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Denying racism: Discursive strategies used by the South African media.

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Denying racism: Discursive strategies used by the South African media.

Abstract

In 1999 the South African media was the subject of a Human Rights Commission inquiry into racism. This paper explores the discursive practices deployed by mainstream newspapers in response to these accusations of racism. We show how several interlocking strategies of denial were used to remodel the field of racist practices and representations into a terrain suited to preserving white privilege. Specifically, the media used strategies of splitting, (dis)locating, relativising, trivialising, deracialising and, ultimately, reversing racism. By constructing the terrain of racism in this way, the South African media was able to sidestep criticism by developing 'acceptable' arguments for reasonable prejudice that marginalise black experience.

One of the main ironies of life in post-apartheid South Africa is that whiteness continues to be privileged despite the fact that it is now an African country, governed by African nationalists, who have scrapped apartheid legislation, outlawed racism and discrimination, and put in place wide ranging policies and measures of redress. Political opinion is divided about whether racism is still a problem in the country or not. Commentators on the left of the political spectrum insist that more must be done to insure equality in practice, and propose policies such as affirmative action to secure a non-racial future. On the other hand, the new right advances a liberal colour-blind approach, insisting that the free market is the model for non-racism. Each party accuses the other of racism. The right accuses the state of (reverse) racism for advancing policies that give blacks a competitive advantage; and the left accuses the right of masking racial interests by insisting on colour-blind procedures that protect unequal racial outcomes. Of course, the accusations break down loosely along racial lines because, generally speaking, whites continue to be privileged and blacks continue to be disadvantaged by the legacy of the past and the practices of the present.

Similar divisions characterise opinion about whether the media in post-apartheid South Africa is racist or not. These divisions came to a head in 1999 when the South African Human Rights Commission (HRC) released an interim report that indicted the media for continuing the racist traditions of the past. The report provoked a series of vigorous denials of racism, in which commentators defended the media, arguing that sufficient transformation had taken place. This paper investigates the way in which racism is constructed in these denials of racism.

Racism in the South African media

Under apartheid, the media played a central role in the politics of division. The government and its supporters tightly controlled the media, and television was effectively a state monopoly ([Berger, 1999](#)). Between 1950 and 1990 over 100 laws were introduced to regulate the activities of the South African media (*ibid*). Most prominent was the Publications Act of 1974, which Nobel Laureate, Nadine Gordimer once described as “an octopus of thought-surveillance” ([Merrett, 1994](#), p. 79). The state created an environment that both controlled the information reaching the public and violated the freedom of the press. “[T]he bulk of the media – with some important exceptions – either expressly

promoted apartheid, or implicitly complied with it, and in both ways contributed to a climate of gross human rights violations” (Berger, 2001, p. 2).

Shocking revelations of the media’s collusion with the apartheid regime came to light in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) hearings on gross human rights violations that had taken place under apartheid (TRC, 1998). Former apartheid state operative, Craig Williamson, testified that state agents had been placed in newsrooms, and he described the state’s relation with the media as a systemic “macro continuum” from the owners of the media, to the editors who controlled the newspapers, right down to the dustbin cleaners who cleaned the dustbins at night and stuffed material in an envelope to be collected by agents’ (in Braude, 1999, p. 39). In addition to so furthering the state’s racist agenda, the media itself engaged in racist practices. The TRC report describes how black staff of the state-run, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) were subject to ‘sjambokking [whipping] as a disciplinary procedure, separate training classes, being given older machines to work with, lower budgets...’ (ibid, p. 43).

The consequence of all this was that the information reaching the public was permeated with racial stereotypes which legitimated the apartheid regime. Consider, for instance, the way in which the SABC represented township violence in the late 1980s (Posel, 1990). While watching the 8 o’clock news broadcast, the primary intended audience – the white South African public – were regularly presented with images of flames, stone throwing and close-up pictures of crowds, together with verbal descriptions such as ‘Security forces were forced to make use of rifles and shotguns to disperse rioting crowds’ (cited in Posel, 1990, p. 162). In justifying state violence, black protesters were represented as primitive and mindless stone-throwing mobs, an image that ‘suggested savage and so-called “tribal” behaviour, as against the more “civilized” methods’ used by the police (ibid, p. 161). The ‘underlying implication was that blacks – epitomised by the crowd – are dominated by their emotions rather than reason, an essentially “primitive” mode of being’ (ibid, p. 165). In the apartheid media, racist images were used to preserve white privilege by legitimating oppression and state violence.

Political transformation in South Africa has had a substantial impact on the media (Berger, 1999). The new constitution embraced the ideals of equality, multiculturalism and non-racialism, and guaranteed (within limits) freedom of expression and free access to information. This invalidated much of apartheid media legislation. In addition, political change was accompanied by a dramatic normative shift. It was no longer acceptable to

express blatant racist stereotypes or to explicitly argue for racial segregation or discrimination. The values of apartheid were replaced with values for unity, reconciliation, and reconstruction. To ensure that change relied not only on goodwill, legislation was passed to make racism a criminal offence. These changes, together with increased black media ownership and the collapse of the apartheid spy network, were forces for transformation in the media.

However, despite these changes, more than five years into the new democracy, charges of racism were laid against two historically liberal newspapers by two prominent black professional organizations, the Black Lawyers Association (BLA) and the Association of Black Accountants of South Africa (ABASA). They claimed that the *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian*, two historically liberal English newspapers, engaged in racially biased reporting and editorial comment ([Glaser, 2000](#); [HRC, 1999](#); [Pityana, 2000](#)). Specifically, they charged that:

- The media remains largely white owned, and white males continue by and large to control public opinion.
- The *Mail and Guardian* exposed corruption in a way that created the impression that black people are essentially corrupt and incompetent.
- The *Mail and Guardian* treated instances of plagiarism by a black and white journalist differently.
- The *Mail and Guardian* refused to carry letters from black people, responding to articles in which they are criticized.
- The *Sunday Times* trivialised the death of black people by reducing them to mere statistics, while covering the death of white people in detail.
- The *Sunday Times* printed hate speech in which a columnist suggested that African Americans should ‘realise that they would probably be living in shacks with no running water if their ancestors hadn’t been abducted by slave traders’.

The South African Human Rights Commission (HRC), a body with a constitutional mandate to investigate allegations of human rights abuses, responded to these charges. They submitted the allegations to the newspapers concerned for response before deciding whether to pursue the investigation. According to Barney Pityana (2000), then chairperson of the HRC, the newspapers bluntly refuted the allegations, challenged the *locus standi* of the accusers and disputed the jurisdiction of the HRC to continue with

the inquiry. Given this defensiveness, the HRC decided to pursue the investigation, and extend its scope to the South African media in general, in an effort to ‘facilitate a robust debate and exchange of ideas about how [South Africa] can construct a society free of racism’ (Pityana, 2000, p. 527).

The interim report of this investigation (HRC, 1999), consisted of eleven submissions from the public, a qualitative investigation conducted by an independent researcher (Braude, 1999), and a quantitative study of the occurrence of racial themes such as ‘Blacks are criminals’ (MMP, 1999). The outcome of the investigation was damning. The public submissions listed numerous instances of racism and the quantitative investigations showed that ‘stereotypical representations of race are unfortunately still common in the media’ (MMP, p. 57). The conclusions of Braude’s discursive investigation, however, were the most cutting. She found evidence of racial stereotyping but also argued that there was ‘continuity’ between the racial thinking of the right-wing and mainstream liberal media: ‘Classic racist and white supremacist representations of blacks as, inter alia, inferior, incompetent and criminal continue to be perpetuated’ (Braude, 1999, p. 142).

The report provoked a storm of hostile criticism that surprised the HRC (Pityana, 2000) and Braude (personal communication, October 11, 2001). The media’s response was scathing, with much of the ‘argument’ *ad hominem*. Although most of the academic response was more measured, the evaluation of the report was much the same (Berger, 2000; Glaser, 2000; Jacobs, 2001, Tomaselli, 2000, 2001). The research was found to be methodologically weak and the HRC project as a whole was accused of being politically motivated, and a threat to press freedom. Braude’s report was rejected for failing to provide a definition of racism and for being an overly subjective and individual reading. She had failed to demonstrate a racist subtext in the mainstream media, but instead “went on a search for racism in the media – and found it everywhere” (Berger, 2000, p. 9).

It was very clear, however, that opinion about racism in the media continued to be divided along racial lines. Pityana reports that the commission ‘received countless calls from journalists encouraging the inquiry. What was significant about this was that almost all of them were black and they all wished to remain anonymous...’ (2000, p. 528). The divide was deepened when media editors and journalists were subpoenaed in February 2000 to appear before the commission to assist in the inquiry. The South African National Editors’ Forum demanded an unconditional withdrawal of the subpoenas, but

five black newspaper editors broke ranks, issuing a statement declaring their intention to appear before the Commission.

Denial of racism

So, is the South African media racist or not? This is the question that the HRC set out to investigate and that has been the focus of the subsequent debate. However, this is not the question that we seek to answer in this paper. There is nothing that we can add to the arguments for or against the original charge that the media continues to be racist. Not only has the debate covered all relevant arguments, but it has also shown that, although different parties firmly believe that they are correct, there is no final consensual view on the matter. So we will not engage with the substantive claims of the arguments made, identifying a subset that we believe to be well founded, and then adjudicating on the matter of media racism. Instead, we will approach our investigation from a different angle. Rather than defining what racism is, and then asking a truth question – Is the media racist? – we aim to study the force and kinds of arguments used by the media in their denials, rebuttals and refutations of the charge of racism levelled against them.

What is the value of studying the rhetoric of denying racism? We believe that it can help us understand the grounds and the nature of the contestation. The reason why there can be such entrenched opposing views about racism in the media is because the very nature of racism is contested. Media advocates believe that the media is racial but not racist, whereas detractors have a broader understanding of what racism is, which includes that which the media advocates exclude. These contested grounds of racism may be mapped out by means a rhetorical analysis.

In focussing on the media's defence, we are interested in exploring how and where they draw the boundaries between acceptable racial reporting and unacceptable racism. In laying out what [Billig et al \(1988\)](#) call the 'contrary themes of reasonable prejudice' media advocates are employing lines of argument that are acceptable in society for defending racial practices. [Billig \(1988\)](#) suggests that denials of racism allow us to investigate the limits of tolerance that are normative in a society. He uses the disclaimer 'I'm not racist, but...' to illustrate. Whatever follows the disclaimer (e.g., '...they don't know how to behave') is typically a racially informed expression of intolerance. The denial helps to render the racial sentiment acceptable by suggesting that is not motivated by the irrational prejudice of a racist individual, but is perfectly reasonable. What is

reasonable is a matter of convention, and so the study of this kind of persuasive rhetoric is a way of investigating the conventions of racial intolerance, which are adapted to the dominant representations and institutional demands of the day.

In addition to supporting an ideological tradition of reasonable tolerance, denials of racism serve individual functions. They allow speakers to justify their own racial practices while claiming membership of the community of the unprejudiced ([Billig, 1988](#); [van Dijk, 1992](#)). Positive self-presentation is thus maintained by rhetorically quarantining any instance of talk that could lead to a negative perception of the speaker.

In analysing the European press and parliamentary discourse, [van Dijk \(1992\)](#) identified a number of rhetorical strategies by which denial of racism was achieved, namely disclaimers, mitigation, euphemisms, excuses, justification, blaming the victim and reversal (cf. [Barnes, Palmary & Durrheim, 2001](#)). In this paper, we follow [van Dijk's](#) lead by investigating denials of racism in the media. The media plays a central role in both reflecting and shaping social consciousness, and so is an important object of analysis when considering racist practices in society ([van Dijk, 1993](#)). The media is not a neutral, passive reporter of facts, but rather – whether intentionally or otherwise – actively constructs and produces public discourse ([van Dijk, 1987](#)). Furthermore, the media plays a central role in setting public agendas by deciding what material is newsworthy, thereby supporting the interests of socially dominant groups. For all these reasons, [van Dijk \(1991\)](#) recommends that the study of media racism be extended beyond European and North American contexts.

Method

The focus of our investigation is the media's response to the HRC report. The response was rich in denials of racism, and our aim was to describe the 'machinery' of denial. What strategies and tactics were employed to criticise the HRC report and justify media practices; and what conception of racism was articulated in such denials? Although the discourse of denial can be interpreted psychologically as subliminal expressions, or linguistically as subtext, our aim was to use the methods of discourse analysis ([Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1994](#)) to investigate denials as regulated performances that have social currency as good arguments, and as such, perform the ideological work of shoring up racial privilege.

The data corpus for this study consisted of newspaper articles published in the mainstream English-language press in South Africa, in direct response to the release of the HRC's (1999) interim report. These newspapers were selected as they have traditionally been perceived as liberal ([Berger, 1999](#)) and consequently, they were likely to represent themselves as non-racist, and react to accusations of racism with denial. Our sample consisted of over 300 newspaper articles that referred to the HRC interim report and continuing proceedings, spanning the period between 21 November 1999 and 24 December 2000¹. After an initial reading, we limited our focus to the subset of approximately 60 articles that made direct reference to the interim report. The majority of these were published within two weeks of the report's release. After a detailed analysis of this subset of articles, we once again read through the entire data corpus in order to judge the validity of our conclusions (cf. [Silverman, 2000](#)).

The analysis proceeded inductively, as we recorded and developed working hypotheses about the ways in which racism was constructed, negotiated and denied as journalists responded to the HRC report. We focused on two specific features of the discourse of denial: rhetoric and subject positioning. The HRC report presented the media with a dilemma: it admitted to (undeniable) forms of racial favouritism, but denied being racist (cf. [Billig et al., 1988](#)). In criticizing the HRC and justifying its own practices, the media articulated the contrary themes of reasonable prejudice in a rhetorically persuasive manner. Following the advice from [Billig \(1989, 1996\)](#), we were interested in documenting how this dilemma was managed rhetorically by the activity of shifting the boundaries of racism. Second, we investigated the way in which writers articulated 'subject positions' ([Harré & van Langenhove, 1999](#)) for themselves and the media. The shifting boundaries of racism have implications for individual and institutional subjects as they allow speakers to position themselves discursively as non-racist subjects, while defending racial advantage, or, in this case, racially biased representation.

Splitting racism

The primary strategy of denial was that of splitting. The broad field of racial representations and practices was bifurcated into 'evil' and morally reprehensible racism on the one hand, and 'benign' racism on the other. By claiming that this benign racism

¹ This comprehensive set of newspaper clippings was collected by Claudia Braude, who kindly made them available to us.

was in fact motivated by concerns other than racism, the media could at once defend their practices, and deny racism.

Extract 1

...Beeld editor, Arrie Rossouw said: 'Beeld does not support any form of racism but this does not mean that at times racial undertones are not present in reports or leader articles or do not slip through unintentionally.'
(*Sowetan*, 10 March 2000, *Racism – dilemma for media*)

Extract 2

Of course, genuine racism remains a serious problem in our society and we must deal with it. But when the "racist" label is used as a substitute for serious debate on important issues, it merely devalues the struggle against real racism.
(*The Cape Times*, 21 February 2000, '*Racist*' label should not be used to stifle debate)

Extract 3

People always discern plots and sinister conspiracies in the media. It is the nature of the beast that those whom it mirrors do not like the way that it is done, whether they be whites, business people, Muslims, sports fans, ballroom dancers or a combination of all of these. There is favouritism in the media. And there is a range of perspectives, from support for one rugby team over another, to sympathy for one or more political parties. That there is racism of some sort is undeniable. Like crime, it will always be with us. Decent people try to fight crime or racism. Good does not always win in the age-old battle against evil, and never manages to eradicate evil completely. In a country where racism was worshipped by the government for four decades (at least), it flourished. Would that it were not so. This newspaper has fought racism. We welcomed the inquiry into racism in the media. We had hoped it would be helpful.

Human Rights Commission chairperson Barney Pitso Moseneke says the year-long preliminary probe offers prima facie evidence that racism is a problem which needs greater investigation. Rocket science was not needed to reach that conclusion. Why tax Rands had to be deployed to inform the commission of this obvious truth, heaven alone knows. Next the commission will discover that crime is a problem in some parts of the country and needs to be combated.
(*The Star*, 23 November 1999, *HRC should do job better*)

The extracts above exemplify the discursive practice of splitting racism, or subcategorising forms of racism, in order to deny that the SA media was racist. Extract 1 suggests that there are different 'forms' of racism, while Extracts 2 and 3 give substance to this variation. Extract 2 suggests that genuine racism may be distinguished, presumably, from other imaginary forms that inform spurious argument. Extract 3 splits racism, less subtly, along a moral dimension, into benign and evil forms. In all three extracts, as in the data corpus more generally, a conceptual apparatus is employed to categorise the diversity of practices that could be described as racist.

Such splitting is a way of negotiating the central dilemma faced by the media in responding to the accusations of racism: The media must devalue the HRC report by denying racism, while simultaneously acknowledging that the existence of racial 'favouritism' and 'undertones' (see Extracts 1 & 3). This dilemma is resolved by splitting racism into different types, and then locating the unacceptable types externally, in the other (Billig, 1988; Riggins, 1997). Thus, while admitting that there is 'racism of some sort' in the media, racism is denied by stating that 'This newspaper has fought racism' (Extract 3).

The categories of racial practices proposed in these extracts are highly serviceable for the task of denying racism, for only one form is truly racist and morally reprehensible. In Extract 3 the 'evil' form of racism is that which 'flourished' under apartheid, and was 'worshipped by the government for four decades'. Reprehensible racism is displaced to the past, and it is constructed as irrational. The word 'worshipped' alludes to the ideological nature of racial policies in the context of Afrikaner Nationalism, and political and religious justification of white supremacy. This is the racism that decent people fight. In lamenting the racist past – 'would that it were not so' – and in presenting its own history of challenging racism, the newspaper constructs itself as non-racist, displacing racism onto a racist and irrational other.

What then of the racism in the media that is 'undeniable'? A benign racial practice is constructed, different from the evil racism that flourished under apartheid. This is simply a form of 'favouritism', similar to supporting 'one rugby team over another' or showing 'sympathy for one or more political parties' (Extract 3); or the racism may be unintentional slips (Extract 1). Although favouring 'whites' over 'blacks' may seem like a continuation of a longstanding tradition of racism in South Africa, the moral value of this racism is downgraded by drawing comparisons with non-racial forms of favouritism (Extract 3), and in arguing that, together, these forms of favouritism are omnipresent, innocuous, or unintentional 'racial undertones'.

In addition to servicing the defensive rhetoric of denying or excusing racism, splitting also provided a platform from which to attack the HRC. By means of this strategic splitting, the HRC investigation is devalued as a waste of money, showing an 'obvious truth' (Extract 3) that an omnipresent and benign racism exists in the media. While 'genuine' racism is seen as a 'serious problem' that 'we must deal with', it is argued that the HRC uses the label 'racist' inappropriately when accusing the media of

racism, and thereby 'merely devalues the struggle against real racism' (Extract 2). The terrain of racism is contested, and the strategy of splitting is used to put markers down for a particular serviceable view of what racism is.

(Dis)locating racism

We have seen how the media splits racism into various forms, distancing itself from those which they consider undesirable while implying that racial representation in the media is both inevitable and benign. This work of category construction ([Billig, 1996](#)) provides a framework through which the media can deny racism. Once racism is split, denial is done by dislocating 'genuine' racism and situating it outside the media. Three discursive tactics are used to accomplish this: the use of passive voice, the media-as-mirror metaphor, and a gesture of looking back into history.

Extract 4

Racism takes different forms at different historical moments. The primary concern or dispute is about what we, at a particular historical moment, define as racism. That is why the commissioners and the journalists who came before it [the commission] struggled to find this racism – it cannot be seen. It has become 'naturalised' in the structures of the media, the creation of markets, audiences and the role of advertising... We need to look at who reads newspapers, the LSMs they're located in and how the advertising industry works in determining content, and suggest positive steps to break down the way the media industry works at the moment. This includes an understanding of the pressures of publishing a newspaper or operating a broadcast station in SA today. It includes the importance of markets or readership and the constraints on publishing or broadcasting in a competitive market. In other words, the production of news is not always about power – it is about deadlines, about lack of training for journalists, about editors acting as business managers, more concerned about circulation figures. Racism is not under every bed.
(*Financial Mail*, 14 April 2000, *What we need is a debate on race, power and media*)

Extract 5

While admitting South African society was in many ways still racist, the Cape Times said: "This will be reflected in the media, otherwise the media is not an accurate reflection of society".
(*Cape Times*, 26 November 1999, *Are halcyon days of free speech over?*)

Extract 6

The media has a complex relationship with its society. The media can dictate society's thinking but it is society which determines the media...

Hence it is often said that we get the media we deserve. What does happen is that the media can and does reinforce already established ideas and notions within society... That was the cornerstone of the research that the Media Monitoring Project undertook for the Human Rights Commission. The media is not responsible for racism in our society – there are far too many other institutions and ideas for that to be the case. But the media

can support or challenge racist ideas by, among other things, reinforcing stereotypical depictions and attitudes that are all of our inheritance from apartheid.
(*Sunday Times*, 27 February 2000, *To think the media is all powerful is to give them too much credit*)

Passive voice is used when talking about benign racism in the media. For example, Extract 5 states that racism ‘will be reflected in the media’, in contrast to a possible active, agentic phrasing, such as ‘the media reflects racism’. Extract 7 uses the passive voice to distance itself from racism by locating racism in disparate and undefined ‘newsrooms’. Extract 3 characterises the media in the passive voice with the phrase ‘those whom it mirrors’. However, the newspaper’s fight against racism – ‘this newspaper has fought racism’ – is spoken of in the first person. The same contrast can be seen in Extract 4, where the media’s ‘struggle’ against racism is spoken of in the active voice – ‘journalists...struggled to find this racism’ – while admissible media racism is presented passively as racism that ‘has become ‘naturalised’ in the structures of the media’.

In all of the above extracts, the use of the active voice serves to highlight the agency of the media, whereas passive voice portrays the media as a subject of broader forces of racism. The active voice is predictably paired with positive actions and the passive voice with statements from which the media wishes to distance itself. In this way the media is able to claim agency for positive actions, such as fighting racism, while denying agency and responsibility for potentially negative actions. Superficially, Extract 6 appears to provide an exception to this rhetorical pattern, by admitting that ‘the media can support or challenge racist ideas’. Agency, however is immediately denied by blaming ‘racist ideas’ and ‘stereotypical depictions’ on the ‘inheritance from apartheid’ or on society, which the media simply ‘reinforces’ and is ‘not responsible for’.

The media’s tactic of using the passive voice to distance itself from ‘genuine’ racism is given shape by the image of the media as a mirror. The mirror metaphor is explicit at times: ‘It is the nature of the beast [the media] that those whom it mirrors often do not like the way it is done’ (Extract 3). According to this line of thinking, the task of the media is to represent society accurately; and if society is racist, then the media will unfortunately reflect this. Such arguments re-locate the origins of racist media representations to society at large, and allow the media to justify its own racist practices whilst nominally opposing racism. This strategy of denial attributes racism to the

'empirical nature of the world, rather than the preferences of the [speaker]' (Billig, 1991, p. 131).

The mirror metaphor is often implicit. Extract 6 argues that 'what does happen is that the media can and does reinforce already established ideas and notions within society' and that 'we get the media we deserve'. Extract 5 suggests that racism in society will be 'reflected' in the media. Extract 4 provides an elaborate account of the way in which racism 'has become "naturalised" in the structures of the media' as well as in markets, audiences and advertising. However, instead of using this awareness to focus on the power of the media to produce, reproduce and redefine racism, the mirror metaphor is drawn on to neatly sidestep media responsibility for racism. It is argued that the press are merely reflecting industrial constraints and the pressures of competing in the South African media market.

In all these cases, the mirror metaphor works to construct the media as a passive agent in the reproduction of racism. The real cause lies elsewhere, in society. The media simply re-presents and reflects social views and biases, and operates under market 'constraints'. Given the secondary role of the media in reflecting racism, responsibility for change is shifted from the media onto other social agents.

The third tactic for dislocating racism from the media involves drawing a strong contrast between post-apartheid and apartheid society, and in locating genuine racism in the past. In Extract 3 racism is spoken of as something 'worshipped by the government for four decades'. The assertion 'This newspaper *has fought* racism' (emphasis added) locates the fight against racism in the past, thereby dislocating racism from the present. Similarly Extracts 2 and 5, by stating that 'genuine racism *remains* a serious problem' and that 'South African society was in many ways *still* racist' (emphasis added), imply that the racism of today is merely a lingering remnant of apartheid. By means of discursive gestures of 'looking back', current racial practices are contrasted with the blatantly racist past, and found to be hardly racist at all.

By portraying themselves as passive, making use of the mirror metaphor, and contrasting present racial practices with the crude racism of the past, the media could (dis)locate racism from itself, denying racism while justifying racist representations.

Deracialising racism

Extract 7

So if an elderly black state pensioner in Soweto and Harry Oppenheimer are mugged on the same day, and there is only space for one story, and they must choose to leave the other out. Which is more likely to run? Most editors would choose Oppenheimer – not because he is white, but because he is famous. I'm by no means saying that this is right, but that is how traditional news values in newspapers work. And it is no different in South Africa than in any other country throughout the world...

Another example that springs to mind is the recent spate of bus crashes. If a busload of working class (black) South Africans are killed, and a bus carrying middle-class overseas (white) tourists crashes, which will attract more media attention? Are the values there based on race?

(The Star, 23 November 1999, Race not necessarily a chief factor in choosing news)

According to Miles (1989), racism depends on a symbolic process of racialisation, whereby social significance is attributed to human difference. By deracialisation, we mean the symbolic process whereby potentially racist practices are divested of racial significance, and attributed to non-racial causes. A number of observers have described similar practices. Proponents of the theory of symbolic racism (Sears, 1988) suggest that contemporary forms of racial expression combine anti-black affect and traditional values (e.g. individualism). Likewise, Billig (1991) suggests that prejudice may be justified by referral to traditional values such as equality and fairness, rather than overt racial themes, thereby sanitising racist discourse (cf. [Augoustinos, Lecouteur & Soyland, 2002](#); Wetherell & Potter, 1992). We have already come across instances of deracialisation, where racism is reduced to non-racial favouritism, and the consequences of racism are reduced to the causing of offence. Just as sports fans and ballroom dancers may be offended by media favouritism, so may whites, blacks or Muslims (see Extract 3). Here we undertake a more detailed investigation of the discursive strategies used in deracialisation.

Deracialisation is illustrated in Extract 7, where the writer argues that racially slanted reporting is in fact not motivated by racism, but by rational decisions about the newsworthiness of stories. In a first example, the newsworthiness of the mugging of an 'elderly black state pensioner' is compared with the mugging of Harry Oppenheimer (a South African tycoon); and in a second example, the newsworthiness of two different bus crashes is compared: a 'busload of working class (black) South Africans' and a 'bus carrying middle-class overseas (white) tourists'. In both cases the news of black misfortune is deemed less newsworthy than white misfortune. However, the reader is invited to understand that this is not racism. The media's racial bias is motivated by non-racial factors – Harry Oppenheimer's fame, and the overseas tourists' foreignness. This

constructs a passive media whose attention is directed to the more newsworthy event by social interest (cf. Extract 4).

Deracialisation is a reaction to, and depends upon, the racialisation of human differences, and these racial assumptions are apparent in the activity of deracialisation. Consider first the selection of the basis of comparison in Extract 7. Why compare a rich, famous white man (Oppenheimer) with a poor, unknown black man? Why not an equally famous black man? Although the conclusion that ‘most editors’ would choose Oppenheimer is portrayed as obvious – it is simply how ‘traditional news values in newspapers work’ – the conclusion is stacked against the nameless black man by setting the racial actors up unequally. The example is loaded in favour of the media representing whites’ lives rather than the lives of blacks, making this seem like an obvious, commonsensical and rational choice. A similar kind racial consciousness informs the deracialisation in the second example in Extract 7 where an unbalanced contrast is set up between working class South African blacks and middle class overseas tourists. Why not tourists from another African country, or working class white South Africans?

In Extract 7, newsworthiness is advanced as a non-racial explanation of discriminatory racial reporting. This non-racial factor is used to make racial discrimination appear as a necessary, if somewhat unfortunate, outcome of how things are. White lives are represented in the media because they are newsworthy. Since the media simply provides a reflection of the world ‘out there’, the choice of which story to print is a pragmatic one, arrived at somewhat reluctantly, as is illustrated by the statement ‘I’m by no means saying that this is right’.

Relativising, trivialising and reversing racism

In responding to the HRC’s accusations of racism, the media portrayed itself as engaging in benign racial practices. There were a number of instances in our data corpus where the writers went further to depoliticise current practices of racial favouritism, rendering them a-moral. This section discusses rhetorical strategies that take the moral and political sting out of accusations of racism. We also examine two ways in which accusations were reversed, and the HRC and its supporters were accused of racism.

Extract 8

Our backgrounds make racists of us all, regardless of colour. The assumption in the report of the Human Rights Commission seems to be that only whites are racist. This is far from the truth – there are black racists, brown racists and, of course, white racists... This is not purely a South African disease but is to be seen in every country in the world.

(*Cape Times*, 26 November 1999, *Upbringing may make us racist, but there is hope*)

Extract 9

It is also important to remember that non-racialism is not the only democratic value that needs nurturing in this country. Tolerance, attitudes towards gender differences, an appreciation of criticism, the importance of freedom of speech and freedom of choice – all of these things, and many more, are equally important.

(*The Star*, 23 November 1999, *Race not necessarily a chief factor in choosing news*)

Extract 10

We have no doubt there is racism in the media, as in many facets of South African life, but most journalists are painstakingly cautious about not causing offence. In fact, the stench of political correctness hangs heavily in the air. And still the scavengers rummage in the dirt for scraps.

(*The Citizen*, 23 November 1999, *Waste of time*)

Extract 11

An inquiry by a public body such as the HRC into racism in the media always has the theoretical potential for unwarranted interference with press freedom and even for introducing Orwellian “thought police”. Several major newspapers have criticised the HRC on these grounds...

These are not only complex philosophical issues, but are also very significant on a practical level – not to mention the leverage applied by a variety of interest groups, each with its own agenda and differing power base...

It is unfortunate that these real and weighty issues have been clouded by what appears to be one researcher’s own agenda and interests (or even prejudices) pushing aside sense, objectivity and reason.

(*South African Jewish Report*, 12 March 1999, *Masking real issues*)

Extract 12

The consequence of all this is to make it more difficult to defend human rights. Right now, the populace is baying for the blood of criminals and wants to brush aside their rights. It is now time for the commission to do its job properly, not involve itself in political agendas.

(*The Star*, 23 November 1999, *HRC should do job better*)

Earlier, we discussed the strategy of splitting, whereby the field of racism was split in a self-serving manner, into evil and benign forms. Here we extend this discussion by suggesting that splitting is the basis for more general strategies of relativising and trivialising media racism, and that these strategies in turn allow for accusations of racism to be reversed.

In Extracts 8, 9 and 10, media racism is relativised by comparing it with violations that writers claim are as bad as, or worse than, media racism. Two strategies of relativising racism were apparent in our data. First, anti-black racism of white South

Africans was relativised by contextualising it against other forms of racism found all over the world. In Extract 9, the universal ‘disease’ of racism is naturalised and universalises racism (Durrheim & Dixon, 2000), as its origins are to be found in ‘our backgrounds’. Racism is thus treated as an inevitable, benign, and even banal, residue of history and circumstance. Thus, we can have ‘no doubt there is racism in the media, as in many facets of South African life’ (Extract 10). Furthermore, a broader and more universal basis to racism is suggested in Extract 7, which states that ‘it is no different in South Africa than in any other country throughout the world’.

Secondly, racism is relativised by contrasting the value of anti-racism with other values in society. While recognising racial bias in media reporting, it is possible to deflect attention away from media racism by pointing to other values that the media upholds, including politeness (Extract 10), tolerance and democratic values (Extract 9).

These strategies of trivialising and relativising racism serve to minimise the importance of media racism by juxtaposing it with other forms of racism and other values. According to Siedel (1988), relativising serves two functions: firstly, a diversionary function, drawing attention away from specific instances of racism and suggesting that such practices are commonplace elsewhere. Secondly, it serves to equate the oppressors with the oppressed by suggesting that people of all races are guilty of racism.

The statement that racism is ‘not purely a South African disease’ (Extract 8), serves diversionary functions, lessening the importance of the ‘white’ racism of which the media is accused. In Extract 10, the existence of racism in the media is taken as self-evident in the light of the South African context and history of racism. Racism is thus trivialised by constructing it as an unavoidable residue of the recent past, which renders racism in the present unremarkable. Consequently, the ‘furore’ over the HRC’s ‘controversial’ report is constructed as a disproportionate response to a patently obvious finding. In this way, the findings of the HRC are dismissed as unexceptional, inconsequential and thus not deserving of serious consideration.

Further examples of trivialising racism can be seen in Extracts 3, 9 and 10. In Extract 3, media practices are described as a form of ‘favouritism’ in the same vein as ‘support for one rugby team over another’. This transforms the meaning of a ‘racist’ media from an unacceptable violator of human dignity and rights to an innocent, harmless and enthusiastic spectator, which merely supports a particular ‘team’ in its choice of

people and issues to reflect. The racist perspective is trivialised as simply being one in a 'range of perspectives'. Racism is trivialised in Extract 9, by the statement that 'journalists are painstakingly cautious about not causing offence', which reduces media racism to the important but minor issue of causing offence. By trivialising media racism, serious consequences such as human rights violations, discrimination or perpetuating racial inequalities in power and resources are specifically ignored. The HRC investigation is thus reduced to an activity of looking for 'scraps' of offence or favouritism (Extract 10), when it should be focussed on serious problems of racism elsewhere, and on maintaining the value of media freedom.

By drawing attention to other instances of racism and other values, a platform is laid from which to relativise the agents of different practices and values, equating the oppressors with the oppressed. This is Siedel's (1988) second function of the relativising discourse. Since all people in South Africa, 'regardless of race', are racists (Extract 8), people of all races are equally responsible for racism. Thus, critical attention is diverted from the fact that racism advantages a racial elite, and that certain actors (e.g., the media) are in a better position to challenge racism than others. Likewise, in Extract 9, the value of the HRC's anti-racism agenda is questioned by suggesting that it might other values such as freedom of speech.

Relativising the value of anti-racism makes the first way of reversing accusations of racism possible. Anti-racism is to be tolerated only to the extent that it does not interfere with the defence of other 'democratic' values. Once competing, racially relevant values have been presented, racism is reversed by arguing that the anti-racist initiative undermines these other values, and is thus deemed to be the real source of racism. There were a number of ways in which this was done in the data corpus. It was suggested that the HRC's focus on benign media racism deflected attention from the real issues. When 'the "racist" label is used as a substitute for serious debate on important issues', the HRC 'merely devalues the struggle against real racism' (Extract 2). Furthermore, fighting racism may result in 'unwarranted interference with press freedom and even...introducing Orwellian "thought police"' (Extract 11). The consequence of all this, as Extract 12 says, 'is to make it more difficult to defend human rights'.

By splitting the field of racism into evil and benign forms, and pointing to other important human rights values, writers were able to argue that particular anti-racist strategies were misguided without rejecting all anti-racist initiatives. In their arguments,

the media conveyed support for a narrow and vaguely defined anti-racist agenda, but criticised specific initiatives for obstructing the struggle against racism and other human rights violations. The media maintained the moral high ground and projected reasonableness by embracing the value of anti-racism and showing how the HRC undermined *this* anti-racism and other democratic values.

This strategy reverses racism by an epistemological positioning. In contrast to the HRC, the media knows what genuine racism is, and knows when anti-racism should be tempered or overshadowed by other competing values. From this position – having a clear view of the facts, a knowledge of what constitutes genuine and benign racism, and the ability to recognise competing democratic values – the media could criticise the HRC for focussing on trivial issues, thus undermining the proper fight against racism. This is shown in Extract 11, which suggests that ‘these real and weighty issues have been clouded by what appears to be one researcher’s own agenda and interests (or even prejudices) pushing aside sense, objectivity and reason’. The source of this irrational motive is found in the ‘stench of political correctness’ (Extract 10), ‘political agendas’ (Extract 12), and the HRC’s incorrect understanding of racism (Extracts 2 and 12). By so adopting an epistemological high ground, the writers create an inverted world where the HRC becomes the agent of racism, acting irrationally, misreading the facts, and acting to ultimately hamper the fight against genuine racism.

Conclusion

The HRC report on racism in the South African media was greeted with scorn and incredulity by the media and other commentators. Given the changes that had taken place since the days of deep apartheid, and the current market-driven reporting practices, how could anyone say that the media was racist? The media speculated that perhaps Braude was confused as a result of being on drugs, or having unhappiness in her personal life, when she did the investigation. Or perhaps the biased and untrue report was to be explained by some sinister agenda on the part of Barney Pitso, to curtail media freedom. Of course the academic commentators were more sophisticated. For them the problem was primarily methodological. Braude had used qualitative methods and had allowed her own subjectivity to becloud the issue.

However, there is one very difficult problem that these commentators must confront. If it is really true that the media is not racist, and Braude and Pitso were

being malicious or simply misguided, why did difference of opinion continue to break down along racial lines? If the judgement of racism was simply based on having a clear view of the facts of the matter, unclouded by subjectivity or hidden agendas, then any right thinking person should agree with the commentators – as they frequently pointed out – that racism in the South African media is a thing of the past. Now, the uncomfortable problem is why it is that black individuals and organizations that continue to complain about racism in the media. As we argued in the introduction, from the beginning, when two black professional organizations charged the liberal press with subliminal racism, right to the end, when the black editors ‘broke ranks’ and gave evidence to the commission when subpoenaed, difference of opinion has fallen along racial lines.

In this paper we have argued that the judgement about whether the media is racist or not is not simply a matter of having a clear view of the facts. Rather this judgement is rooted in ideological and rhetorical traditions, which frame the facts. In particular, we have focussed on a set of rhetorical devices by which the media defended itself, denying the charge of racism.

The aim of our analysis was not to show that the media were really being racist all the while that they were denying racism. Rather, our aim was to show that in denying racism the commentators were mapping out a new terrain of racism that normalised their own practices. In denying racism they were doing the rhetorical and ideological work of mapping out the boundaries of reasonable prejudice (Billig, 1988; Billig et al, 1988). This allowed them to divide the wide array of acts and representations that could potentially be labelled racist into those that were genuinely racist and those others that were simply a reasonable, unavoidable and defensible prejudice. In claiming ownership of only the latter, the charges of the HRC could be refuted. By so mapping out the terrain of racism the media could ‘resolve’ the dilemma of acknowledging discriminatory racial representations, while simultaneously denying racism. More broadly, and in tandem with these self presentational functions, these denial strategies worked to re-construct and renegotiate the shared meanings of “racism” in the public arena in such a way that racial bias can be defended in non-racial terms, or as benign, necessary, socially acceptable or commonplace.

This terrain of racism is not simply a matter of fact, and we can imagine that black and white commentators or liberals and conservatives would have different views

of what constitutes real racism. It is for these reasons, rather than a breakdown of logical faculties of some parties, that those who accused the media of racism and those who defended the media could have such ongoing divergent opinions.

Consider again the way in which black people are represented in Extract 7. In the second example to show that black experience is not newsworthy, the writer contrasts a “busload” of blacks with a “bus carrying” white tourists. The blacks are categorised and dehumanised as a load – similar to a load of cargo – whereas the whites retain their individuality. Moreover, we are told that the blacks are killed, whereas our finer sensibilities are protected in the description of the white bus, which merely crashes. Crucially, the white people in this extract are afforded more human qualities, which emotionally engage the reader in their misfortunes, even though these are far lighter than the misfortune of blacks. But throughout this newspaper report, the author is arguing that this kind of racial practice is a benign favouritism, motivated by newsworthiness, not genuine racism. However, the boundaries of this terrain of acceptable prejudice are not a matter of fact, and there are many who would abhor the fact that a writer could equate the death of black passengers with the misfortune of white passengers being involved in a bus crash.

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