

“The Media, Crime and Race”

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T H Barry Lecture Theatre, Iziko Museum of Cape Town

SPEAKER

Ian Glenn

Professor of Media Studies & Director of the Centre for Film and Media Studies,
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RESPONDENT

Pippa Green

Journalist and former head of SABC radio news

Ian:

See Ian Glenns' paper

Pippa:

See Pippa Greens' paper

Questions from the floor:

1. There are points I'd like to make about the media. First, there is a capitalist media that is promoting attitudes of capitalism, and there is a media that is promoting issues of communism or socialism. Second, whenever we hear a story in the media, we are only going to see the negative reflections of the story. Often, we hear a story about an incident, but it is never followed up, we never get a report back on how or even if it was resolved. The stories just vanish and we never hear anything more about them. This is especially true of scandals involving public figures or political figures.
2. This question for Pippa: what is your sense of what is called the juniorisation of newsrooms and the competency levels in newsrooms today, compared to ten or twelve years ago?
3. What about foreigners in our country committing crimes? I stay in Sea Point and apparently the biggest criminal gangs are the Russians. There's nothing on that in the media, nothing at all. Why is it that we hear nothing about that?

Speaker Responses

Ian:

What underlies all three questions is a point that Pippa raised more sharply than I did: the lack of skills and expertise that characterizes much of the media. I think it's scandalous that the *Cape Times* had its editorial staff slashed from eighteen to seven in one year. When that happens, we cannot expect quality reporting.

I quite agree that the media needs to do better job of sticking with stories and following up.

A final point that I forgot to make during my talk, but which relates to the question about a capitalist and a socialist media – often, our coverage of crime is not so much racially based as class based. This links to the point I made earlier about crimes involving high-profile people being more rapidly solved (or even solved at all), because of the huge media pressure that is brought to bear on police in those cases.

Pippa:

On the juniorisation of newsrooms: I don't believe that that alone is the nub of the problem. Some of the younger reporters at the SABC are more talented and harder working than the older guys. Often the people who'd been there for 30 years were relics of another era – the old had no capacity to investigate and question, because they'd never been allowed or expected to do that.

It's really sad what's happened to independent newspapers with the stripping of resources. The papers that are doing the best at the moment, in my opinion, are the News24 groups. But reducing investment in journalism is a world trend, and I suppose that relates to the question about capitalist media. Why would big business put money into media that constantly expose its ugly side? With certain checks and balances, however, I think the capitalist media can do a reasonable job of raising awareness levels.

With regard to foreigners' involvement in crime – I think this is linked to the amazing social transition we've been through. As South Africans, we often fail to see ourselves in a world context – we tend to see ourselves as unique. But the point with social transitions is that borders suddenly become porous and people flood in. The Russians themselves, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, experienced a massive explosion of crime in all areas of life, much worse than we have experienced here. What's happening now with some of the efforts at tightening up control of foreigners, both by the police and by Home Affairs, is partly aimed at rooting out criminal foreign elements.

Questions from the floor:

1. You spoke about the media owing society. I'd like to agree with you. I don't take the idea that we have an independent media very seriously – I'm not sure that papers like the *Cape Times* and so on are all that independent. When they report on crime, they seldom tell us anything about either the victim or the perpetrators. The accomplices of Dina Rodrigues, for instance – what was their motivation? What were their circumstances? The greatest motivator is poverty. But that is never addressed.
2. One of the problems of dealing with crime is the sheer variety of incidents. Think about the amazing publicity that the abduction of the child in Portugal received – yet it was only much later that the media began to relate that crime to the broader issue of child abduction and the use of children as slaves, soldiers etc. Very often, incidents are never contextualized within the wider framework of issues of which they are a part.

Speaker Responses

Ian:

The point about perpetrators is a good one. The great novels of the 19th century often focused on crime from the perspective of why the criminal did what he or she did, and the film **Tsotsi** tried to do that as well. I think it is a valuable approach. If we have no understanding of crime, we cannot hope to solve it. That said, I'm suspicious of the notion that it's all driven by poverty – if there is a liberal fallacy, I'd say that is one. Poverty doesn't drive the Russians, and it didn't drive Dina. There are more complex forces at work.

The issue of the Madeleine McCann abduction is a fascinating one. There have been a lot of critical comments – for example, why are there pictures of Madeleine at Cape Town airport when we have so many missing kids of our own? The reason, of course, is because that family has a publicist. The rest of the world depends on the media to report their child missing, and often the media is lazy or inadequate in reporting on these things.

Pippa:

A short comment on the abduction thing - I agree that the focus there has been on Madeleine has been quite amazing, and I'm not suggesting that that focus should have been any less, but it brings our attention sharply to the incredible lack of focus on missing children, both from the media and the police themselves. In fact, I know of incidents in which police have scolded parents for going to the media because it is perceived as criticism of the police, and the police don't want bad publicity!

Question from the floor:

1. Isn't the real problem that our media has become incredibly incident-based. What we don't see is the media becoming more issue-based – we've heard a lot of issues tonight but we need the media to pick up on those issues and report on them – endless reportage of random incidents is of no help.
2. Aren't we forgetting one thing: the calibre of the police. From what I understand, the sort of policeman we are dealing with today has deteriorated. The pay is terrible, and that makes it very hard to attract the right sort of person. The matter to be addressed is what sort of person are we recruiting as policeman, and who are the captains and people in charge?

Speaker Responses

Ian:

The old media question is what makes an incident – why are 170 people in pauper's graves not an issue, while a murder in a white suburb is an issue? I think there's a definite sense that editors tailor what they report on to fit their reader's tastes. The other side of that is that, when the media squeal, the quality of the police work suddenly goes up. If you go to a small township in a rural area, the media is not even reaching there, so that there is no media pressure whatsoever. Bad policing and media reliant on that, is a recipe for disaster.

Pippa:

It's not true to say that police pay has gone down. I also don't think that one is recruiting a worse type of person into the police force. I think it's more a question of trying to consolidate the various aspects of their training. I don't think it's fair to hammer the police in isolation for every problem.

I also think we need to remember that most victims know their attackers or murderers – we can have the best police force in the world, but if we don't fix the underlying social issues, those kinds of crimes are not going to change.

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