



Hope Springs Eternal:

The Image of South Africa in Swedish Media

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Introduction

When South Africa is covered in the Swedish media, the focus is often on the history of South Africa, the role of Sweden in the anti-apartheid movement and, in more recent years, the political and socio-economic landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, marked by increased wealth gaps, social unrest, and corruption. How South Africa is covered by foreign media is important and politicians, as well as businesses and organisations such as Investment South Africa, Brand South Africa, and South African Tourism, keep a keen eye on the media as a gauge for maintaining diplomatic

relations, as well as for attracting foreign investment. As a former journalist who has covered South Africa for Scandinavian media, I have had ample opportunity to ponder and research the media coverage of South Africa and the African continent in the Swedish media, as well as Scandinavian and wider international media. Drawing upon my own experience, as well as an analysis of coverage of South Africa in the Swedish news media, I ask what the image of South Africa is in the Swedish media, how this has changed over the last 30 years and, importantly, what this might mean for South African-Swedish relations?

On an overall level, coverage of South Africa in Western media has a significant impact on politics, foreign policy, diplomatic relations, and the country's image of itself. Positive coverage can help to improve the country's image and reputation, while negative coverage can harm it. For example, coverage of South Africa's political and economic progress can help to attract foreign investment and promote positive diplomatic relations. Conversely, social unrest, coverage of crime, corruption, and other negative issues can harm the country's image and discourage investment and tourism. In my current position as Head of the International Office at the University of Johannesburg, I have first-hand experience of how negative media coverage of South Africa in international media impacts social structures and organisations in South Africa. The coverage of xenophobia, for example, hampers our quest to attract international students to South Africa. In particular, students and their parents often ask about the xenophobic violence that surfaced in 2008, widely covered in the international media, and the risk of further xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa.

On the upshot, in relation to Scandinavian and Swedish media, South Africa is covered much more than any other African country. This is part explained by South Africa being seen as the powerhouse of the African continent, even though not without rivals. Swedish media have also traditionally stationed their correspondents in South Africa – a practice which continues today. In addition, and importantly, the links between Sweden and South Africa have always been very strong and historically this is grounded in the role that Sweden played in the anti-apartheid movement. In general, the image of South Africa in Swedish media can be seen as relatively positive and influenced by the role of Sweden in the struggle against apartheid and the fact that many South Africans, including high-profile political leaders such as Oliver Tambo, spent time in Sweden. This is also reflected in what journalists themselves say about the way in which South Africa is covered. In 2014, I interviewed foreign correspondents for an article on awareness among foreign correspondents of alternative narratives and news frames, as well as attitudes towards alternative practices and models for journalism in relation to the way in which South Africa and the African continent is covered. Although these interviews were conducted

almost ten years ago, the two Swedish journalists interviewed had many interesting things to say about their relationships to the foreign desk, their editors, and their audience – comments which still resonate today. The then-correspondent for the Swedish Public Broadcaster, Sveriges Television (SVT), poignantly pointed out that:

Sweden by virtue of being a smaller country with a well-defined and quite homogenous audience, actually has more space for more nuanced stories and analysis. There is also a real focus on positive news from the continent in terms of development in various areas. (SVT respondent, interview with author, 17 August 2014)

This also related to a sense of 'convention' and how Swedish news editors and audiences relate to coverage. The then-correspondent for Sweden's largest national newspaper stated that:

[E]ditors back home and audiences I suppose like an intermediary, someone who speaks the same language and shares the same conventions for reporting. (Dagens Nyheter respondent, interview with author, 26 August 2014)

This builds on the fact that the post-apartheid era is often highlighted as a period of progress and change in terms of political, economic, and social development. The role of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) in the fight against apartheid and the subsequent formation of a democratic society has also been frequently highlighted in the media.

However, the media also covers other aspects of the country, and in later years, issues of increasing wealth gaps, raising poverty, gender-based violence, crime, and corruption are highlighted. The country's high levels of income inequality and poverty, as well as its high crime rates, are often reported on, particularly in relation to their impact on the country's development and political stability. Corruption is also a topic of coverage in the Swedish media, particularly in relation to government officials and business leaders. And, while in the immediate aftermath of the first democratic elections in 1994, media coverage was heavily centred on the peaceful political transition and the role of Nelson Mandela as the man who 'ended' apartheid and united South Africa, in recent

years coverage has tended towards narratives centred on corruption and a failed post-apartheid state and an incompetent post-apartheid government.

The aim of this article is to give insight into South Africa-Sweden relations by looking at how South Africa is depicted in the Swedish news media, and as this is, strictly speaking, not an academic article, also to provide some of my own impressions of how the news media has covered South Africa post-apartheid. This will inevitably include my own work as a foreign correspondent and a 'running commentary' on the media politics matrix that I have been part of for the last 25 years.

The role of Sweden in the anti-apartheid movement

Sweden played an important role in the anti-apartheid movement, which aimed to end the system of racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa. The Swedish anti-apartheid movement and the relationship between South Africa and Sweden are often emphasised as fundamental to continuous diplomatic relations. Sweden was one of the first countries to impose economic sanctions on South Africa in the 1960s, in response to the country's policies of racial segregation and discrimination. These sanctions included a ban on arms sales, as well as restrictions on trade and investment. In addition to economic sanctions, Sweden also supported

the anti-apartheid movement through diplomatic means. The Swedish government was a vocal critic of apartheid, and actively lobbied other countries to impose sanctions on South Africa. Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was assassinated in 1986, was a particularly outspoken critic of apartheid and a strong advocate for sanctions against South Africa, something that was highlighted in the media as well and centred in theories around the murder of Olof Palme as a potential motive.

Sweden also provided support to anti-apartheid organisations and activists, both financially and through the provision of political asylum to those fleeing the regime. Many anti-apartheid activists, including Nelson Mandela, were given political asylum in Sweden.

Sweden also supported the cultural boycott of South Africa, which aimed to isolate the country culturally and to deny its artists and athletes the international recognition they craved. Furthermore, the Swedish government supported the United Nations General Assembly resolution 3151 (XXVIII) which declared the policy of apartheid as a crime against humanity and that all states should refrain from providing any form of support to the South African government. Apart from state support from the Swedish government, the Africa Groups of Sweden, also sometimes referred to as the Isolate South Africa Committee, formed in the mid 1970s, were particularly active in supporting the liberation movement and the struggle against apartheid. By the early 1990s the 'Africa Groups' had about 1,500 members in Sweden (African Activist Archive, n.d.). Such a membership, taken together with a widespread support for the government policy of sanctions against the apartheid regime and the continued support for many of the core ideals of social democracy in South Africa, has contributed and continues to contribute to the support for the post-apartheid democracy project in South Africa and, by extension, continues to influence media coverage.

Coming to South Africa and the role of a foreign correspondent

As stated above, this is not an academic research article; instead, it is a reflection that draws upon research as well as my own lived experience of covering South Africa. That said, I have also drawn on

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academic research, my own and others, and also conducted a desk top analysis of media coverage of South Africa in Swedish media over the last 20 years. In doing this I have looked at the online archives of the main news media outlets in Sweden, filtering my searches through a few keywords related to stories that have made headlines not only in Scandinavia but globally, such as the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the first South African democratic elections in 1994, the Arms Deal Saga, and the many corruption stories surrounding former South African President Jacob Zuma. But there are many other stories that have attracted attention as well and the South African story is both well-covered and nuanced as reflected through the Swedish media.

I first came to South Africa in the late 1990s after falling in love with a South African journalist. At the time, I had been working on the Balkans as a foreign correspondent and was enrolled in an MA degree in journalism at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. My first years in South Africa were exhilarating and there were quite a few Swedish and Scandinavian journalists stationed in South Africa at the time, mainly in Johannesburg and Cape Town. In other words, there was healthy competition and this generated interest in the Swedish media for stories on South Africa.

However, as the years have gone by, the interest for South Africa waned and the demand for stories from South Africa dwindled from Swedish as well as Scandinavian media more generally. This coincided with me falling pregnant with my first son and, as I also covered stories from the rest of the continent and Southern Africa in particular, I quickly realised that travelling was becoming more and more cumbersome. So, after a brief stint in the NGO sector, working for the U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the South African Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) amongst others, I completed a second MA degree in Political Science at the University of the Witwatersrand and got my first university teaching job in the communications department at the University of South Africa (UNISA). This was followed by a few years in London where I completed a PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University before finally returning to South Africa in 2009 and taking

up a position in the School of Communication at the University of Johannesburg (UJ).

During my years as a foreign correspondent, I always had a sense that foreign journalists stationed in South Africa had a genuine interest in the country and truly wished to see it succeed, as one of the last countries to gain independence on the continent. I had a sense that journalists, Swedish and others, tried to report on stories that transcended the politics of apartheid and instead embraced a new democratic South Africa, full of hope and energy. Of course, on the other hand, much critique has been levelled against coverage of the African continent, South Africa included, and the South African ANC-led government has at times lashed out at the news media, local as well as foreign, accusing them of political bias and racism in their coverage. The news media fraternity, on the other hand, have often labelled this coverage as fair and as a true reflection of the current state of society and political affairs (Rodny-Gumede, 2015).

Studies have established that there is an overwhelming emphasis on war and conflict in the news media (Bratic and Schirch, 2007; Carruthers, 2011; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Lynch and Galtung, 2010; Rodny-Gumede, 2012, 2015) and critique has been levelled against the news media and foreign correspondents, postulating that the news media thrives on a logic that seeks out sensational stories, in particular those that emphasise conflict and 'bad news' (Carruthers, 2011: 5). This is, however, somewhat mitigated by my own academic research conducted on foreign coverage and the work of foreign correspondents that shows that, in general, foreign correspondents covering and working on the African continent express a wish to report on other issues than politics, war, crime, illness and disease (Rodny-Gumede, 2016). Rather than over-emphasise conflict, foreign correspondents understand their role as to report on what is seen and experienced, while staying clear of stereotyped and sensationalist coverage (ibid: 90).

In my own writings and coverage of South Africa, I have had the great advantage of living in South Africa for the last 25 years and of being married to a South African author and journalist. This has given me unique access to a broad swathe of debates and sources over a long period of time, as opposed to coverage sourced either from Swedish correspondents who are

temporarily deployed and/or from international news agencies. When I first came to South Africa in the late 1990s, the South African story was as previously stated still full of hope and energy. I arrived in an era where I thought global leadership was forever going to be shaped by the polo-necked trio of Thabo Mbeki, Tony Blair, and Koffi Annan. But, of course, there was also the Arms Deal corruption story making headlines and allegations of corruptions and rumours of 'deal sweeteners' were circulating around the sale of the Swedish Saab Gripen fighter jets to South Africa in 1999. Of course, the Arms Deal and the corruption allegations surrounding it later resulted in the Seriti Commission of Inquiry (2011–2016) which attracted considerable coverage from Swedish and other foreign media.

The biggest news story to have come out of South Africa in the last 30 years is of course the unbanning of the ANC, the release of Nelson Mandela, and subsequently the first democratic elections in 1994. As this all happened before I came to South Africa, I missed out on these stories. I did, however, cover the death of former President Nelson Mandela. I also covered a story that backdates to the 1980s, namely that of the murder of Swedish Prime minister Olof Palme, a social democrat who embodied Sweden's anti-apartheid stance and the potential of South African involvement. This is a story that resonates hugely with Swedish audiences as the murder remains unresolved; it is, in many ways, a Swedish JFK story. For me, this was my first story for South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*, and the story ran simultaneously in *Aftonbladet* in Sweden. It was also my first investigative news story.

As stated earlier, South Africa has always gotten proportionally more coverage in the Swedish news media than other African countries, and the coverage over the last 30 years has been fairly diverse. This said, there are a few stories that have dominated.

The media image of South Africa in Sweden

With the caveat that this is in no ways an academic article, the following is based on a very limited desktop analysis scanning the online archives of four major Swedish newspapers: the liberal left-of-centre *Dagens Nyheter* (DN); the more conservative newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD); two tabloids, *Aftonbladet*,

with a social democratic political leaning; and the independent liberal *Expressen*. In addition, the online archives of the Swedish public broadcaster (SVT) and commercial Channel 4's coverage of South Africa, filtered by using just the key word 'South Africa' in the years 1990–2020, generated over 40,000 news stories. These searches were followed up and additional keywords added to the search as patterns and/or themes of stories making the headlines emerged. In the main, though, these are my reflections, and mine alone. Here it is important to note that while the South African news media are thought of as independent and free of any political leanings, the Swedish news media have always been stratified along political lines, with news media outlets openly declaring their political leanings and stance. The editorial pages of the Swedish newspapers directly reflect this.

Overall, the image of South Africa in Swedish media is framed within a context of the history of South Africa and historical relations. The coverage has changed substantially over the years from the heady days of the 1990s, the first democratic elections, and the promise of a new and prosperous democratic South Africa, towards the increasing and ongoing challenges of growing poverty, inequality, and corruption. In later years, stories have also focused on issues related to land reform, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, race relations, and racism. There is still a strong focus on bilateral relations, highlighting historical and cultural ties, cooperation in different areas such as trade, investment, and development, and the potential for increased cooperation in areas such as renewable energy and sustainable development.

To a lesser extent, the Swedish media covers culture (including literature, art, and music), tourism, and wildlife. A prominent story in the last 15 years is the story of wildlife conservation and the threat posed by poaching, with a clear focus on the plight of rhinos and their diminishing numbers. Most of these stories have a positive angle in the sense that they are focused on projects of conservation and the efforts put in place in the fight against poaching and the trade in rhino horns.

What follows is an outline of some of the most notable stories over the last 30 years. By far the most prominent story is Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990 and the subsequent end of apartheid.

This was a major story covered by most foreign media representing a major turning point in South Africa's history. The late Nelson Mandela, of course, has also become an international icon and symbol of hope, equality and justice, all aspect reflected in the coverage. There have also been some interesting shifts in this story from a focus on the armed struggle, support for, and/or condemnation of the Swedish support to the African National Congress (ANC) and the armed struggle, to the focus on Mandela the global icon of peace and reconciliation. Out of the 40,000 stories, the search for 'South Africa' with the added keyword of 'Nelson Mandela' generated over 15,000 stories. In 2013, when Nelson Mandela passed away, he was the sixth most-searched-for 'topic' on Google in Sweden. This is an indication of Nelson Mandela's status as a South African icon, and there is a sense that the man is, in some ways, more known than the country itself. This also come through in coverage where stories of South Africa often include a reference to Nelson Mandela.

In terms of coverage of South African politicians, the coverage of the rise and fall of Jacob Zuma (President of South Africa from 2009 to 2018) has been less than positive. Zuma's tenure was marked by several controversies, including corruption scandals and economic mismanagement. His rise and fall as President were widely covered by foreign media, and his presidency had a significant impact on South Africa's reputation and international relations. The Swedish media has in the main focused on the corruption charges and supposed lack of accountability and failure to prosecute. Equalling the coverage of corruption in the case of Jacob Zuma is the coverage of the Zuma rape trial in 2006 in which he was later acquitted. Some of these stories have also focused on clampdowns on media freedom and Jacob Zuma's criticism of the news media in the wake of the rape allegation as well as of corruption.

The issue of land reform, and in particular the expropriation of land without compensation, has been a major topic of discussion in South Africa in recent years and has been widely covered by foreign media, including the Swedish media. It is a topic that comes up particularly in relation to Zimbabwe and analogies are often made of South Africa as 'going the same way as Zimbabwe', with farm invasions and forced land appropriation without compensation to

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farmers and landowners. However, history plays a big role here and while land reform in the British media for example is enmeshed in the colonial project of Britain, in the Swedish media coverage has instead tended to explanations citing historical injustices and economic exclusion based on race as the basis for the calls for land reforms. When analogies between South Africa and Zimbabwe were made in Swedish media, arguing that white farmers were being targeted in South Africa, the Swedish Public Broadcaster's Africa and South Africa correspondent Johan Ripas quickly refuted this, stating that instead we should be concerned by the treatment of unregulated, low-salaried black farm workers (Global Portalen, 2018).

Issues related to economic reform and the inequities of the past also surfaced in the coverage of the Marikana massacre. The Marikana massacre, i.e. the shooting and killing of 34 miners (with a subsequent death toll of approximately 44 people and many more injured) at the Lonmin mining company's Marikana mine in South Africa on August 16 2012 has gone down in history as the worst act of violence displayed by the South African Police Force (SAPS) in the post-apartheid era. The Marikana massacre is seen as a major setback for South Africa's image as a democratic and human rights-respecting nation. While the Marikana massacre, when covered in South African media, generated different narratives around what actually happened on the day, why it happened, and who was to blame, particularly in the first week

following the massacre (Rodny-Gumede, 2015b), Swedish media was very quick to label what happened a 'massacre' and did not shy away from highlighting the shootings by the police and putting the blame on structural injustices in the mining industry.

Another story that has made headlines in later years is the rise in xenophobia. In 2008 and 2015 there were widespread xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals living in South Africa. This was covered widely by foreign media and was seen as a major setback for South Africa's image as a welcoming and inclusive nation. As with many other stories, headlines are made but then the story dies down. However, the idea of South Africa having gone from being the beacon of hope and the champion for racial integration and a global leader in promoting non-racialism has been severely dented. The explanations offered for the rise in xenophobia are in the main financial instability and increased poverty gaps, and several stories have been filed from 2008–2019 on the topic.

In the lead up to the soccer World Cup hosted in South Africa in 2010, these stories reflected a changing attitude towards South Africa and a post-apartheid democracy project in jeopardy. More recently, and as to be expected, coverage of South Africa decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic and in particular during the many months of hard lockdown that the country experienced. However, when South African scientists first revealed the discovery of the new Omicron variant this made headlines around the world and many countries, including Britain and the U.S., banned travellers from southern Africa. When the South African government protested citing discrimination and racism, this was not immediately covered by the foreign media. The Swedish media coverage, however, quickly picked up on the story. The travel bans and their consequences were covered with an emphasis on the unfairness and inequality of the restrictions imposed, as well as fears of future reluctance to report on new variants for fear of similar reactions.

What does this mean for relations between South Africa and Sweden?

Globally, Mandela has achieved a saint-like status, and it is important to note that, in the fight against apartheid, deliberate choices were made by the ANC

in exile to build up the name and myth of Nelson Mandela, the individual. These efforts, together with subsequent work to build Mandela up as an icon, around whom the post-apartheid nation of South Africa could rally, ensure that what people say of Mandela is difficult to separate from the myths about him (Chasi and Rodny-Gumede, 2017: 345). The idea of pushing for favourable coverage is of course part of nation branding as well and the Mandela brand is still closely linked to the South African nation brand.

In addition, the lines are increasingly being blurred between journalism and public relations (Koch, Viererbl and Schulz-Knappe, 2021). To counter bad publicity and to promote a positive image of South Africa in the international media, organisations such as Brand South Africa, South African Tourism, and Investment South Africa push for more favourable coverage. Media coverage have a significant impact on the country's politics, foreign policy, diplomatic relations, and importantly self-image. I came to South Africa during a time when there was still a strong sense of optimism among South Africans about the country's trajectory. Equally, there was a strong interest in the Swedish media for the South African story, a positive story in the main. Sadly, this has changed. The South African story today is one marked by the country's ascendance to topping the list of the highest gap between rich and poor in the world, lack of faith in governance, and the multiplying impact of global environmental and energy challenges, among many other challenges. This is impacting the global image of South Africa negatively. There is therefore an increasing pressure for South African institutions to find positive stories to promote in and through the international media, while at the same time these stories are becoming increasingly difficult to find. Pressures are also put on foreign journalists who, at times, have been heavily criticised by officials within the South African government and other public figures in South Africa for reinforcing a negative image of South Africa abroad. While studies have shown that news media and foreign coverage in particular often put the emphasis on conflict and sensationalism and that bad news 'sells' newspapers, being a journalist is not pushing the good story, and for foreign correspondents, the role of journalism is simply to try to convey and interpret a different national reality and context to audiences back home (see Rodny-Gumede, 2016). One explanation for a more balanced

and less sensationalist coverage of South Africa in the Swedish news media might also be attributed to the fact that there are so few Swedish correspondents permanently posted in South Africa and/or southern Africa, which means less competition.

This said, questions have been raised around the media image of South Africa in Swedish media. South Africa was the theme for the annual Swedish book fair in Gothenburg in 2020 and Petterson (2020) writes that the book fair left her with an overwhelming sense that Swedish coverage of South Africa needs to become more nuanced and reflect the challenges facing the country better. She says that we need to move away from casing issues in nostalgia and what she calls 'the special bond' between the two countries and argues that the image of South Africa in Swedish media is stuck in a sentimentality that contributes to a smug and rancid nostalgia. Solidarity is important, but in celebrating what has been, it should also be possible to openly assess what has gone wrong post-apartheid, she says (Petterson, 2020).

Not working as a journalist anymore, and through being a media academic, I am privileged in the sense that I can take a step back and reflect on the state of journalism and the coverage of both South Africa and Sweden in both countries, without having to make any editorial choices about what to write about or how to cover often very complex issues. This is a privilege, as it would pain me to have to write the contemporary South Africa story, yet Swedish-South African relations are still steeped in a relationship in which hope springs eternal.

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