



Chapter 5

Twenty years of freedom: whose democracy are we reporting?



William Bird

William Bird is the Director of Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) which was started in 1993 to enable the organisation to carry out the first monitoring project focused on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC's) reporting on the 1994 elections. MMA has been monitoring the media for 21 years and in that time has carried out over 130 different media monitoring projects, across key issues from representing elections, to gender, children, HIV, health, race and racism.

Analysing our media¹⁸ 20 years into South Africa's democracy is rather like a 20-year-old looking into a fractured mirror. Some pieces are similar to the reality; others make the viewer seem quite grotesque; yet others make her seem more beautiful. The media is of course not merely a mirror – it has the ability to shape and be shaped by that which it seeks to represent. Analysing the news does, however, offer critical insights into the state of South Africa's democracy.

There is no question that as a country we are light years away from where we were in 1994. So, too, is our media. A surface scan reveals that we have some of the best legal and policy instruments (including our Constitution) dealing with media. We have a host of bodies, supported by both state and industry, that promote and entrench media freedom. We have clear parliamentary processes, an independent broadcast regulator, an agency set up specifically to encourage media diversity (the Media Diversity and Development Agency) and a public broadcaster striving but struggling to break free from its self-censoring past. We have also seen the development and establishment of crucial industry bodies in response to the democratic imperative for accountability, including the newly revitalised Press Council and the Broadcast Complaints Commission (BCCSA). We have seen an explosion of media, from small commercial and community print to community radio, and an exciting TV broadcast environment.

The picture is not all sunshine, roses and lollipops. Indeed, there are threats to media freedom from various quarters – some by misguided miscreants in government and in political parties; others from the profit-seeking corporate sector; and those seeking to undermine our democracy for selfish ends. As with other sectors, the media face challenges and the legacy of apartheid is manifest in different ways. Despite the significant changes, we are still not sufficiently transformed as the media. Some of the key issues around structural

transformation are outlined in greater detail elsewhere in this book – indeed, transformation remains one of our biggest challenges, not only in media but in our society more broadly.

But what do we mean when we talk about transformation? Some argue strongly that above and beyond the regulatory and legislative requirements of broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE), it is the transformation of content and organisational culture, and the building of a skilled cadre of journalists and editors, that will go the longest way in effecting sustainable and lasting transformation in the print and digital media industry. In various sectors, and not just the media sector, 'transformation' imperatives, drives, processes and plans have often not yielded the desired results. Many have had a narrow focus on meeting targets for representivity, employment equity, BBBEE and related initiatives – the

But what do we mean when we talk about transformation?

ticking of boxes. Although there are definitely boxes to be ticked, true transformation requires a serious commitment to going beyond, to building a diverse media sector where all in South Africa can access a diversity of views and voices across a range of platforms and in the languages of their choice. It is clear (from the current state of the public service broadcaster, as well as in the print media sector, as highlighted in the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team report of 2013) that in terms of transformation our media has a long journey ahead. What is perhaps less clear is the point at which a sector can be considered transformed – and who determines such transformation. These questions must be debated as we go into our twenty-first year of democracy.

While the media environment has changed fundamentally since 1994, and broadly speaking in ways aligned with the kind of society envisioned by our Constitution,¹⁹ less attention has been given to the content of the news media and to how that has, or has not, changed. News media matters, and the content matters, not because audiences can be brainwashed but because the news media plays a critical role in

setting and framing debates. As the expression goes, the media doesn't tell us what to think, but it does tell us what to think about.

A defining element of traditional news media is that it seeks to portray or to represent the news or events to its audiences in a simplified and narrative manner in limited time and space. An analysis of the news can reveal what, and also who, the media views as important. The issues covered, how often they are covered, how they are framed, and those who speak, help to inform us about who and what the media considers to be important – and also which subjects, people and institutions hold power in society. Conversely, those marginalised and whose voices are not heard indicate who has less power and is less important. One of the most effective methods of determining these issues is through media monitoring,²⁰ which enables us to analyse hundreds of thousands of news stories in great detail. It also enables us to analyse trends over time – and in so doing to assess shifts in the media coverage of crucial issues.

This chapter seeks to unpack some of the media shifts since 1994 and to examine how key issues facing our emerging democracy have been reported on. The analysis of media content (which will also necessarily indicate a bias) will be drawn from the data and monitoring projects Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) has carried out over the last 20 years.²¹

The point of departure for this chapter is to consider five critical aspects of our society and, together with case studies and reference to research, indicate how they are represented in the media. The following areas have been selected:

- **Race, racism and xenophobia.** Given South Africa's racist history, race and racism have been and continues to be critical to our development and transformation.
- **Elections.** These are a core element of democracy. Valuable insights into shifts in our media's basic performance can be gleaned from how the media reports on elections, whether they inform the public and provide balanced, accurate and fair coverage.

- **Children.** Children account for 39 per cent of our population, and this figure will increase in the future. Children are also arguably the most protected group in our country and yet they experience high levels of trauma and abuse, and are marginalised in society and the media. How they and their issues are portrayed offers crucial insights to our country's sustainability.
- **HIV and AIDS.** As it is one of South Africa's biggest health and social challenges, understanding how this pandemic has been reported will help us understand how key health issues are portrayed in the media.
- **Gender and gender-based violence (GBV).** South Africa has among the highest levels of GBV in the world. With our deeply sexist and patriarchal history (like race), how gender and gender-based violence is dealt with so that dignity and equality is realised becomes an important indicator of our democracy.

Each aspect listed above could easily be the focus of a separate book, and there are already books on some of these issues. For current purposes, however, I seek to highlight key elements in order to show how far we have come and how far we still have to go. Also, by drawing greater attention to these elements, I hope to stimulate deeper debate on how we can meet the challenges we face.

Race, racism and xenophobia

South Africa's Constitution speaks directly to these issues in the founding provisions, where it notes the values of '... human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms [and] ... non-racialism and non-sexism.' Given our deeply racialised and racist past, few other aspects are as essential to consider as race, racism and xenophobia and how these issues are portrayed in the media. It is an area where some fundamentally positive changes have been seen but also one in which a great deal more transformation is necessary.

It was common, for example, in the mid 1990s, for media to include the race of a person in a story such as a crime story. A case in point was a story saying that three black men hijacked a white woman in Sandton. Not only was the person's race irrelevant but mentioning it served to perpetuate a range of stereotypes about black people as criminals. This filtered through to reporting on crime, where in the late 1990s it was common for media to portray whites as the victims of crimes and blacks as the perpetrators.

Following the Human Rights Commission's inquiry into racism in the media, a number of substantial changes occurred in the coverage of race. It is highly unlikely that a person's race would be mentioned unless it is clearly relevant to the story (for example, an item about a racially-motivated crime).²² The chances of a South African media breaking the law and being openly racist are even more unlikely.

In spite of the positive changes to the media, however, racism and the perpetuation of racist stereotypes still occur. While race may not be so easily and overtly assigned in stories, negative stereotypes may be perpetuated through trends in representation. An example lies in some media tendencies in the mid 2000s to report on issues of race – and especially racially motivated crimes – as graphic or violent events without, in most instances, any analysis or explanation as to the underlying issues or causes. Such reports often perpetuated stereotypes. The cases of labourers being painted silver by their employers, or made to engage in humiliating activities such as being forced to eat dog food had clearly racist undertones but these were seldom explained, unpacked or analysed. In a deeply disturbing case in early November 2000, the TV programme *Special Assignment* showed police dog unit officers encouraging their dogs to attack 'illegal immigrants.' Understandably, much of the subsequent media focus was on the brutality and illegal actions of those involved – however, the racist and xenophobic nature of the incident received far less coverage.

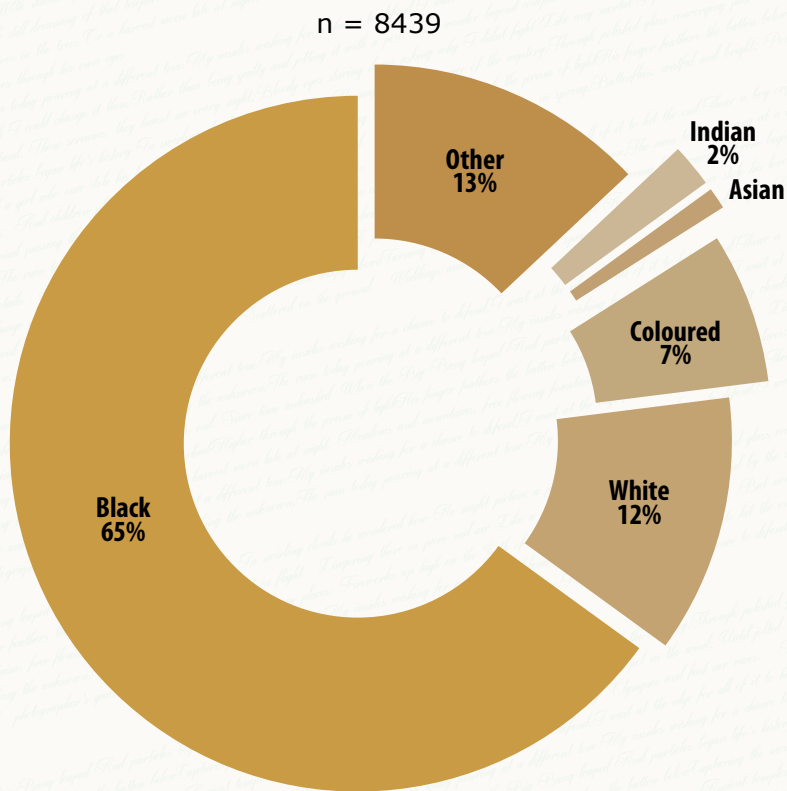
In 2009, research by Media Monitoring Africa on the representation of race and racism highlighted that with one exception, *Die Afrikaaner* (a newspaper aligned to the Herstigte Nasionale Party), all print media monitored adopted editorial positions opposing racism and the most common proposition identified in the monitoring was, 'There is no place for racism in the new South Africa'.

In spite of the positive changes to the media, however, racism and the perpetuation of racist stereotypes still occur.

However, although there has been a significant shift in reporting content, journalists interviewed in 2009 indicated that there had not been sufficient transformation in the media industry. Some four years later (and while the research did not focus on content), the report by the PDMTTT²³ shows that there has still not been sufficient transformation in the print media. There is not necessarily a clear link between the transformation within newsrooms and the content, but it seems reasonable to assert that there is far greater likelihood of the content being influenced if the newsrooms are themselves sufficiently transformed. There is still some distance to go in addressing the coverage of race and racism, but there have been significant positive shifts. A quick glance at the coverage of children in terms of racial breakdown highlights this shift.

In 2004, research²⁴ revealed that 39 per cent of children represented in the media were black (30 per cent were white). This figure has more than doubled in 2013 results,²⁵ with black children accounting for 65 per cent of those accessed or mentioned in reports and whites dropping to 12 per cent.

Figure 1. Children represented in the media by race (2013)



Xenophobia: A case study

In May and June of 2008 there was an outbreak of violence around Johannesburg which was soon identified by media, government officials and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as being xenophobic-based violence. It was located largely in townships around central Johannesburg and in most instances took the form of aggression expressed against African non-South Africans by African South Africans. In a three week period more than 60 people were killed and 50 000 were displaced from their homes. The authorities were seemingly caught off-guard and media reported their delayed response to the violence. In many instances it was reported that NGOs were operating more efficiently and effectively than formal government response services. The media coverage during this period was extraordinary. Most media were able to emphasise the brutality of the violence through the use of graphic visuals.

All the media monitored by Media Monitoring Africa (with one glaring exception, the *Daily Sun*)²⁶ condemned the violence – even the majority of tabloids: ‘We are all to blame’ (*Sunday Sun* 18 May 2008) and ‘Act now, or it won’t end’ (*Sunday Sun* 1 June 2008). The condemnation of the xenophobic-based violence was given extraordinary prominence in some cases through the use of front page editorials. *The Sowetan* (14 May 2008) said: ‘Do unto refugees as you would them to you’.

The media coverage was typified by a diversity of issues being covered, from dealing with the violence, to response from authorities, to shelters and emergency service stories. The media monitored carried special sections in their newspapers. There were special debates and discussions on radio, and even public debates with experts aiming to unpack some of the causes.

Generally, media made efforts to ensure that coverage did not only focus on the hatred and xenophobic violence. Some media carried stories

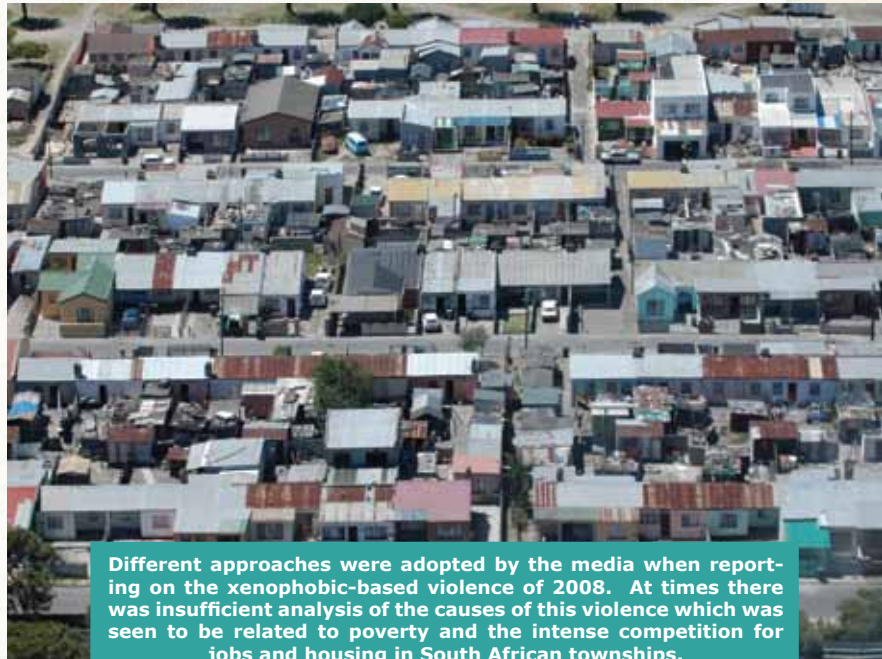
focused on communities where all the people were getting along – for example, ‘Hatred and mayhem shatter SA, but ... in Bokfontein love transcends borders’ (*City Press* 18 May 2008), an article, accompanied by photographs, which focused on positive relationships between foreign nationals and South Africans in an area with high unemployment and poverty. Another article, ‘Khutsong vows to support its comrades in ‘demarcation struggle’ (*City Press* 1 June 2008), drew attention to a community where the local residents’ forum and the Merafong Demarcation Forum had pledged that they would live in peace and not involve themselves in attacks against foreign nationals. The article highlighted the history of South Africans and foreign nationals living together in that area, and sharing the same cause. One forum member is quoted as saying: ‘These comrades from other countries have been on our side in the demarcation struggle. They have been living with us for more than 20 years and have not done anything wrong to us.’

The media’s general response to the violence went beyond the news, and included local soap opera stars, musicians and other celebrities coming out and calling for an end to aggression. There were even a few stories about rape as a form of xenophobic violence (generally, however, there was an absence of gender perspective, which was a significant area of weakness in the coverage, as will be discussed further).

Do unto refugees as you would them to you.

Other stories served to humanise the victims, largely by giving them a voice and telling their stories. In so doing, the media helped to challenge stereotypes about non-South Africans and to highlight the consequences of the violence. For example, ‘Foreign nationals are marooned between a rock and a hard place as former neighbours go beserk’ (*City Press* 18 May 2008) tells the story of a ‘naturalised

South African citizen’, a ‘municipal employee’, who had lived in Alex since 1994, who could not go back to Zimbabwe owing to lack of jobs, and a Zimbabwean with a South African wife who had lived in South Africa for 11 years. Numerous articles with a similar focus appeared in *City Press*, including ‘Dreams of prosperous life in SA shattered’ (25 May 2008), ‘I’d rather die here than go back to Zim’ (25 May 2008), ‘Refugee life is not a bed of roses’ (1 June 2008), ‘Shop owners forced to abandon their business’ (1 June 2008), and ‘A blessing taken away, at only four months’ (1 June 2008).



Different approaches were adopted by the media when reporting on the xenophobic-based violence of 2008. At times there was insufficient analysis of the causes of this violence which was seen to be related to poverty and the intense competition for jobs and housing in South African townships.

Other media stories focused on the perspectives of children, which made for particularly powerful accounts. A story in *City Press*, ‘I am 12 and I am always scared’ (25 May 2008) was written from the child’s viewpoint and talks about the impact of the violence on the child. Another story in the *Sowetan*, ‘Hope beats fear’ (25 May 2008) also examined the violence from a child’s outlook and demonstrated how the children were hopeful that things would be resolved. The *Mail & Guardian* also took the extraordinary step of using the drawings of children on its front page, accompanied by powerful accounts of their experience during the attacks: ‘Tell them we are from here’ (*Mail & Guardian* 24 May 2008).

In many instances media went beyond traditional lines of ethics and responsibility by setting up their own initiatives and actively encouraging help from their readers, viewers and listeners. Some media, like *The Star*, set up funds and encouraged companies to donate. Others provided information about where people could make donations. Media professionals, journalists and camerapeople continued to work in the communities after filing their stories.

In their coverage, media pushed ethical boundaries to the limit. There was extensive public debate over the use of a particular series of photographs of a man who had been set on fire. The man can be seen in the foreground bent over double while his flesh burns. Subsequent images show police officers extinguishing his burning body, while the man was alive.²⁷ Some media argued that the use of such images was essential to bring home the brutality of the violence, while others argued that the pictures were offensive and undignified. The media's response to these images and to the brutality generally demonstrated how difficult covering such violence can be and also highlighted how media can and sometimes do clearly adopt positions (opposing violence), engaging with the issues and not merely reporting on them from a distance. It also highlights how difficult daily ethical decision-making processes are.

Although there were many truly remarkable instances of in-depth reporting and of rights-based positions, there were of course also significant gaps and weaknesses in the media's coverage. In most instances the gender dimensions of the attacks were not considered, and whereas the media can shoulder some of the blame for this, civil society (including institutions such as the Commission on Gender Equality) also failed in this respect. There was also insufficient analysis of the causes of the violence. Overall, however, the majority of media adopted very firm anti-xenophobic positions.

The coverage of race, racism and xenophobia highlights an editorial bias that seeks to highlight racism and xenophobia in negative terms and in ways that show how they undermine our

democracy. The extensive coverage of race, racism and xenophobia during the attacks of 2008 highlighted some incredibly powerful storytelling and presented a stark contradiction – with the media broadly opposed to racism and yet, transformation around race within newsrooms still remaining a challenge.

What makes the contradiction all the more startling is that despite clear editorial positions on the importance of voting; combating gender-based violence as well as HIV; and, reducing child abuse, reports on these matters often tend not to contextualise or offer deeper analysis of the situation.

Reporting elections

At no time is the role of the media more important than during elections. Not only is this the acid test for freedom and fairness of media coverage, but the media's pivotal role in democracy is most visible during this period.²⁸ Balance and fairness are key to election coverage. It is only to be expected however that during an election period there will be some bias where a party will make allegations against another, and the media will not counter-balance this in the same story. In most cases such incidents might be reported on the following day or in a later bulletin where a response from the opposing party is sought. Such practice is in line with the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) elections regulations,²⁹ but where such opportunities are not afforded the news item is obviously biased.

On fairness, we can take some pride in the knowledge that on average over 80 per cent of all elections items monitored since 1994 were fair. In 2009 this figure was 84 per cent across the 56 different media monitored. Among the lowest performing media were some print media, for example the *Sunday Times* and *Saturday Star*, but it is also to be noted that other print media including the *New Age* and the *Mail & Guardian* were also among the highest for balance overall. Where bias does occur it tends clearly to favour or to oppose a political party.

In 2009 the ANC received the lion's share of coverage across all media monitored for all elections, averaging 46 per cent in the 2009 elections. Together, 77 per cent of all coverage was afforded to just four political parties, with the remainder spread among the rest. The ANC received the highest number of biased items overall, but only a handful of these items were clearly biased 'against'. Given that it has a majority in government, dominates coverage and that it was subject to most of the attacks by other political parties, it is hardly surprising that it should have more biased items than any other party. Overall, there was no evidence in the media monitored of any intentional systematic bias for or against the major political

It is important to distinguish the coverage in news from party elections broadcasts, for which a formula is used to calculate the levels of coverage. The requirement for news is a reasonable opportunity for conflicting views to be heard and for all parties to be treated equitably.³¹ It is obvious that solutions must be found to ensure that the views of smaller parties are heard.

It is certainly an achievement worth boasting about that the majority of media coverage in mainstream private, public and community media is overwhelmingly fair. Considering South Africa's history of media bias prior to democracy, the achievement is all the more significant and speaks in some way to the commitment of the majority of media professionals to free and fair elections. And yet, far too often media fail to adopt a citizen's agenda by reporting on issues of immediate relevance to citizens and providing information necessary for making informed choices, opting instead for easier 'follow the leader' stories and reports on campaign trails and political party rallies. If anything, then, the media may be accused of not being sufficiently critical of political parties and of allowing them to determine the election coverage.³² The contradiction mentioned above is once again highlighted: we have media coverage during an election period that is overwhelmingly fair, and yet some of the most critical issues and the voices of ordinary citizens are marginalised.

Media's agenda is also heavily influenced by the actions of the major political parties, and the smaller parties are further marginalised.³³

parties. While such a scenario certainly seems equitable for the larger parties, there is cause for some concern around the extremely low coverage afforded to the smaller parties. While media may assert that coverage was broadly in line with or proportional to seats in parliament, it seems difficult to argue that affording a party less than three per cent coverage will allow voters to be fully aware of what the party stands for or what its strengths and weaknesses are. That so much coverage in an elections period is also driven by events, and is campaign and personality focused means voters are likely to be even less informed about the smaller parties.³⁰

Children: Our future today

Children account for roughly 39 per cent of our population.³⁴ The African continent's population is getting younger, with UNICEF's 2013 State of the World's Children report showing that 47 per cent of the population in eastern and southern Africa is under the age of 18: that is, children. Despite this, children only feature in only 10 per



cent of all South African news stories, and their voices are marginalised still further with only seven per cent of all children's stories carrying the voices of children themselves.³⁵ The good news in these figures is that compared with 2003 where children only appeared in six per cent of news items the trend, while perhaps not as high as it should be represents a 67 per cent increase.

In 2003, one in ten stories violated the rights of the child (see Figure 2). Not only did the media act unethically – and in many cases illegally – but also not in the best interests of the child. In the last five years we have seen a very positive shift in our media. The South African National

Editors Forum (Sanef) has recommended a set of guidelines for reporting on children to all its members; the Independent Group of newspapers has adopted them; and Times Media and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) have included key clauses focused on children in their own editorial policies. Most recently, during the comprehensive revision of the South African Press Council, children and children's rights (including a dedicated clause on children) have been incorporated in the new Press Code which came into effect in 2013). The latest research shows that only two per cent of news stories further violate the rights of the child and while this is still two per cent too many, it does indicate a significant improvement in South African reporting.

The positive trends in reporting on children go further than the number of children in stories. In 2003, the single most common role for children in the news was as victim whereas the latest figures from 2013 show a greater (but still limited) range of roles, with a child given the status merely as a child in over a third of all roles. The positive shifts need to be celebrated.



Figure 2. Children's rights in 2003

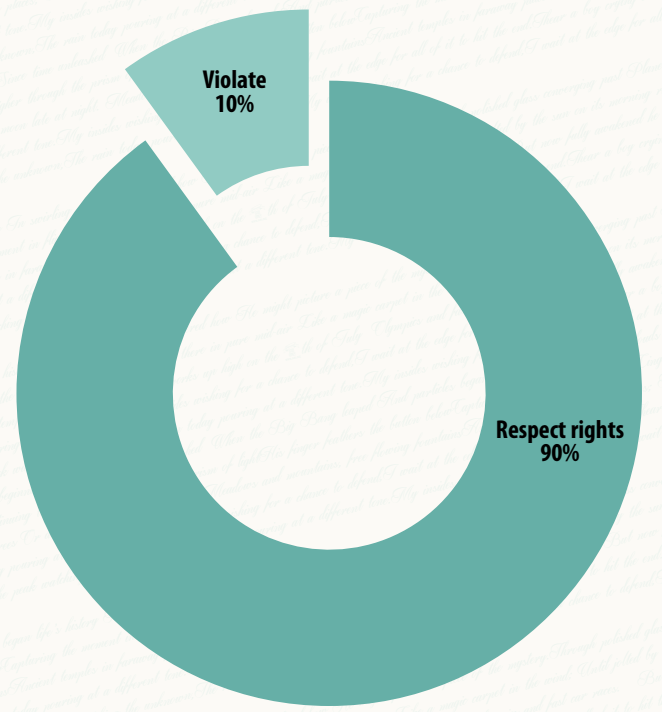
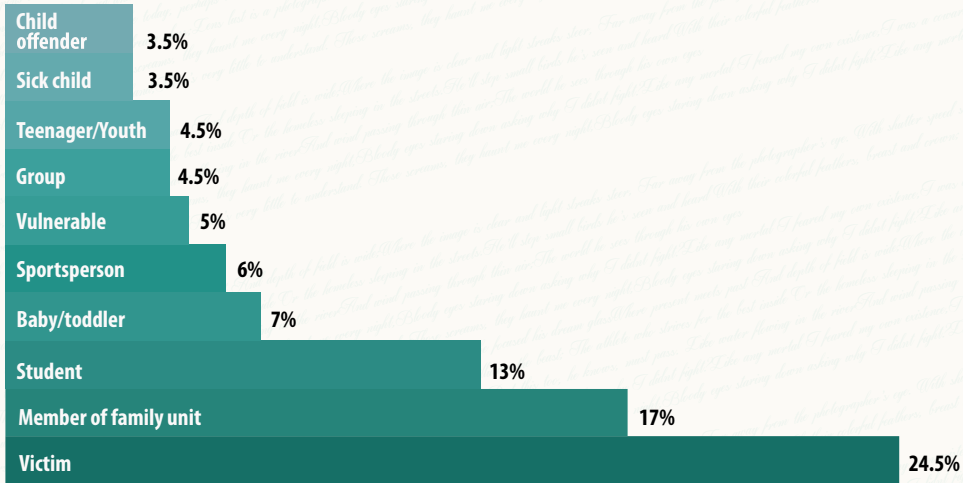


Figure 3. Top 10 roles children assigned in media coverage 2003



If we consider the topics or subjects that are about or feature children we see a similar positive trend, away from the stereotype and victimisation to recognising children as citizens with value – a dramatic shift from stories featuring children being dominated by crime, war, conflict, child abuse and disasters/accidents (49 per cent of all stories collectively) to stories about or featuring children focused on education, the justice system and health (52 per cent collectively). Although many of these stories revealed how children are being failed by society, the change of emphasis from children as helpless victims is at least positive.

Figure 4. Top 12 topics 2003

What are the stories with children about? Top 12 topics (90% of all stories).

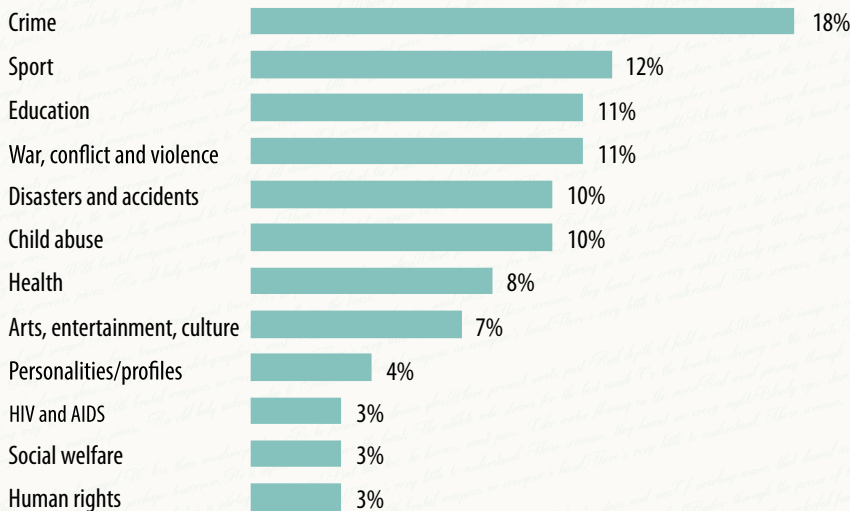
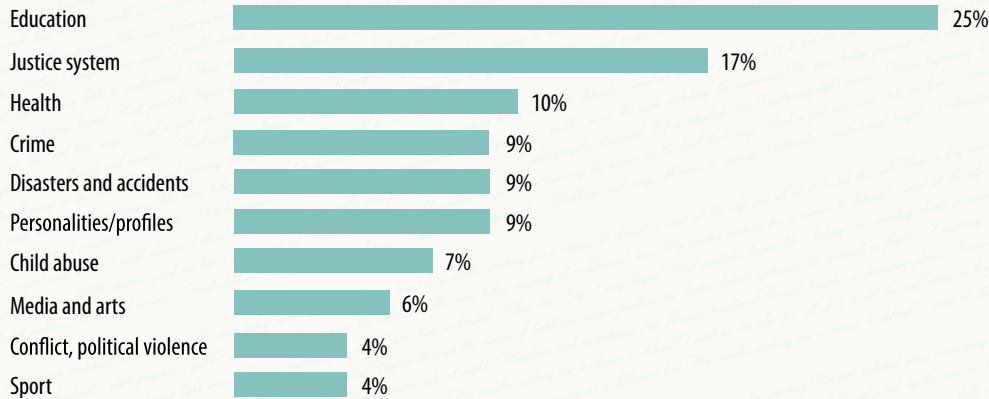


Figure 5 Top 10 topics 2013



There is still a long way to go towards a situation in which media reports on children are more in line with South Africa's realities. Challenges to the SABC, (including its ongoing financial instability and leadership crises) present worrying threats to the public broadcaster's ability to fulfil its mandate in respect of children. Quality children's programming is expensive and requires extensive planning and research. There is currently no local South African drama for children and the news for children on television, with some wonderful exceptions, is generally extremely limited and of very poor quality.

It is perhaps in the portrayal and reporting of children that the clearest transformation trend of the South African media can be seen. From increased portrayal and voice, to shifts in roles and issues covered, to seeing that girl and boy children are generally represented in equal numbers (but, it must be noted, not equitably, as will be discussed below) the trend is encouraging. Children are however still generally badly marginalised in terms of voice and portrayal, particularly when compared against their numbers in the population, the level of protection afforded to them under our democratic dispensation, and, their importance for our nation's future.

Reporting HIV and AIDS

A brief review of the coverage of HIV and AIDS, one of South Africa's most serious health challenges, is useful for two important reasons: it offers an indication of the accuracy of reporting on complex issues while reflecting on how such critical issues are covered – and what drives the coverage.

Research carried out in 2003³⁶ sought to address a range of issues focused on HIV and the media, including the media's ability to report such a complicated health challenge accurately. There was a sense, expressed by some of the partners carrying out the research, that the media was not accurate in its coverage of HIV. One of the methods devised to test the accuracy of the stories included having a doctor, an expert on HIV, analyse a random sample of stories to assess this. In 2003 the accuracy level was found to be 88 per cent accurate to very accurate. A similar test was carried out in 2005 on a study on the prevention of mother-to-child transmission and the results were very similar. While positive, this finding cannot be extrapolated to all areas of media coverage, but what it does suggest is that, significantly, the media is able to accurately report on extremely complicated health challenges when they devote sufficient capacity and resources to doing so.

Accurate reporting of HIV, however, does not necessarily mean that coverage of HIV is equally

good. Again, there are challenges in how HIV is reported. Very few voices of people living with HIV are heard in the print and broadcast media, which tends to cover the actions of leaders, allowing their agenda to be determined not by the issue but by the leaders and the stories they generate.³⁷ As a result there has been a significant drop in coverage of HIV as the conflict between government and civil society that drove so much of the reportage was removed when the government changed its policy around HIV and AIDS after a Constitutional Court Ruling in 2002. Research from 2009 indicates that coverage of HIV has dropped by 63 per cent.³⁸

Table 1: showing the decrease in articles over the two periods analysed

	Count (all items for period)
Survey 1: 2003	2 204
Survey 2: 2009	806

While there was clearly less conflict-driven news, it would be difficult to argue that the drop in coverage was in line with the reduction in the impact of the epidemic. Rather, it points to the manner in which the media were reporting the epidemic, and which needs to be changed.

Gender-based violence

Gender in general is frequently marginalised in discussions about transformation, yet it must be given the same importance as issues of race and children if our nation is to be a constitutional democracy. Gender inequality and patriarchy prevent more than half of our population from realising their rights as equal citizens with dignity. Unsurprisingly, it is also one of the core areas that requires radical transformation in the media sector, across virtually all parameters.

On average, women account for only 29 per cent of news sources in South African media. On a fundamental level the media perpetuate gender inequality³⁹ and the degree to which media can be said to be fair and accurate must therefore be questioned. Although the figure is better than the global average of women in the media (23

per cent, according to the most recent Global Media Monitoring Project), we have some way to go in realising gender equality and balance. While our media are not much different to media throughout the world there is no reason to be complacent, as we can, and should, expect our media to outperform global media.

A review of media coverage of gender reveals some broadly positive trends. In the 1999 general elections, women accounted for 10 per cent of all news sources about elections. In 2004, that figure had more than doubled to 23 per cent – which could not be attributed to the media alone and reflected broader changes in South Africa at the time. It remains nevertheless a very positive shift. In 2005, during the 16 Days of Activism campaign (running annually from 25 November to 10 December), MMA's monitoring found that for the first time there were more female voices than male in the news. Female voices accounted for 55 per cent of all voices during the period. But unfortunately the increase remains tied to issues or events with an overt gender focus, and these levels are not maintained.

South Africa has one of the highest levels of gender-based violence in the world. While it is still dramatically under-reported there have also been some significant changes in the manner in which these crimes are reported. In the mid-1990s, it was commonplace for rape to be reported from a male perspective and largely by men. It was also commonplace for reports of gender-based violence to be trivialised – cases of severe domestic violence were reported as lovers' spats or lovers' tiffs. Such reports are now the exception and are quickly addressed and corrected even in the tabloid media.⁴⁰

Two high profile events in 2013 highlighted the strengths, weaknesses and complexity of the advances and lack thereof in our media. The first was the killing of Reeva Steenkamp by Oscar Pistorius and the second the rape and murder of Anene Booysen. The cases are both unusual in the amount of media coverage received: the levels of coverage of the Pistorius-Steenkamp case were unprecedented, and before the loss of former President Nelson Mandela it was the biggest story of the year.⁴¹ It also highlights

the society we live in. If you are wealthy, live in an urban area, are good looking and white you will get preferential treatment – not just by the media but by political parties, the justice system, and on social media. It helped that Pistorius was a celebrity and a sportsman, which also affected the level of coverage afforded to Steenkamp.⁴² Of course there is more to the Pistorius-Steenkamp story: it is a perfect news story, the death of someone popular and 'beautiful', her career set to boom and her life ended by an international sports hero (the fall of a hero always makes better news than an ordinary person simply killing another person). The story was so big that the President's State of the Nation Address (SoNA) was relegated to inner pages and barely analysed. The story was even prominent in the *Daily Sun*, a paper that normally has a very different agenda to that of mainstream media. *Business Day* was the notable exception. We need to ask, however, whether the story merits the huge attention and the relegation of issues of greater national importance. This appears to be a case in which the public interest has been trumped by what is of interest to the public.

Surely, government plans to combat gender-based violence require deeper discussion and analysis than a tragic murder and the fall of a hero, but we cannot only blame the media for we need to look to the audience, as it is the audience driving the interest and insisting on the stories. It is worth asking just who the audiences are. Is the story as big in small community media? Only a few days later the *Daily Sun* had already moved away from the story. Are the other stories on rape or education not as interesting to the public? Is it because they are more often focused on issues and not individuals? Or is it because of the manner in which they are reported and communicated? Perhaps it is a combination of all of these.

The coverage also raised another gender issue. It seemed to be obligatory when referring to Steenkamp to note that she was a 'model' or that she was 'beautiful', repeated so often that it seemed significant and that somehow her death was all the more tragic because of her beauty. Surely there is no need to refer to her physical looks or modelling career as they have no bearing on her being killed and/or its

importance? If this were the case however why is it so emphasised by certain media.

Compare her to Booyesen, a 17-year-old who was described as a 'girl', with more attention paid to her wounds and that she had been gang-raped than how she was as a person. In contrast, we know Steenkamp was 'beautiful', a 'model,' but also much more. We have seen interviews and tributes to her that ensure we have a much fuller sense of who she was as a person; we are able to empathise with her family and friends, even though most of us never knew her.

It may well be positive for the media to humanise Steenkamp and to provide a sense of who she was as a person, but in comparison we know little about Booyesen, or about a woman in Daveyton, whose husband killed her and cut off her head (a story reported in *The Sun* of February 2013). These are all women who have become symbols, or objects about which people can vent their anger, frustration and despair about violence, and gender-based violence in particular. Surely, they also deserve to be treated with dignity – to have their full selves represented in the media; for us to know they too had families, what they liked, what their hopes and dreams were.⁴³

Inequality

It is easy to argue that the media simply has not transformed, and this is true in many respects. But it also, to a degree, reflecting on the inequalities of the society on which it reports. Pistorius is wealthy and has an expert legal team, a spin doctor and a pathologist, whereas the accused in the rape and murder of Booyesen had a state-appointed attorney; wealth and power make a crucial difference to justice. The inequalities in media coverage do not end there. Both the Steenkamp and Pistorius families have had media access carefully mediated. Spokespersons have been appointed within the families, and the media have by and large respected them. The Steenkamp family wanted a private ceremony and even though the media crowded outside the cemetery, the family's wishes for dignity and privacy were respected. (There were some ethical and legal violations when a number of



media houses ran images of Pistorius crying in court despite the explicit instructions of the court. The news organisations apologised afterwards.)

In contrast we saw the family and friends of Booysen in their most private grief. Not only were the media present but politicians used the opportunity for their own agendas. Like the Steenkamp's, the family and friends of Booysen also surely deserved time to deal with the death of a loved one and not have it so crassly interrupted. Where was the sanction for the parties concerned? There was some media critique⁴⁴ that did serve to highlight how Anene's death was used for politicking.

We are not going to see a sudden end to the Pistorius story, which looks set to continue getting extensive media coverage. What we would have hoped to see was the use of the case beyond its sensational and gratuitous detail – for example, an explanation of how the criminal justice system works, or what our gun laws are and when guns can be taken away. We also hope to see media asking questions. How can we reduce violence in South Africa? What are our understandings of masculinity? What should our government be doing to eradicate gender-based violence? What can citizens do? How can we make sure that the next time a celebrity is arrested on charges of gender-based violence and the charges are withdrawn that the story continues? How many of those celebrities own guns? Should they still have them?

Conclusion

Three trends emerge from the aspects highlighted and cases mentioned. The first is that across crucial elements of race, elections, accuracy, children, and gender the South African media has made changes generally in line with the country's constitutional order. At the same time, the need for further and extensive transformation remains – not to reach some utopian ideal but to be more representative and to offer a greater diversity of views and voices, ensuring that all within our borders are represented. The third trend is that across the issues highlighted the concern about voice has been raised. Far too often, the media is dominated by the voices of the powerful. When it comes to public violence, to strikes, to

education, to racism, the voices of those directly affected are seldom heard, for the media is dominated by the powerful in government or in the corporate sector. Voices are further limited along urban-rural, rich-poor, and gender divides. Tackling such dynamics is not easy.

The media is in a 'catch 22' situation where they must engage with and start portraying other audiences, telling the stories of a greater diversity of South Africans – but at the same time the media operate in a society where inequality is increasing and where they tend to target audiences with means and resources. How does one target new audiences when it makes no business sense to do so? The same holds for the public broadcaster for even though its mandate and editorial policies promote diversity, and even though it should be seeking to meet the needs of all, its commercial operations and reliance on advertising – coupled with social and economic inequality – means that it serves the interest largely of the urban and the middle to upper middle living standards measures. So what is required for our future and to strengthen the gains made? A few crucial elements are: a good institutional framework, an effective three tier media system, with effective public broadcasting, commercial and community broadcasters and other media.

It is critical to strengthen and develop our media sector in a meaningful and sustainable manner. Short term desires for 'better' or more positive coverage of certain groups or interests do not achieve that aim. What is necessary is a skilled and diverse media that informs and offers credible and diverse perspectives, voices and issues, and that engages audiences and does not speak down to them. It is a truism that you cannot have quality media where media freedom is heavily curtailed. This is a call for effective social democracy where there is a strong policy framework and strong democratic accountability with accessible institutions that maintain and entrench media freedom and limit the influence of those with disproportionate power. For such a system to be realised the media in all its forms needs to transform, but so too do the other key stakeholders including government and civil society. For this reason, we need to ensure we highlight the gains made in the last 20 years, and harness the positive energy to push ahead with further transformation so that the next 20 years will see as many dramatic positive shifts.