
Problematizing Race for Journalists: Critical Reflections on the South African Human Rights Commission Inquiry into Media Racism

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Abstract

How journalists report race and racism was at the centre of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Inquiry into racism in the media. A critical analysis of the conceptual assumptions in the Inquiry's Final Report, however, reveals serious limitations to the enterprise. In particular the flawed conceptualisations, plus the generalised character of the findings are of little help in assisting the momentum of eradicating racism in South African media, and for linking race transformation to issues of class, gender, sexual orientation and xenophobia. This article identifies the problems as race essentialism and a relativism about what constitutes racism. It argues instead that journalists need the concept of racialisation in order to change their reporting. The argument upholds the desired role of the South African media as one that contributes to a non-racial, as opposed to a multi-racial, society.

Introduction: Author, Process and Product

"The boundary and meaning of the concept of racism is the site of theoretical struggle" (Miles, 1993, p.7).

This article is written with the explicit acknowledgement that it cannot be "race free" in its authoring. The writer grew up as a 'white' South African under apartheid, and although he was later jailed for fighting the system, he would not presume to be free of all aspects of a racist mentality – many of which are deep-seated and not always easy to recognise. It is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning. As made clear in his submission to the Human Rights Commission Hearings in Johannesburg during 2000, one

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