

# MEDIA AND VIOLENCE: PUTTING AUDIENCES BACK INTO THE PICTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Based on extensive survey research work, this paper sets out to explore some comparative issues on the impact of the media on attitudes towards political violence in the Natal Midlands. Central to the discussion is an attempt to apply and develop contemporary theories of the role of space, community and domestic arrangements as a basis for exploring the differential influence/impact of media representations of political violence.

While an empirical approach, on its own, has many limitations in explaining how media representations shape attitudes, this paper sets out to show that the media "consumption" of Whites and Indians<sup>1</sup> poses a number of important questions for researchers of media effects.

## INTRODUCTION

The question of what happens to a mass media message/text, once it has been formulated and transmitted, remains one of the thorniest issues for media and cultural studies. Studies of the audience, once so polarised into paradigms (see Bennett, 1982) has become much more fluid through the 1980's and 1990's. This fluidity has encompassed both the methodological and conceptual spheres of media studies, and owes much to the impact of David Morley's work *The "Nation-wide" Audience* (1980). Unfortunately,



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this research trajectory which is now close to dominant in the USA and UK, has not made media studies – and effects research on audiences – much easier. The gradual sophistication of the old "uses and gratifications" approach, which has led to the subtle mix of empirical and ethnographic techniques currently in use, has as its engine the re-evaluation of the relationship between individual and message/text.

There is now a substantial literature to support the view that neither the text dominated research tradition of content analysis and semiotics, nor the institutional/organisational tradition are adequate vehicles, methodologically and conceptually, for the study of the

1 The usage of the term 'White' and 'Indian' in no way endorses the South African state's conception of these categories as immutable. These terms are however unavoidable in the context of the research upon which this article is based.

audience. (See Lull: 1990), Morley: 1989). For example,

Stuart Hall, writing about the potential of semiotics suggested that

"a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research, of a quite new kind, may be opening up" (Hall, 1980: 131). In large part however, semiotics has remained part of an institutional analysis of the media – analysing the messages sent by somebody (usually the ideological apparatus of the capitalist class) rather than an analysis of the way in which codes (and therefore meanings) were simultaneously created and interpreted in a social context. This two way process, implicit in semiotics, has been harnessed, in the main, to the critique of ideological production. Consequently, the study of the text has become something of a fetish in some quarters – and the poor "reader" – the other half of the original two way process, has tended to be ignored. There have been numerous examples where criticising the message has been enough, and the real "effect" or impact of the message itself on the audience or reader, assumed! (cf Lewis 1991; Keene-Young 1992).

The implication of this has been the viewing of the audience as undifferentiated – or on occasions stereotyped for a political purpose. This may be acceptable as political tactics (discredit the enemy through a fanciful show of collective horror etc.) but should not, ultimately, establish the limits of studies of the role and impact of the media in society. So too have institutional analyses been taken to extremes, particularly in South Africa, where the structures of management of public broadcasting are seen as explanatory causes of certain (unspecified) reactions among the public (black or white, as the political wind blows) (e.g. Slovo 1992). In this paper I wish to

draw to the attention of semioticians, content analysts, organisational and institutional analysts, to the existence of empirical information which must be considered when textual analysis/semiotic analysis is undertaken, and then offer some tentative ideas about how one might interpret it.

While this paper makes no claims to have uncovered profound considerations when undertaking analysis of the audience, it does point the way towards the necessity of integrating methods and approaches which will ultimately give us a deeper understanding of South African media audiences than we have at the moment.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The surveys, from which the following data was generated, were designed to elicit attitudinal and descriptive information on a wide range of issues. One section of the questionnaire was devoted to establishing where members of the White and Indian communities, in Pietermaritzburg, get their information about political violence; and whether or not these sources influenced their views about the violence.

The initial findings, based on a "drop off – pick up" survey of 400 randomly selected households falling within the boundaries of the then White Group Area (randomising respondents over 18 years of age in each household), conducted in September 1990 with a 60% return rate, were reported in Burton & Wittenberg (1991).

These findings include:

- 44% of White respondents cited the mass media (newspapers, television and radio) as their main source of information about violence in Pietermaritzburg.
- 33% of White respondents cited contacts<sup>1</sup> with fellow hu-

1 Contact refers to information from domestic workers, work colleagues and others at work, friends, family; or have themselves witnessed violence.

man beings as their main source of information about violence in Pietermaritzburg.

- 10% of White respondents cited both contacts and media as their main sources of information about violence in Pietermaritzburg.
- 13% of White respondents declined to specify.
- Newspapers were cited as the main source of information twice as often as television.

A second survey was then undertaken of 476 randomly selected households (with a randomisation again of persons over the age of 18 years in each household) within the old Indian Group Area boundaries in June 1991 within which the vast majority of Indian people continue to reside. We had a 95% response rate because field-workers remained with respondents while the questionnaire was completed. We found among other things:

- 72% of Indian respondents cited the mass media (newspaper, TV and radio) as their main source of information about violence in Pietermaritzburg.
- 15% of Indian respondents cited contacts as their main source of information about violence in Pietermaritzburg.
- 7% of Indian respondents cited both contacts and mass media as their main source of information about violence in Pietermaritzburg.
- 5% of Indian respondents declined to specify.
- While newspapers were cited as a main source of information by 63% of Indian respondents, TV was cited by 46% of respondents.

Immediately after completing the White attitudinal survey, we were struck by the high proportion of respondents who cited contacts as their main source of information, rather than the

mass media. We decided to cross check with a number of items elsewhere in the questionnaire. Attempts to establish significant relationships between mass media as the main source of information among White respondents and attitudinal responses proved unsuccessful. However, for that category of White respondents for whom contacts was the main source of information, we did establish significant relationships:

- They are less likely than those who cite mass media as the main source of information to see the toll of 2 500 dead as exaggerated.
- They are more likely than those who cite mass media as the main source of information to believe that the violence started before 1987.

We then checked contact as the main source of information against a category of questions which sought to establish where respondents hear about violence, and the reliability of the information they get. Note, this is a different question from that eliciting the main source of information (which was open ended).

- White respondents citing contacts as the main source of information are less likely to accept TV as reliable.
- White respondents citing contacts as the main source of information are more likely to believe newspapers are unreliable.

Finally, on the basis of White respondents' political affiliations, we established that those to the left of government (ANC/UDF and DP supporters):

- are less likely to cite TV as the main source of their information.
- are more likely to believe that the violence started before 1989.

While these findings are, at face value, quite interesting, it's hard to pinpoint their real significance – and we have not really been able to develop an explanatory argument. It does, however, seem that there is a large grouping within the White community that cannot be isolated by basic categories of sex, education level, income, and age, who do not, and here one needs to tread with care, seem to take the media as a source of information as seriously as it would its every day communicative network. Political attitudes may be decisive here – and this should be tested more thoroughly.

On completion of the survey amongst Indian residents in Pietermaritzburg, we were intrigued by the significantly higher proportion of respondents who perceive the mass media as their main source of information about the violence in Pietermaritzburg (nearly double), and the correspondingly smaller proportion who cite contacts as their main source.

Our initial tests to establish similar relationships between mass media and contacts as main sources of information and attitudinal items (such as perceptions of the accuracy, or otherwise of the death toll, and when the violence started) – as well as reliability of sources, proved fruitless.

However some simple proportional comparisons do begin to provide us with interesting points of departure.

The comparison that proved to be most stimulating relates to the question asked of all respondents – “Where do you hear about the violence?”, and the invitation to score the reliability of the information received from these sources.

In the following tables, these results are set out.

**Table 1: Where do you hear about the violence?**

	White Respondents (n=242)	Indian Respondents (n=476)
Newspapers	85%	93%
Television	82%	92%
Radio	70%	74%

These sources are predictably high (confidence level of 95%), and indicate a stronger media attachment on the part of Indian respondents.

Moving on to the reliability of these sources, the results are surprising to say the least. We recorded only the 4 and 5 ratings of a scale 1-5, unreliable to reliable.

**Table 2: Reliability of sources of information about the violence.**

	White Respondents (n=242)	Indian Respondents (n=476)
	White Respondents (n=242)	Indian Respondents (n=476)
Newspapers	33%	60%
Television	35%	65%
Radio	28%	51%

The implications of this finding are puzzling, but do suggest that a perception exists among Indian respondents that the mass media is more truthful, to a significantly greater extent than is the case for White respondents.

For both White and Indian respondents these reliability levels are significantly higher than those found for information from family and friends, while the higher reliability levels for information from domestics and work colleagues

(and others at work) could not get through a 90% confidence test.

Comparisons between White respondents and Indian respondents responses to the question, "when did violence in and around Pietermaritzburg become serious?" show a striking difference between the two groups, with 60% of White respondents seeing it as becoming serious in 1988 or before, while 51% of Indian respondents see it as becoming serious in 1989 and after.

Similarly, comparing White respondents with Indian respondents responses to the question, "is the violence in Pietermaritzburg worse than violence in other parts of South Africa?" We note some differences, with 42% of White respondents answering in the affirmative as against 27% of Indian respondents.

Finally we selected a much publicised death toll (2 500 since 1987 for the White attitudinal questionnaire, and 2 700 since 1987 for the Indian attitudinal questionnaire) and asked respondents to assess whether it was accurate, exaggerated or underestimated. Differences on accuracy and exaggeration were small, but 39% of White respondents felt the toll was underestimated as against 55% of Indian respondents who also felt it was underestimated.

Before we move to attempting some interpretation, it should be pointed out that the questionnaires revealed some important differences between the samples.

- While the survey conducted in White residential areas gave us an even break down of male and female respondents, the survey conducted in the Indian residential areas was skewed towards male respondents (60% to 40%).
- White respondents were generally older (mean age 42

years) than Indian respondents (mean age 34 years).

- White respondents were better educated (75% with matric.) than Indian respondents (45% with matric.)
- White respondents were in a vastly superior position with respect to monthly household income.

As has been noted, there appear to be no significant relationships between any of these factors and respondents choice of main source of information. One could of course continue to test these sociological variables against responses to all questions – but we do not sense any urgency about that.

### THEORETICAL APPROACHES

In as much as the violence in and around Pietermaritzburg has cast a shadow on all its peoples, and has constituted a major crisis for the city, the Black community in particular, this research has substantiated the view that "recent research continues to support earlier findings that interpersonal as well as broadcast media are primary sources of information during crisis events" (Johnston 1990: 336). However, this violence may not easily be characterised as an event "in reality", but a process which has been shredded by the media coverage into a series of episodes (or events). We know very little about how much coverage of this violence there has been in the media or the way it has been presented. Ruth Tomaselli's (1988) work on one SABC programme dealing with the violence in Pietermaritzburg is one of the few examples of a close scrutiny of the way the issue of violence has been handled. Nevertheless, our research does throw up the serious questions of why a differential proportion of interpersonal and broadcast media information exists between the two groups, and why these two groups diverge markedly on the issue of reliability of sources.

One direction to be followed in seeking an answer is provided by Morley (1990: 138) when he suggests that :

“Broadcasting (along with other domestic technologies of communication) has, therefore, to be understood as enmeshed within the internal dynamics of the organisation of domestic space (and primarily with reference to gender relations)”.

Morley, along with a host of media researchers (Lull, Lewis and Frith for example) have been drawn to that sociological work analysing leisure and the transformation of the relations between public and private spheres – particularly, space. Martin Wittenberg’s work (based on the same survey of White attitudes in Pmb.) is a useful illustration of the way in which neighbourhood and social identity are crucially linked (Wittenberg 1991: 9).

It is clear from research conducted along these lines, that the viewing of television is not a simple process. It is tied up with the way in which families are organised, their way of life and the way in which the family is constituted in popular consciousness. There are significant differences in the way broadcasting is “consumed” by men and women (an issue not dealt with at all by this paper). Finally, it is clear that notions of citizenship and social access are important determinants of the way in which media is “consumed”.

Another orientation which may have some contribution to make to analysing these results, is that which argues that proximity (of which geographical location is one element) is an essential variable in assessing the degree to which media contributes to an individual’s construction of subjective reality (see Cohen et al 1989: 37). While this may sound like nothing more than common sense, it is interesting to note

the findings of a major international research project which states that:

“The findings of this study also reinforced the notion that people are able to make distinctions between the way television presents various aspects of the ‘real’ world and what they think the world is really like. This has been found to be particularly manifest in the case of South Africa, where the gap between the way social conflicts were perceived to be in the real world and in the world of television news was the most salient.” (Cohen et al 1989: 160)

Yes, South Africa with its legacy of segregation and Apartheid, certainly does display significant features of cultural and social divisions with a clear spatial ordering to them. But Cohen (et al) also ascribe a psycho-social context dimension to this idea of proximity. In fact, Barrie Gunter has gone even further, arguing that the understanding of information losses (and by implication, knowledge acquisition) from TV bulletins “requires conceptualization in cognitive-psychological terms rather than just in sociological ones” (Gunter 1991: 256).

That these cognitive-psychological terms can be divorced from sociological factors is hard to swallow, just as hard to swallow as that approach, commonly referred to as the preferred reading of messages approach within textual analysis, can do without the audience.

Furthermore, as Behr and Iyengar (1985: 53) have observed,

“Real world conditions and events provide an independent impetus to the perceived importance of issues. Moreover, since news coverage of issues is to a significant extent deter-

mined by actual conditions, analyses of media agenda setting that ignore real-world conditions will arrive at seriously inflated estimates of media influence”.

Finally, in an approach reminiscent of cultivation analysis, Altheide and Snow (1991:83) “emphasise once again that media logic and formats do not dispense with conventional power and manipulative zeal, but rather are a mode of discourse through which all public pronouncements are shaped and marketed.”

## DISCUSSION

In terms of the theoretical observations made above, how can we begin to make sense of these research results?

Firstly, there is something to be said for an approach which explores the structure of public and private space, and which is sensitive to the proximity of individuals to real conditions in assessing media usage and influence.

The structure of public and private space is different for the two groups investigated. This is a result of the Apartheid states' efforts to create discrete “communities”, but has a cultural moment to it as well. The White community, through the benefits it has reaped from segregation and Apartheid, does have access to more public amenities – for leisure, sports and entertainment, and may not be wedded to either the mass media as leisure pursuit or information source to quite the same degree as the Indian community which has been systematically dispossessed of its access to public space. We are on tricky ground here, for while this has been the case, it is beginning to change quite rapidly with the integration of residential areas, as well as changes of education and income levels among the younger people.

The point is that there never has been the pressure on the White community to turn domestic space into public space – even though its affluence allows it the luxury of choosing to do so. But this really only tells us of the potential for mass media to play a larger role in the Indian community. Furthermore, there is a vibrant associational life in the Indian community which may in fact nullify this loose hypothesis.

On the issue of media formats, there is some evidence to suggest that the kinship structures and networks within the Indian community are more closely paralleled in the construction of “soap operas” than would be the case for the white community. Does this format effect spill over into a general “centredness” around television that is stronger in one community than in another? (see Chetty: 1992). Ien Ang has concluded that “what is at stake is not the understanding of ‘audience activity’ as such as an isolated and isolable phenomenon and object of research, but the embeddedness of ‘audience activity’ in a network of ongoing cultural practices and relationships” (1989: 101).

In terms of proximity to real conditions, there does not seem to be much in it – both White and Indian communities are literally miles away from the townships which are the predominant site of violence. In fact, it may be that the Indian community is closer to violence, particularly in the Pietermaritzburg situation where many African people will shop in a section of a city with shops owned and peopled with members of the Indian community.

Secondly, from the point of view of what Cohen (et al) call the dimension of psycho-social context, there may be interesting differences between these communities.

On the one hand, the Indian community, or significant parts of it, may find themselves in a situation of insecurity which does not apply to any significant part of the White community. Historically it is a community that has been squeezed between Black and White, a community whose future is not cut and dried in the event of a Black government. This kind of insecurity – painted in very rough strokes here, is to some extent demonstrated by the fact that almost half of the Indian respondents who identified themselves with the political policies of one or more of the ANC/SACP/NIC also identified themselves as supporters of National Party policies.

If there is a grain of truth in this formulation, could it be that Indian respondents identify the mass media as the main source of information as a result of attempting to keep “in the know” of national developments, and high reliability scores for the mass media do not necessarily reflect a belief in the content but in their own need to be informed.

On the other hand, the White community has benefitted from decades of White minority rule and have a sense of security in their own future – perhaps even an arrogance which is no better illustrated than by the White right. This is a community that may not need the news – good or bad. For Jan-Uwe Rogge “subjective media reality has many facets: on the one hand, the form taken by media activities expresses cultural orientation and day-to-day life-styles. Media activities can be defined as part of a way of life” (1989: 179).

This would suggest that a much closer analysis of “ways of life” of these communities, be undertaken.

Lastly, as far as the white community is concerned, we are in line with other

search efforts which have shown “the greater ability of the more involved viewer to counterargue with news stories (which is) expected to produce a degree of immunity to framing effects” (Iyengar 1991: 118). Framing refers to the episodic nature of most television news items which promote attribution of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to social forces. The resulting political impact of framing is the maintenance of the status quo. However, no such finding is made for the Indian community, notwithstanding the existence of a sector of this community which has associated itself with the struggle for a non-racial South Africa.

## SUMMARY

In the course of this research we have encountered evidence of significant differences in attitude towards the mass media, and to some extent media usage. It remains a distinct possibility that some of these differences are methodological. If this paper can serve as a catalyst for debate about methodology (beyond opinion polling frameworks) then, other issues aside, it will have achieved something. These research findings may also be seen to be opening a Pandora’s box of problems around culture and ethnicity. If this is a price to pay for a more serious study of who our media audiences are and how they are constituted, so be it. Unfortunately, the problem of cultural or ethnic stereotyping runs deep in our society, and while every effort has been made to avoid this trap, there is the distinct possibility that there are categories and classes of informants whose very existence lends itself to manipulation and abuse.

This paper seeks a critical rapprochement between positivist media methods, unsubstantiated interpretivism and ethnography. It seeks to bring



sociology back into cultural analysis, and contribute to the evolving discussion of the relationship between the symbolic order and the real world of every day life (with all its constraints and possibilities).

These findings prove nothing more than the need for the audience (however conceived) to be more thoroughly investigated, using methodologies and conceptual frameworks that are apparently not yet that influential in media studies in South Africa.

Finally, insofar as this research falls into a category, it is that of political communication. Studies of political communication, and its impact on the various groupings within South Africa, is relatively underdeveloped. Susan Booyesen's (1991) work is the exception, in an area which has a position of pre-eminence in terms of the needs of research. Much is made of the impact of our broadcasting setup on the people, when in fact, we know very little about it. This research indicates that an understanding of audience and media effects will significantly enhance our ability to predict and explain the influence of political broadcasting (and related matters, such as political socialization).

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