

Do the media in South Africa offer alternatives to violence in their coverage of protests?¹

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the many social ills affecting the country, South Africa continues to make strides in the creation of a non-racist, non-sexist and non-violent society. The media's role in this endeavour is important. Hence, this research examined whether the media in South Africa offered alternatives to violence in their coverage of the municipal protests recorded between 2009 and 2011. The research revealed that the media's coverage of these protests was narrow and partial. In order for the coverage to be holistic, it is critical that the media go beyond reporting the violence, its causes and its effects to offering alternatives to violence. However, offering alternatives to violence is not the magic tool to prevent or even stop violence – it is a professional activity that highlights the key issues the media could focus on in order fully to inform the audience in the public interest. It is also about socially responsible media.

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¹ This paper is based on Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)'s daily qualitative monitoring of the South African mainstream media coverage of various human rights-related issues and on data collected by Kgalalelo L. Morwe in fulfilment of her Honours Degree in Media Studies and Wellington S. Radu in partial fulfilment of his Master's Degree in Sociology.

INTRODUCTION

This paper was inspired by three considerations. Firstly, it was motivated by the fundamental role the media play in reporting on issues that hold the potential to cause conflict (such as racism, xenophobia, land reform, unemployment, nationalisation of mines, economic emancipation, etc.) as this has a bearing on society's perception of such issues. Secondly, the paper was prompted by the many social ills that characterise South Africa, including high rates of violent crime, rape, gender-based violence, child abuse, drug and human trafficking (often involving violence), mob justice, and police brutality – all of which have a profoundly negative impact not only on the individuals involved but also on South African society at large. Thirdly, the paper was encouraged by the fact that 18 years into democracy, South Africa continues to strive to shake off the shackles of its violent past. The paper therefore asks: Do the media in South Africa offer alternatives to violence in their coverage of protests?

In answering this question, we first describe what we mean by the media, the power it wields in society and its responsibility to offer alternatives to violence. We move on to situate our analysis within cultural studies, critical political economy of the media, theories of news production and peace journalism. We then briefly discuss the qualitative method Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) uses in its ongoing analysis of the South African media's coverage of various issues related to human rights. Specifically, we scrutinise the portrayal of municipal or community protests (hereafter protests) between 2009 and 2011, most of which turned violent and even left some people dead.. After that, we document some of the trends in the media's coverage of protests. We note that the media's coverage of protests tends to be partial, narrow, stereotypical and therefore inaccurate. This is the case because the media often focus on the violent and disruptive nature of the protests, doing so to the detriment of the protesters' cause. Such partial coverage does not allow the audience fully to comprehend the issues at hand. It also does not tell the audience much about why the people were protesting, what led to the violence, what alternatives people had tried, if any, and what alternatives existed for the protesters.

We operate from the assumption that the media seek to adhere to standards of professional journalism, that is, to be balanced, accurate and fair in their reporting (Press Freedom Commission, 2012: 17).² Regarding the coverage of protests, this includes giving attention to all the goals of all the parties involved in conflict (Galtung, 2007: 15). It also includes dealing with all the phases of the protest before, during and after violence (Galtung, 2007: 15). It also includes offering context as well as noting potential alternatives to resolve the conflict. This points to a further assumption we make, namely that violence can undermine the rights contained in South Africa's Constitution.³ This, in turn, is based on the assumption that if the media fail to inform or, in extreme cases, help to encourage violence, they shut down space for debate and limit freedom of

² See also the regulations on broadcast media of the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), which can be accessed from: http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=218750

³ See Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/a108-96.pdf>

expression and thereby limit other basic rights. In the current format, it may not be one story that serves to undermine other rights, but if, over time, a consistent pattern of violence is supported and encouraged, it will undermine other basic rights. Thus, as a means of ensuring, protecting and promoting other rights, including freedom of expression, the media in South Africa have a significant role to play in presenting alternatives to violence.

1. THE MEDIA AND THE POWER IT WIELDS IN SOCIETY

We recognise that the media are much more than newspapers, radio and television. They encompass other interactive forms of communication that use the Internet, including social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and MXit. The media also include mobile phones, leaflets, posters and even messages on pens given out at conferences. Although valid, such an understanding of the media is too broad and therefore relatively meaningless because almost all forms of communication become media. Therefore, in discussing media, this paper explicitly focuses on the media that work to provide some form of news, seeking to give a view(s) of the world and event(s) that take place. There is also a sense in which those that do so seek to have a level of credibility, which is then reinforced by an adherence to professional standards, ethics and codes. Such media can be publicly or privately owned or community- or state-owned. In addition, being widely accessible to the public, such media have a broader influence over audiences and/or act as change agents in society. Although in some instances we use the terms 'journalists' and 'media' interchangeably, for the sake of conceptual clarity we are mindful of the fact that there is a difference between the profession of journalism and the competitive media industry. We are also aware that sometimes the goals and drivers of journalism are in conflict with those of the media industry, those of the latter often being profit driven.

The media play a pivotal role in organising the images and discourses that people use to make sense of the world (Golding & Murdock, 1996: 11). In fact, people obtain knowledge of the world outside their immediate experience largely from the media (Ekström, 2002: 259). For this reason, Hall (1980: 16-29) and Hesmondhalgh (2002: 1-36) contend that the media have the ability to influence people's perceptions and shape their understanding of the world around them. It is thus indisputably true that the media are able to escalate and/or deescalate violence or war – the 1994 Rwandan genocide is a good example. In its verdict on 3 December 2003 on the media's role in the Rwandan genocide, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda found that *Kangura* (a newspaper) had poisoned the minds of its readers against the Tutsis, while *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM)* openly called for their extermination, luring victims to killing fields and broadcasting the names of the targeted people.⁴ Another example closer to home is cited by MacGregor (2004: 91-94). She notes that between 1985 and 1999, political conflict between

⁴ The Tribunal likened the Rwandan situation to the well-known Nuremberg case of Julius Streicher whose publication, *Der Stürmer*, was found to have "injected into the minds of thousands of Germans" a "poison" that caused them to support the National Socialist policy of Jewish persecution and extermination. See International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, Case No ICTR-99-52-T. (2003). The Prosecutor v. Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza and Hassan Ngeze. <http://www.unictr.org/Portals/0/Case/English/Barayagwiza/judgement/Summary-Media.pdf>.

the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC) claimed thousands of lives. However, the media, particularly the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), played a role in ending political violence by drawing up a media-party Code of Conduct and by supporting a civil-society group that was organising a peace agreement between regional leaders.

The impact of the mass media on influencing people's perceptions is also illustrated by Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 2) who argue that "media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists ... develop and crystallise meaning in public discourse" (cited in Scheufele, 1999: 105). Furthermore, Lynch and McGoldrick (2005: 216) offer a more detailed explanation of how media play an active role in the meaning-making processes by hypothesising a notion they call the "feedback loop". The notion describes the process whereby conflict actors assume that journalistic representations will influence public opinion in particular ways, and then adjust their behaviour accordingly to win future coverage that will "redound to their benefit" (Lynch, 2010: 551). Therefore, the nature of news coverage exerts an influence on source behaviour. So, because of its accessibility, effectiveness and potential to intensify and/or abate conflict, the media ought to be as comprehensive as possible in their coverage of critical issues. Put differently, given that the media are accepted as purveyors of 'reality' and have the capacity to influence public opinion, it is essential that their coverage of issues that have a potential to result in violence be holistic and that it should adhere to standards of professional journalism. This can be achieved through:

- Listening and dealing with all sides of the story, not just two sides
- Giving a voice to all parties involved
- Encouraging talking, mediation, community discussions or meetings, letter writing, campaigns, possible legal action, etc.
- Ensuring that facts are not distorted and/or repressed
- Helping reduce suspicion by reporting contested issues and showing how accommodation is possible
- Countering misconceptions among conflicting parties and the public, through accurate and balanced reporting
- De-objectifying protagonists by identifying their interests, the underlying issues and the potential consequences of violence⁵

This brings us to the role of the media in offering alternatives to violence in their coverage of protests.

2. THE MEDIA'S RESPONSIBILITY TO OFFER ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE

[Promoting peace] is the work of a monk ... If you want to resolve conflict and make peace, then join the UN [or something]. I will be outside the gates reporting on your efforts if they

⁵ For a detailed description of the possible activities the media could engage in to present alternatives to violence see Manoff (1998) cited in MacGregor (2004: 88-89).

turn out to be a story (Mark Brayne, The World Service news executive cited in Taussig, 2004: 100).

Peacemaking ... is not the business of a reporter (Loyn, 2007: 2).

The quotations above bear testimony to sentiments harboured by many media practitioners and some academics. Journalists may argue that they report what they see and that the results of such reporting are none of their business. However, the 'I tell it like I see it' proposition depends on who sees what and how (Taussig, 2004: 100). In other words, the pretence of offering news 'as it is' is flawed. Further, as we shall demonstrate in the next section, what is put in the media as a story is very much a matter of choice (Sen, 2004: 78). This means that alternatives to violence are not news because they are not reported, but acts of violence are news because they are reported.

Having said that, the media in South Africa have a responsibility to offer alternatives to violence both at the international and at the national levels. At the international level, South Africa is party to many declarations and conventions that recognise this responsibility. These include:

- Principle IX of the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism, prepared in 1983, which states that "the ethical commitment to the universal values of humanism calls for the journalist to abstain from any justification for, or incitement to, wars of aggression ... and all forms of violence, colonialism ... By so doing, the journalist can help eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding among peoples, make nationals of a country sensitive to the needs and desires of others ..."
- Article 5.3 of the UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice of 1978, which also states that "the mass media and those who control and serve them ... are urged with due regard to the principles embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ... to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among individuals ..."

At the local level, the South African Constitution can be viewed as promoting alternatives to violence in that it is founded on the principles of fundamental human rights that outlaw propaganda for war, incitement to violence, and advocacy for hatred.⁶ In line with the Constitution, the preamble of The South African Press Code, which came into effect in October of 2011, also outlaws propaganda for war, incitement to violence and advocacy for hatred.⁷ Based on these and other international and local codes, it can be argued that the media in South Africa have a clear responsibility to offer alternatives to violence.

⁶ See section 16(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

⁷ See Preamble of The South African Press Code

3. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to contextualise this paper we situate our qualitative analysis of the coverage of protests by the media within cultural studies, critical political economy of the media, theories of news production and peace journalism. Briefly, cultural studies⁸ offers a disciplined means of exposing how communication and representation serve the interests of power and manipulation (Rojek, 2007: 4). However, it does not emphasise the structural factors that influence the production of media content (McChesney, 1998: 4). For this reason, we also draw on critical political economy of the media⁹ to help us consider some of the structural factors that affect the production of stories. Although we do not analyse the political economy of the media in South Africa, critical political economy of the media enables us, in our critique of the media, to recognise and consider some of the structural factors that affect journalists in reporting on protests. In other words, critical political economy of the media enables us to be realistic in terms of our expectations of the media in their coverage of protests.

A compelling aspect of critical political economy of the media is that it shows how financing and organising cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain (Golding & Murdock, 1996: 11). It also offers persuasive positions on the structural factors and the labour processes in the production, distribution and consumption of news (McChesney, 1998: 3-4). Nevertheless, critical political economy of the media is criticised for assuming much about the influences on, and behaviours of editors and journalists who are involved in cultural production – as a result, individual-level actions and cognitions are neglected (see Davies, 2008: 56). In order to mitigate this weakness, we also draw on theories of news production¹⁰ to help us reflect on the practices, cognitive processes and social interactions of professionals involved in covering protests. Theories of news production thus enable us to consider the context within which stories on protests are produced and also to recognise the social relationships and interactions that define journalists' parameters of vision, constrain their autonomy, and shape – sometimes dictate – the form and content of what they write and speak about regarding protests (McNair, 1998: 12).

⁸ For a detailed description of cultural studies, see Davies (2008), Golding & Murdock (1996), Hall (1997), Mattelart & Mattelart (1998), McChesney (1998), Rojek (2007), Saukko (2003), Schudson (1996), Talbot (2007) and Tuchman (1978).

⁹ For a detailed analysis of critical political economy of the media see Bagdikian (2004, cited in Davies, 2008), Christopherson & Storper (1986), Curran (1978), Curran & Seaton (2003), Doyle (2002), Golding & Murdock (1996, 1997), Herman & McChesney (1997), Murray (1989), Peacock (1986), Schiller (1989) and Schudson (1996).

¹⁰ For a detailed explanation of theories of news production see Curran (2000), Davies (2008), Edwards & Cromwell (2007), Fiske (1991), Hawk (1992), McNair (1998), McQuail (1969), Schudson (1996) and Tuchman (1978).

More importantly, we draw on peace journalism¹¹ in arguing for the media to offer alternatives to violence. Peace journalism is a critical realist theory about the reporting of conflict (Lynch, 2006: 74). Lynch and McGoldrick (2005: 5) define it as “creat[ing] opportunities for society to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict”. For Peleg (2007: 1), peace journalism stems from a very clear epistemology that aims at a more balanced and more comprehensive account of conflict. In the words of Galtung (2000: 163), “the task of peace journalism is to make conflict transparent ... by giving voice to all parties involved”. However, peace journalism is criticised both for being prescriptive (see Loyn, 2007) and for not recognising the realities of today’s news-production processes that often prevent journalists from covering conflict in a way that contributes to processes of peace building (Bläsi, 2004: 1; Hanitzsch, 2007: 1). Despite such criticisms, we could argue that peace journalism is by far the most non-partisan means of reporting violent conflict (Sen, 2004: 79). It picks up distinctions that are material to the course of events in conflict and also the likelihood of violent or non-violent responses (Lynch, 2006: 84). It can contribute to making media discourse on conflicts more transparent and balanced and to protecting conflict coverage from the fateful propaganda trap into which traditional conflict reporting continually falls (Kempf, 2007: 1). Thus, peace journalism helps us to argue for the comprehensive coverage of conflict.

Drawing on cultural studies, critical political economy of the media, theories of news production and peace journalism we are able to examine the media’s coverage of protests while considering the structural factors (both internal and external) that influence the media’s production of news and the actual content they produce about the protests. We are also able to critique the media’s coverage of protests and present practical ways to cover conflict comprehensively. Analyses that are based on the theories described above posit that the media do not simply mirror or reflect reality (see Edwards & Cromwell, 2006; Fiske, 1991; Hawk, 1992; McNair, 1998; McQuail, 1969; Schudson, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). Instead, through the use of words and images, the media re-present, in particular ways, the people, places, events, ideas and institutions that constitute the world (Gasher et al., 2007: 558). Further, media content is produced or constructed through a series of complex choices about precisely whether and how to depict a given issue, in this case, protests (Gasher et al., 2007: 558). In other words, media practitioners decide what to include, what to exclude, what to emphasise and what to minimise in their coverage of protests (Karpf, 1988: 2). This means that the coverage of protests is the product of decisions by editors and reporters about which aspects of those stories should be highlighted.

4. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In our qualitative monitoring of the coverage of protests, we analysed news stories that specifically focused on protests from various print and broadcast media over a two-year period. The sample

¹¹ Peace journalism was devised by Johan Galtung and developed by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, and others. For a detailed description of the merits and demerits of peace journalism see Bläsi (2004), Fjortoft (2004), Galtung (2000), Hackett (2006), Hanitzsch (2007), Kempf (2007), Loyn (2007), Lynch (2006), Lynch (2007), Lynch & McGoldrick (2005), MacGregor (2004), Peleg (2007), Sen (2004) and Taussig (2004).

that was analysed consisted of media coverage of 'service-delivery protests'¹² in all the issues of *Mail & Guardian*, *Business Day*, *Sunday Times* and *The Star* newspapers and SABC 1, 2, and 3 news bulletins published/broadcast between 2009 and 2011.¹³ The selection of both print and broadcast (in particular television) for analysis was based on their accessibility and their potential, ideally, to provide detailed coverage of protests.¹⁴ The SABC was chosen primarily because it is the country's biggest broadcaster with a public remit to provide viewers and listeners with content that not only reflects the diverse nature of South African society, but which will also help South Africans learn and react to the world and the issues around them. The overall corpus was scrutinised for recurring themes used over time both to refer to and describe the protests. The main recurring themes identified from the thematic analysis were then used in interpreting the findings. To help the reader understand the particular theme, a few citations from the original text are mentioned .

A sample of the data retrieved from the media in question was used to conduct a detailed analysis informed by discourse analysis. In general, *discourse analysis* is the name given to a variety of different approaches to the study of texts that have emerged from different theoretical traditions and diverse disciplines (Gill, 2000: 172; Hepburn & Potter, 2004: 180-181). What the different perspectives of discourse analysis have in common is a rejection of the notion that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world and a belief in the importance of discourse in constructing social life (see Fairclough, 1989: 41; Fairclough, 2009: 164; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997: 258; Gill, 2000: 172; Halliday, 1985: 101; Stubbs, 1983: 12; Van Dijk, 1997b: 2; Van Dijk, 2009: 67; Van Leeuwen, 2009: 148; Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 6).

The term *discourse* refers to all forms of talk and texts, be they naturally occurring conversations, interview material or written texts of any kind (Gill, 2000: 174; Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 7). Therefore, discourse analysis is interested in the content, organisation and function of texts. That is to say, discourse analysis deals with talk or text in context (Renkema, 1993: 1; Van Leeuwen, 2009: 144). Discourse analysis is essential for describing, interpreting, analysing, and critiquing

¹² According to Botes (2007), 'service-delivery protests' are a combination of various reasons and factors that contribute to protests. On the surface level, service-delivery protests are about civic action against deficient delivery of basic services including electricity, water, transport, housing and so forth. However, 'service-delivery protests' have come to mean more and highlight intrinsic issues not made explicit in the media; among them, issues of poor governance, individual political struggles, poor communication, lack of transparency, nepotism, ineffective management, corruption, poor housing administration and management, and inadequacy of existing services.

¹³ The period, 2009-2011, witnessed the highest number of 'service-delivery protests' since 2004. According to the Municipal IQ press statement entitled '*2011 – A quieter year thanks to election engagement*' released on 16 February 2012, 105 protests were recorded in 2009, 111 in 2010 and 81 in 2011 compared with 10 in 2004, 34 in 2005, 2 in 2006, 32 in 2007 and 27 in 2008. See http://www.municipaliq.co.za/index.php?site_page=press.php

¹⁴ Curran et al. (2009: 13) argue that even in the Internet age, people still rely on 'traditional' media (including print and broadcast) for news. This also aided our choice of the media we analysed.

the social life reflected in text (Luke, 1997). It is concerned with studying and analysing written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias, and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific social, economic, political and historical contexts (Van Dijk, 1988).

The particular variety of discourse analysis we employed to reveal and problematise relations of dominance as they manifest themselves in texts and contexts is termed *critical discourse analysis* as it is characterised by Van Dijk. Thus, the application of critical discourse analysis in our research allowed for the comprehension of the gist of words and an understanding of what they symbolised, implied and represented. It allowed us to understand how the media constructed and represented the actors involved in the protests. Put differently: discourse analysis allowed us to reveal who was represented and who not, how the message was constructed and made to mean and, more importantly, whose representations were reflected in the coverage of the protests.

As with any other method, critical discourse analysis has its limitations. One of the limitations is that, given the polysemic nature of texts, the issue of reliability in discourse analysis raises concerns as to whether different researchers or audiences would interpret the text in similar ways. According to Stratton (1997: 116),¹⁵ “there is no guarantee that such reliability is possible, bearing in mind that researchers are likely to differ in their motivational factors, expectations, familiarity, and avoidance of discomfort”. Therefore, it has to be accepted that our analysis is subjective and thus leaves room for many possible interpretations. However, as Gill (2000: 188) contends, this in no way undermines the discourse analytic case. It merely serves to highlight the inescapable fact of language being constructed and constructive.¹⁶

5. TRENDS IN THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF PROTESTS

Duncan (2010) succinctly describes the media’s coverage of protests as follows:

But all too often, media coverage does not help us to understand the complex forces that gave rise to such protests. Coverage tends to be episodic, focusing on the moment of protest, which does not explain why a community got to the point where they felt that the only way of communicating their message was to barricade roads, stone the mayor’s house or torch a library. Episodic coverage does not explain why these protests turned violent, while others didn’t, and whether the violence could be attributed simply to a criminal element in the crowd, as official spokespeople often allege.

Duncan’s description resonates with what we found in our analysis. We found that when protests are covered in the South African media there is almost always some kind of demonisation if not

¹⁵ Cited in Fulcher (n.d.)

¹⁶ Apart from that, it is always useful to employ various methods including interviews and focus-group discussions with both producers (that is, media owners, editors, subeditors and the actual journalists who cover protests) and consumers (that is, audiences) of news. However, these often require financial resources that are not always available. Hence, we relied on discourse analysis.

dehumanisation of the protesters. *Demonisation* refers to the projection of a person or idea as the 'enemy' through suggestion or false accusations and *dehumanisation* involves "the process of negatively labelling a person or group of people so that they are perceived more as objects than real people" (Berlet & Lyons 2000: 7). Demonisation and dehumanisation are often associated with the belief that a particular group of people is inferior or constitutes a threat. This is often done through exaggerating the potential threat of a protest group, thereby inciting enmity towards the group (De Hoyos & Morris 2004: 281). In the media's coverage, protesters are often labelled as 'angry', 'frustrated', 'violent', and 'rioters' without being individuated or without any other humanising criteria being used, and protests are framed as 'mayhem.' According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *riot* refers to "a violent disturbance of peace by a crowd". Therefore, riots denote wild and often uncontrolled acts of violence. Put bluntly, rioting is a criminal offence. Notwithstanding the existence of the possibilities that some protesters' conduct may be violent, such coverage can ultimately have a bearing on how protests and the protesters are perceived. This kind of coverage can create the impression that all protests are inherently violent and consequently unpardonable. Pithouse (2010) contends that the customary portrayal of protesters as 'criminals' has an ideological implication imbedded in it. It serves to perpetuate an attempt to demystify and embarrass the poor and their political actions. Moreover, it portrays them to the general public as being not only irrational but also fearsome and terrifying. As a result, the occurrence of assembled poor people in a peaceful demonstration could be perceived by the public as threatening.

Headlines such as "Protesters vent frustration at government" (*M&G* online, 23 July 2009) and "Government refuses talks with angry residents" (*Star* online, 6 July 2009) emphasise possible negative reactions by protesters. 'Anger' and 'frustration' are overly negative words to use in portraying protesters. By using such vocabulary, protesters are portrayed as not knowing how to express their demands, not in control of their emotions and overreacting. The protesters are therefore made out to be irrational in their behaviour. This type of coverage often downplays the actual efficiency of a protest. It is also a highly ideological process in which targeted individuals or groups are placed outside the circle of wholesome mainstream society through political propaganda and prejudice. Other headlines such as "Marchers may smash your windows" (*Star* online, 13 October 2009) and "Let's burn him, he is a police officer" (*Star* online, 28 January 2010) alert the readers to the danger the protesters can cause and also evoke shock and fear in the readers. The use of headlines of this nature arguably portrays protesters as both violent and a threat not only to society but to police officers who are meant to protect them. The newspaper's use of a potentially violent action like burning a police officer who is tasked with safeguarding the interests of society can ultimately turn society against the protesters, thereby increasing the potential for further violence. Thus, the media create a sense that protests are carried out by a group of violent and absurd outlaws with the intent of wreaking havoc, yet people do not just wake up one morning and decide to go on a rampage; there are reasons (often valid) why people engage in protest action. Further, Section 17 of the highest law in the land, that is, the South African Constitution,¹⁷ states that "everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions".

¹⁷ See Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/a108-96.pdf>

Linked to the demonisation and dehumanisation of protesters is another trend characteristic of the media's coverage of protests, that of destruction. Precedence is given to the damage caused by the protesters and not to the message behind the protests. The *Business Day* for example, will run a story focusing on how much the protest or protest damage costs the economy. Often the reports focus on the number of 'vehicles damaged', the 'windows shattered' or the 'houses torched'. One good example is the protest that occurred in Soweto in October of 2009 during which a councillor's house was torched. The majority of the media focused on the torching of the house, especially given that there were children inside the house when it was torched. Ideally, this incident should not have been left unreported. However, attention should also have been paid to the processes that led to the torching of the house. Another example that relates to the focus on damage is that during the run-up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, almost all protests that occurred during that time were linked to the event. The protests were reported against the backdrop that they would jeopardise the progress made in preparation for the event and that they would dent South Africa's image in the international arena. This discourse of linking the protests to the World Cup, could be argued, reduced the protest action to an 'insignificant event', yet in the eyes of the protesters the reason could have been a matter of life and death.

The media's focus on damage caused by the protesters is well documented (see McLeod & Detenber, 1999). While there is value in focusing on the damage caused by the protesters, overly focusing on damage can distort the messages of the protesters. For example, in the instance where a councillor's house was torched, the councillor's recall of events that took place that day was given prominence over the protesters' grievances. The tendency in media coverage of protests of paying attention to events rather than to the core issues fundamental to such events is therefore problematic in that it discredits the messages of the protests by relegating them to the backburner. However, if we go with the assertion that "if it bleeds, it leads", then we may understand why journalists choose to focus on the damage caused by the protesters. Certainly, destruction and damage become news because they are out of the ordinary and they shock and evoke the audience's emotions. However, it is also the media's duty to be responsible watchdogs; hence, their coverage ought to be fair in that they report on all sides of the story by also including the protesters' grievances apart from reporting from the damage the protesters have caused.

Another trend in the media coverage of protests is that almost all protests are labelled as 'service delivery-related'. The media often use headlines like "Service-delivery protests erupt" or "... residents gather for services protest". However, close readings of the stories reveal no evidence as to which services are the subject of the protest. The reader is left to fill in the blanks of whether the protests were at all about delivery of water, electricity, housing or all of the above, or if indeed, the protests were about service delivery. As in the case of the protest in which Andries Tatane was killed by police, we are told that the protesters were "demanding action from a municipality that ... failed to deliver."¹⁸ However, we are not told what kind of 'delivery' the municipality had failed to provide. Often, the media do answer the basic questions of who, what, where, when, how, but not

¹⁸ See SABC1, 2, and 3 prime-time news bulletins on 13 April 2011

the 'why', and the context is also not provided in such stories. The reasoning behind the omission of the *why* could be attributed to news framing, which is a common technique used in journalistic practice, or rather, news production (see Gitlin 1980: 7). In other words, the media use the conflict frame that emphasises conflict and disagreement among individuals or groups as a means of capturing audience interest.¹⁹ It is rare to find headlines that are clearly specific about what the protests were about, like "Cape protests 'about leadership'" (*The Star*, 7 July 2009).

Labelling the majority of the protests as 'service delivery-related' is problematic because 'service delivery' is a very vague concept in that the task of finding out what exactly are services is very complex. It serves as shorthand for a far more complicated set of issues. According to the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (1995: 55), *service* can mean two things. First, services can be those that are paid for. Secondly, it can be those that are not paid for but are funded by rates.²⁰ This distinction testifies to the ideologically loaded nature of the concept of 'service delivery' and the problematic usage of 'service-delivery protests' as a catch-all phrase. The use of catch-all phrases obscures the root causes of the protests and hence the lack of understanding and perhaps an ill-informed understanding of the protests. The phrase 'service-delivery protests', like most labels, often camouflages more than elucidates the root causes of protests.

Apart from labelling almost all protests as 'service delivery-related', the media have a tendency to juxtapose protesters and the police (see SABC 1, 2 and 3's prime-time news coverage of the protests in Ficksburg, Free State on 13 April 2011). In the SABC news video clips, the late Andries Tatane (one of the protesters), is seen in a sudden scuffle with a dozen police officers – as if he just broke out from the group of protesters and started beating up the police. Even where such portrayal is justified by the focus on police brutality, as happened in this instance, it still serves to set protesters up against the police. Protests are thus constructed as a conflict between the two actors, that is, the protesters and the police. In other words, the media seek to create binary opposites; that of protest action versus police reaction. This is in line with Lynch and McGoldrick's (2005: 218) assertion that if the media "report incidents of political violence without context ... they are likely to incentivise a 'crackdown', because someone, somewhere, will assume the public have received, from such reports, an idea that this will form a fitting and effective response". In other words, excluding or downplaying the issue content of protests that bring protesters into confrontation with police may enter "feedback loops" of journalism-source relations, and lead to more violence.

Moreover, protesters are frequently portrayed as lawbreakers or outlaws disturbing the peace, while the police are seen as law enforcers. This is evidenced by statements such as "the police

¹⁹ For a detailed description of various media frames, see Semetko & Valkenburg (2000: 95) and An & Gower (2009: 108).

²⁰ Rates are public contributions used by local government to pay for services, which include "community facilities such as libraries and community halls, roads and pavements, traffic police and fire protection" (see Institute for Democracy 1995: 55).

fired rubber bullets to disperse the rowdy protesters or to restore calm” or “the police arrested 50 protesters for public violence”. Attributing the restoring of peace and calm to the firing of rubber bullets by the police symbolises the police as the restorers of peace and the protesters as ‘criminals’ who are in the wrong. More so, focusing on the arrest of the protesters justifies the arrests and the wounding of the protesters with rubber bullets. This discourse privileges the police and also reinforces the often hostile police reaction (aka police brutality) to protesters.

This portrayal is strengthened by the common practice that when covering protests, reporters often stand behind a line of police officers. This is clear in the SABC news video clips of the protest that left Andries Tatane dead.²¹ The footage reveals that it was taken from behind a line of riot police. While it would be even more dangerous for a reporter to stand between the protesters and the police, especially if the protest turns violent, by standing behind a line of police officers, the reporter risks seeing and representing the protest through the eyes of the police and officials only. This is precisely what happened in the case in point. In the SABC 3 news clip in particular, the only two sources accessed are the Setsoto mayor, Mbothoma Madona, and the Free State premier, Ace Magashule. The former is accessed saying the municipality is on course to address the problems and the latter is accessed saying the provincial government is already sending condolences to the affected family. Nowhere in the clip does the viewer get to hear the side of the protesters from a protester. The challenge therefore, is for the reporter to be aware that the protesters could be seeing the protest from a very different perspective and that that perspective has to be represented in the coverage.

Just as the SABC relied on official sources in covering the protest in the Free State, the media generally tend to use and rely on the police, local and national government officials and analysts as sources of information about protests. Relying on official sources only may support the status quo as it might allow the sources to define the perspective of the story. Media scholars have observed that official sources are considered to have greater expertise and to have access to more accurate or more specialised information on particular topics than does the majority of the population (see McNair, 1998; Nunn, 1995). However, the problem is that the words of official sources are taken as self-evident truths and the words of non-official sources are often dismissed as being irrelevant, inappropriate or without substance (van Dijk, 2000). Scholars like McLeod and Hertog (1999) explain that many instances are attributable to the unquestioning trust bestowed on official sources. They mention the credibility and impartiality that give weight to the story and the reputation and stature often associated with official sources as some of the reasons. However, the use of officials, police and other authorities as sources rather than members of the targeted communities serves to marginalise such communities (Henry & Tator, 2002: 76). In light of the media’s portrayal of protests as shown above, it is our view that, in order for the coverage to be holistic, it is critical that the media offer alternatives to violence.

²¹ See SABC1, 2, and 3 prime-time news bulletins on 13 April 2011

6. OFFERING ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE

Presenting alternatives to violence could be perceived as a sliding scale – from full-blown advocacy of non-violent solutions to professional journalistic/media practice. In other words, offering alternatives to violence could be seen as a continuum with clear editorial positions on alternatives to violence and coverage of peace initiatives at the one end, and merely condemning or questioning violence at the other. In referring to the sliding scale, we seek to draw a distinction between peace projects, that have as their core goal the attainment of peace and also their own complexities and nuances, with offering alternatives to violence. While peace-oriented projects have peace as their core goal, for the media, the minimum is to achieve professional ethical standards of reporting, a core component of which is offering diversity of views and opinions. When it comes to conflict reporting, the maximum objective of the media is to offer and explore alternatives to violence. In other words, realising professional ethical standards is the ideal role the media could play, and, offering alternatives to violence is the best the media could do for the following interrelated reasons:

- Alternatives to violence entrench, allow and encourage a culture of human rights.
- Human rights, in turn, deepen democracy.
- Violence undermines freedom of expression. It also undermines the right to impart and receive information.

This means that if the media fail to take a position on the alternatives-to-violence sliding scale as outlined above – they may very well undermine the very right that enables them to report on the violence in the first instance. Put differently: for the media to build credibility and for them to serve to inform and adhere to professional standards, it is imperative that they offer and possibly promote alternatives to violence. This begs the question as to which media should offer alternatives to violence – only the public media? Our response is that all media carry the responsibility to offer alternatives, but some carry more responsibility than others because of the public mandate to do so, for example the SABC.

However, offering alternatives to violence is not without challenges. It could be seen as either partisan, propagandist or biased (see Loyn, 2007). However, we submit that it means giving equitable coverage to efforts that are related to non-violence (Sen, 2004: 79). It is about socially responsible media (MacGregor, 2004: 87). It goes beyond reporting the violence, its causes and its effects, to reporting efforts that seek to prevent or end the violence (however small those efforts may be), and reporting the context and also or possibly any other available alternatives (Sen, 2004: 79).

An additional challenge is that alternatives to violence are often not regarded to be newsworthy. However, if offering alternatives to violence is an aspect of good-quality journalism, which it indeed is, then it may sell contrary to traditional belief. As Galtung (2007: 16) contends, “good journalism will attract many and good readers, for instance many more women – even if some over-macho men are lost”. Nevertheless, in the South African context, we have witnessed the

rapid growth of tabloid media, where not even the basics, like truth-telling can be relied upon let alone good quality reporting. The challenge for these is to offer alternatives to violence in similar tabloid forms, that is, simple, graphic, entertaining and grounded reporting.

Also, offering alternatives to violence can be seen as an expensive exercise in that one has to be at the place for a long time and also take time to be well informed on the conflict. This is especially important given the global economic recession and the volatile financial environment we are currently experiencing. Further, Nel's (2003)²² research on newsroom constraints revealed that South African journalists are generally demoralised, poorly paid and get hands-on training in under-resourced newsrooms. In this context, journalists may face enormous logistical difficulties in simply getting to places and filing stories. Then to add additional work²³ so as to present alternatives to violence may be asking too much.

The other challenge is that some issues are structurally imbalanced from the beginning (for example the land issue in South Africa in which you have the occupier and the occupied). How does one balance such an issue in one's reporting? In such cases, we think the imbalance should be reflected in the coverage but the reporting should suggest ways of resolving the issue.

Another challenge is that of a constrained environment in terms of movement or of limits to freedom of expression (for instance the *Sunday Times* journalist and cameraman who were detained for about eight hours by Mandla Mandela for trespassing while they were covering a story on land grabs in the Eastern Cape Province). Another example is the tapping of Mzilikazi wa Afrika's phone records by the state intelligence services. Further, in the context of threats to media freedom, for instance through potential state regulation, offering alternatives to violence could be seen as another externally set, objective-driven norm to stop journalists from telling the real stories of violence and conflict. However, offering alternatives to violence does not mean that the media should stop reporting on violence and conflict, but rather that the media's coverage of these issues be more balanced and comprehensive.

In spite of these challenges, the media in South Africa have the potential comprehensively to cover critical issues in a way that encourages alternatives to violence. This is because, firstly, relative to other African countries, South Africa has a strong communications infrastructure and a relatively free media. Secondly, some media sometimes have solution-seeking analyses in their editorials and in their supplements, which often tackle issues such as racism, xenophobia, land reform, unemployment, nationalisation of mines and economic emancipation in a nuanced way, although these are often sponsored. Thirdly, some media have proactively worked towards mediation and non-violence, for example SABC played a role in ending political violence between

²² Cited in MacGregor (2004: 90)

²³ Additional work because it is something they are not accustomed to. Journalists oftentimes report on events and do not necessarily offer remedies to abate violence.

the IFP and ANC in the 1980s and 1990s. Further, during the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) process, the media in South Africa played a considerable role in consolidating peace once apartheid had ended. Wall-to-wall coverage of TRC news, issues and hearings was brought into the homes of anybody who cared to listen or read the long and appalling story of apartheid's abuses (MacGregor, 2004: 94). This shows that the media in South Africa have the capacity to offer alternatives to violence in their coverage of issues that have the potential to cause or result in conflict.

7. CONCLUSION

The role of the media in offering alternatives to violence is based on the premise that the media wield power in society. This article has shown that the media's coverage of protests demonises and dehumanises protesters, focuses on the damage caused by the protesters, labels almost all protests as 'service delivery-related', and relies on officials as sources of information about protests. Such coverage is partial and narrow because it camouflages more than it elucidates the root causes of the protests and is devoid of context. In order for the media's coverage to be complete, we argue for the media to offer alternatives to violence. We may not agree on the role of the media in offering alternatives to violence but we may agree that one of the fundamental traits of a democratic society is non-violence. So, if we are to build a democratic South Africa then there is need for the media, among other cultural institutions, to offer alternatives to violence or at least to report on them. However, offering alternatives to violence is not the magic tool to prevent or even stop violence – it is a professional activity that highlights the key issues on which the media could focus in order fully to inform the audience. It means giving equitable coverage to efforts that are related to non-violence – it is about socially responsible media. It goes beyond reporting the violence, its causes and its effects, to reporting efforts that seek to prevent or end the violence (however small such efforts may be), and reporting the context, as well as, or possibly any other available alternatives.

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