jobs they want?

- Are they prepared to accept lower pay, are they more skilled, are they corrupt?

c) **Competition for resources including water, sanitation and health.**

E.g. there is only one water tap for so many people and we run out of water because of foreigner using it up.

- Health-issues around foreigners accessing free health care, the local clinic runs out of medicines because the supplies are being used by foreigners who come to the clinic
- Providing goods and services: are foreigners selling things cheaper than locals or are they seen to have an unfair advantage in pricing their goods?

d) **Crime-**‘foreigners are responsible for crime’.

- We need to probe a bit beneath this perception.
- Are there some foreigners that people believe are the most responsible for crime? Or is it all foreigners.
- What types of crime are they usually involved in?
- Is this just a general impression or have people had direct experiences?

e) **Illness/HIV/AIDs-**‘foreigners are responsible for spreading disease’.

- Why do they think this is the case, have they had any experience of this.

f) **Gender related issues.**

- Do they feel relationship issues are involved?
- Are foreign men seen to be in competition with local men for local women?

g) **Migration-**have a lot of new people moved into this area recently?

- Where are they from?
- Do they have a good or bad relationship with them?

- Is this causing conflict?

**h) Policing issues-**

- Do they feel that the actions of the police have anything to do with how bad the situation has got, i.e. colluded with or not acted against foreigners who do 'wrong things', crime etc.

**i) Government-local especially and national**

- Do they feel that the actions of the government at local level (councillors, local MPs) etc have anything to do with the situation e.g. giving jobs or houses 'unfairly' to foreigners.
- What about local politicians, local civic leaders, other leaders?
- What channels exist for you to report your grievances to the authority?

**3) Has there always been animosity towards the foreigners living in this community? [5 minutes]**

- Has this always been the case or had you lived peacefully before?
- When did people start seeing foreigners as the enemy?

**4) What do you *feel* about the violence which has been happening in your area? [10 minutes]**

(Looking for attitudes towards the violence, either negative or positive.)

- Do people maybe agree that foreigners are 'a problem' but feel there *shouldn't* be violence against them?
- Do they think they 'deserve' the violence, that violence has been effective in dealing with other 'criminals' and should now be used against foreigners?

**5) Is there anything that should or could be done about this violence?**

**[10 minutes]**

**(Prompt-**trying to non-judgementally see whether people think the attacks should or will continue.)

- Also trying to draw out possible ways to intervene in the violence, how people think it could be addressed in terms of community or government initiatives, or is it a matter of the government simply addressing the problematic underlying issues outlined in the discussion, or is it a matter of arresting and deporting foreigners?