

## PERCEPTIVENESS OF UFS STUDENTS TOWARDS RACIAL MESSAGES IN NEWSPAPERS: A PILOT STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*The South African media was dissected by the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in 1998, following complaints that certain media were allegedly guilty of racism and creating racial stereotypes. However, the process of the Human Rights Commission's inquiry received much criticism from media institutions, on the grounds that the HRC omitted the interpretation of the mass media receiver within this particular communication process. This article tries to fill this void, albeit it in a modest way, by investigating (through structured questionnaires) how students at the University of the Free State (UFS) perceive certain identified newspaper items, which the HRC itself labelled racist. The results indicated that the students did not perceive the media as racist, but that their perceptiveness of racial messages was influenced by their cultural backgrounds.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1998 the Human Rights Commission (HRC) received a request in terms of Section 7(1) of the Human Rights Commission Act, 1994, from two professional bodies, the Black Lawyers Association (BLA) and the Association of Black Accountants of South Africa (ABASA) to investigate racism in newspapers.

The media are very powerful communication channels. Accusations that the media is racist might have enormous implications for the media itself and society on the whole.

The HRC employed two research authorities, namely Claudia Braude (qualitative content analysis) and the Media Monitoring Project (quantitative content analysis) to investigate the issue. The research was undertaken independently of the HRC and the conclusion, observations and recommendations that followed were those of the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and Claudia Braude.

A number of newspaper editors and journalism institutes questioned the research findings of both the research bodies. According to these parties, the research was "considerably weakened by the absence of research into media consumers" (*Faultlines* 2000: 50). They based their arguments on the premise that the research focused primarily on the content of the newspapers, and not on the interpretation of the readers/receivers thereof. The receivers were only considered at the beginning of the research when submissions of possible racist messages could be submitted.

When trying to define the term and phenomenon of racism, both the research parties admitted that the interpretation of racism lies primarily within the frame of reference of the receiver of the message. Combined with the objections made by the newspaper authorities, it was evident that a major part of the inquiry into racism in the media was omitted.

In the final section of the report, the HRC came to the conclusion that "the media can be characterised as racist institutions" (*Faultlines* 2000: 88). This finding was based largely on the research done by Claudia Braude and the MMP.

It would thus appear as if there was a void in the final assessment that was made on racism in the media. The role of the interpreter (reader/receiver) was never considered in the research and findings of the HRC inquiry into racism in the media.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

The aim of the research was to determine the perceptiveness of students at the University of the Free State (UFS) to so-called racist messages in newspapers. From the various newspapers subjected to the HRC inquiry three mainstream newspapers were selected, namely *Mail & Guardian*, *The Star* and *The Citizen*. Newspaper items that contained implicit and explicit racist messages were identified and submitted to the respondents for analysis.

The population from which the sample was drawn comprised all students between the ages of 18 and 25. This age group can be considered important future readers and interpreters of newspaper messages.

The respondents completed a questionnaire based on a number of selected newspaper items, which had been analysed according to the quantitative content analysis categories of the MMP report. In using the MMP content analysis categories, the research further aimed:

1. To determine whether the race of the respondents possibly influenced their mass media interpretation; and
2. To determine whether the perceptions of respondents were in accord with the findings of the content analysis.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Over a period of nine weeks the content of three newspapers subjected to the HRC inquiry (*Mail & Guardian*, *The Citizen* and *The Star*) was analysed on the same guidelines determined by the quantitative MMP research.

Newspaper items were analysed by monitoring items in which race was explicitly stated and implicit to the content. For every item identified in this way the content was analysed to reveal whether the item supported or challenged any of the listed categories. This was done by means of examining the use of language in both the headline and the body of the item.

Once the content analysis was completed, examples of specific newspaper items, which had been selected as the most appropriate for the study, was administered to the respondents. After reading the content of the item, the respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire based on the selected newspaper items. A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) was used and

the survey was aimed at determining whether or not the 305 respondents consider the newspaper items to be racist.

By means of comparing the findings of the content analysis and the considered perceptions of the respondents, the research aimed to determine if the respondents' perceptions were complementary or contradictory to the content analysis' findings and thus the findings of the Human Rights Commission.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Content analysis

A total of 848 items, which contained implicit or explicit racist messages, were identified by means of content analysis. Of this a total of 417 items showed a support of racism, i.e. 49,2% of all items: contained some sort of *support* for racist elements, while 32,2% were coded as being *neutral* and 19,6% *opposed* racism.

It appears as if the content analysis conducted for this article rendered similar results to that of the MMP inquiry, with only a few differences.

Both studies found a prominent presence of items containing implicit or explicit racist content that focused on the *government* (125 items: 14,7%). The *government* seemed to be a subject that could easily conjure up racist connotations. These might however be inconsistent, as the government will always be a focus point in a liberated press, having the opportunity and duty to report on irregularities within the government irrespective of the government's race compilation.

The media's critical reporting on *government* was interpreted by the MMP as racist, often creating the idea that Black politicians are incapable, corrupt and inefficient. Critical reporting on the government issues constituted 14,7% of all the items identified by the content analysis. Judging by the MMP criteria, governmental reports possibly created racial stereotypes and consequently implicated that the media was racist. However, when dealing with issues revolving around the *government*, careful consideration must be given to the function of the media as a watchdog. As Randall (2000: 3) states, responsible journalism includes scrutinising the actions of the government.

*Corruption* was often associated with government issues, mainly focusing on the apparent fraudulent arms deal and the Tony Yengeni saga, which dominated the press within the period of analysis.

*Corruption* was also prominent in the MMP inquiry, which might indicate that *corruption*, as a subject, tended to evoke implicit or explicit racist notions.

All in all, from the content analysis of the current study, it could be deduced that there were still traces of racism inherent in the content of the media, albeit that racism appeared to be a very difficult multi-dimensional phenomenon that could not be completely pinpointed. Every person had his/her own interpretation of racism.

These findings were dependent on the categories used in the content analysis, which were identified by the MMP and excluded the perceptiveness of mass media receivers. The findings on the receivers' responses will subsequently be discussed. This might possibly indicate whether the media was perceived as racist by the other critical participant in the mass communication process, namely the receiver.

### **Survey findings**

As pointed out earlier, the perceptiveness of UFS students to racist messages in the media was determined by means of a structured questionnaire. The respondents were asked to evaluate four types of newspaper items, namely a photograph, a letter, an article and a cartoon. These four items were identified by means of the content analysis and all contained implicit racist messages.

The photograph supplied to the respondents depicted bodies of dead soccer fans after one of Africa's soccer tragedies in Ghana (*The Star*, 11 May, 2001). This was a disturbing graphic photograph. The implicit racist elements identified by the content analysis included the perception that Black lives were not important, that Blacks died in large numbers and the that media invaded the privacy of Black victims.

The letter (*Mail & Guardian*, 4 May, 2001) contained the views of a reader on the alleged fraudulent arms deals, indicating that the government is failing in its political capacity. Implicit racist messages which arose from this letter concerned perceptions that the ANC government was corrupt, it had failed, it was incompetent, ANC parliamentarians were inefficient and there was a breakdown in social order.

The article focused on the resignation of the MEC for Health in the Eastern Cape, supplying her reasons for leaving and consequently implicating criticisms against the ANC government (*The Star*, 30

April, 2001). It consequently contained implicit racist elements, possibly conjuring up perceptions that the ANC government was responsible for the breakdown in social order, that it had failed and that it damaged society.

Lastly, the respondents evaluated a light-hearted cartoon showing Pres. Thabo Mbeki in conference with Pres. Bill Clinton (*The Star*, 4 May, 2001). The cartoon was a satire on the alleged plot to oust Pres. Mbeki. President Clinton in return was explaining to Pres. Mbeki the nature of a democracy. Judging by the content analysis, this cartoon implicitly showed the incompetence of the South African government. The interpretations of these items are discussed individually below.

### **Photograph**

As mentioned above, the photograph contained elements of implicit racism as identified by the content analysis. These implicit messages were reconstructed into statements, which the respondents used to evaluate the photograph. The highest percentage of respondents *disagreed* that these statements were racist.

A high percentage of respondents (82,9%) indicated that they *agreed* with the statement that the photograph underlined the tragedy of the event. It seemed as if a major portion of the respondents perceived the photograph as an objective source to enhance sympathy with the victims.

A significant difference between the interpretation of the Black and the White response group was observed with every statement regarding the photograph.

Although the photograph was coded as a racist item in the content analysis, the highest percentage of respondents (39,7%) perceived the photograph as *objective*, while only 3,9% indicated that they perceived the photograph as *racist*. This might have indicated that the respondents perceived this photograph as an objective newspaper item and not necessarily a carrier of racist messages, even though the photograph was classified as racist in the content analysis.

### **Letter**

The letter (*Mail & Guardian*, 4 May, 2001) was classified as racist in the content analysis. A high percentage of respondents *agreed* with the statements, which were replicated from the content analysis categories used in the study. Only 8,5% of respondents, however, perceived the letter as *racist*.

The respondents possibly did not perceive the statements as indicators of racism. All the statements pertained to the government. This commonality might be grounded in the identified function of the media to scrutinise the actions and inaction of government, implicating that the respondents perceived the letter not as racist, but possibly as part of the function of the media to report on government activities.

### *Article*

There was a significant difference between the Black and the White response groups with regard to the interpretation of the article (*The Star*, 30 April, 2001). In general, a larger group of Black respondents than White respondents *disagreed* with the statements.

Although the White response group *agreed* more with the statements, the majority of Whites (67,3%) indicated that they could not deduce from the article that the media was racist. It would thus appear as if the White respondents could not perceive the media as racist, even though the highest percentage of them agreed with the statements.

A larger portion of Black respondents (29,2%) indicated that they *agreed* with the statement that the article created the idea that the media was racist. The Black response group was more reluctant to agree with the other statements. This might be an indication that the Black response group identified other implicit messages that made them conclude that the media was racist.

### *Cartoon*

A high percentage of respondents agreed with the statement that the cartoon showed the incompetence of government, but also *disagreed* that the cartoon was a racist attack on Pres. Mbeki. The majority (64,1%) did however indicate that the cartoon was only light-hearted and should not be taken seriously.

There was a significant difference identified between the interpretation of the Black and the White response groups on every statement regarding the cartoon. A larger portion of the White respondents than Black respondents *agreed* with the statement that the cartoon showed incompetence on the part of government.

It appeared as if the Black respondents were more sceptical of the light-heartedness of the cartoon, which might refer back to the field of experience which they brought to the communication process. The influence of culture on the individual could also influence his/her humour, and consequently his/her perceptiveness of the cartoon.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Racism appears to be a very complex and evasive phenomenon to research. It seems to be a concept that cannot be kept in isolation, i.e. it has to be contextualised.

One of the identified functions of the media is to scrutinise the actions of government. The HRC regarded this scrutinising of government as racist. There are significant correlations ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) between all the statements pertaining to government. It appeared as if the respondents agreed with the statements, but did not perceive the reporting on government as racist.

With regard to every statement in the questionnaire a statistical significant difference ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) was calculated between the responses of the Black and White groups. The conclusion can be made that the race of the respondent influenced his/her interpretation of the newspaper message.

The interpretation of the respondents appears to be guided by their perceptions of the media item. These perceptions are embedded in the fields of experience which each respondent brings to the mass communication process. This is further influenced by factors such as culture, schema and connotations.

It would appear that new categories for the identification of racist content can be developed for future content analyses. For one, the audience must first be analysed in order to obtain the categories perceived by the audience as measures of racism.

While conducting the theoretical research it became apparent that there is a lack of scientific literature and research on racism in the media. There are thus numerous new opportunities to assess the impact of racism in the media.

To conclude, from the data gathered, it appears as if most UFS students – as active interpreters - did not perceive the investigated media as racist, but that their perceptiveness of racial messages was influenced by their cultural backgrounds.



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