

WRITING XENOPHOBIA:
IMMIGRATION AND THE PRESS
IN POST-APARTHEID
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SERIES EDITOR:
JONATHAN CRUSH

SOUTHERN AFRICAN MIGRATION PROJECT 2000

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mass media have become one of the most important institutions in modern society, playing a role not only in our learning and education, but also in how we see opportunities for change and improvements in our lives. For these reasons, the media are seen as a powerful vehicle for social transformation and development, and have drawn increasing attention towards themselves in contemporary society. The print media (ie newspapers) are particularly important in this respect, given that the press has traditionally been a provider of information on daily events and, for many people, are the only source of information about events that are not experienced directly.

This report discusses the South African print media's coverage of cross-border migration in the post-apartheid period and how it may affect public opinion on the topic as well as immigration legislation. It is based on a survey that was the first, and most comprehensive, of its kind ever undertaken in the country, drawing on more than 1 200 newspaper clippings about migration from all English-language newspapers between 1994 and 1998. The report presents both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of this media coverage and offers a set of recommendations on how the press could improve its reportage in the future.

In sum, the report argues that coverage of international migration by the South African press has been largely anti-immigrant and unanalytical. Not all reportage is negative, and newspaper coverage would appear to be improving over time, but the overwhelming majority of the newspaper articles, editorials and letters to the editor surveyed for this research are negative about immigrants and immigration. They are extremely unanalytical, uncritically reproducing problematic statistics and assumptions about cross-border migration.

A large proportion of the articles also reproduce racial and national stereotypes about migrants from other African countries, depicting — for example — Mozambicans as car thieves and Nigerians as drug smugglers. This “criminalisation” of migrants from other parts of Africa is made worse by the more subtle use of terms like “illegal” and “alien”, despite their being roundly criticised by institutions like the United Nations for contributing to misconceptions of an otherwise law-abiding group of people.

The aim of this report is not to convince the reader one way or the other about the merits or demerits of migration into South Africa. There is a vast and rapidly growing literature on the subject and the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) continues to make contributions to this debate. Rather, our intention here is to remind the reader

just how complex the migration debate is and how poor a job, in light of this complexity, the media have been doing in providing a more balanced, critical and reflective coverage of the issues.

At best, the press have been presenting a very limited perspective on cross-border migration dynamics and, in the process, are leaving the South African public in the dark about the real complexities at play. At worst, the press has been contributing to public xenophobia generally through weaving myths and fabrications around foreigners and immigration.

In terms of recommendations, the report makes four general points:

- Newspapers and wire services should assign one or two journalists to cover migration issues on a regular basis, with the time and resources necessary for covering the issues in an in-depth and critical manner. But resource constraints affecting newspapers militate against this idea; not every newspaper has the luxury of assigning a single person to a particular “beat”. However, given the importance of the migration issue at national and regional level (a point borne out by the sensational coverage already given it by the press), and the fact that it is destined to grow in importance over the coming years, there is justification in giving it the resources required for meaningful coverage. The fact that most of the daily newspapers are owned by only a handful of syndicates makes the resource issue less of a constraint if some of the research and writing were done in a more centralised manner.
- Journalists and editors should pay particular attention to how they report the immigration statistics they receive from “official sources”. An almost universal acceptance by the press of the misleading “fact” that there are somewhere between 2.5 to 4.1 million undocumented migrants in South Africa is a good example of the need for a more critical assessment of where these numbers come from, how they are obtained, how realistic they are, and what their implications are for thinking around cross-border migration. There is a growing body of literature on both the quantitative and qualitative impacts of migration in Southern Africa and journalists/editors should know what the debates are and who their sources are.
- Editors should attempt to strike a better balance in the coverage of migration issues. We recognise the need for free expression of ideas and it would be a serious mistake to ignore, or to try and cover-up, the widespread opposition to migrants and immigration that exists in South Africa. But newspapers also have a responsibility to recognise the need for more balanced coverage and

should be willing to address the racist and nationalist immigration biases of the past actively.

- Journalists and editors should address the sensational and “criminalising” language used in articles on migration. The terms “illegal” and “alien” should either be dropped completely and replaced with more neutral terms like “undocumented” or “irregular” migrants and a clear distinction made between the different types of non-citizens in the country. Permanent residents, contract miners, tourists, refugees and undocumented migrants are very different categories of migrants and should be recognised as such.

INTRODUCTION

In mid-1997 and late-1998, SAMP conducted two nation-wide surveys on the attitudes of South Africans towards immigrants and immigration.¹ The surveys' aim was to develop a better understanding of the causes and dimensions of xenophobia in South Africa, and they produced several interesting results. Firstly, it is apparent that South Africans on the whole carry strong anti-immigration sentiments, with fully 25% of the population calling for a complete ban on migration into the country and approximately half (45% in 1997 and 53% in 1998) calling for a "strict limit on the number of foreigners allowed into the country". Only 6% in the 1997 survey said that the government should "let anyone in who wants to enter", a figure that dropped to 2% in 1998. The remainder were "unsure" or said that people should only be allowed in if there were jobs available. These are very conservative attitudes towards immigration and considerably more conservative than comparable survey results from 17 other countries around the world, for which data exists (including the United States).

The surveys also found that South Africans hold strongly negative views about (im)migrants themselves, particularly people from other African countries. African migrants are perceived to be responsible for stealing jobs and causing crime in the country and for bringing in diseases like HIV/AIDS. In the 1997 survey, 37% of South Africans felt that "people living in South Africa from neighbouring countries" are a threat to jobs and the economy, 48% believed that they are a criminal threat, and 29% believed that they bring diseases (Note: totals add to more than 100% due to multiple responses). By contrast, only 25% of the sample said they had "nothing to fear" from foreign migrants living in South Africa.

Most importantly, these perceptions and attitudes were held by virtually every socio-economic and demographic group in the country. Men and women, whites and blacks, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, all held the same general negative stereotypes about immigrants and immigration. In other words, anti-immigrant sentiment is not only strong in South Africa, but is extremely widespread.

It is important to note that only 4% of the sample in 1997 and 6% of the sample in 1998 said that they had a "great deal of contact" with people from other African countries. Almost half said they had no contact whatsoever, with an additional 17% in both years saying they had "hardly any contact" with (im)migrants from other African countries. Clearly, then, anti-immigrant sentiments in South Africa are not a result of personal experience with non-citizens but rather a product of (mis)information from secondary sources like schools, friends and the media.

The media, especially the print media, have come under particular scrutiny in recent years for exactly this reason. Numerous research reports have directly or indirectly accused the South African press of contributing to xenophobia, with one report going so far as to claim that xenophobia in South Africa can be “attributed to the formulation and publicity given to various anti-illegal views through the media”.²

Unfortunately, research on this issue to date has been largely anecdotal and impressionistic, providing only a qualitative analysis of a select sample of print media clippings. What is required is a more rigorous, quantitative assessment of a representative sample of print media clippings from a broad range of sources. This report is an attempt to provide just such an analysis, and is based on a collection of 1 200 migration-related articles from all English-language newspapers and wire services in South Africa from 1994 to 1998. A representative sample of articles from this database was selected for analysis and assessed in terms of their quality and quantity of analysis.

The report begins with a brief overview of the print media in South Africa and highlights the major ownership and audience trends to give the reader a better sense of the size and distribution of the print media as well as its historical lineage. This analysis is followed by a review of the research methodology employed for this study. We then evaluate the character of migration reportage, first by looking at the distribution of articles that take a pro- and anti-immigration attitude to cross-border migration, and second, by looking at how sophisticated the analysis of migration is in the articles. We then take a closer look at language, with a focus on the use of negative phrases and metaphors, and their impact on conceptions and ideologies of immigration and immigration policy. The report concludes with some suggestions on how the media could address problems relating to coverage of migration issues.

In sum, two polarised perspectives currently characterise press coverage of foreign migration in South Africa. One section of the press (the majority) portrays immigration from an anti-foreigner perspective and calls for stringent and immediate controls, even an outright banning of immigrants. This media coverage also tends to be unanalytical, reproducing problematic research and anti-immigrant terminology uncritically. The other section of the press (the minority) is more accommodating and thoughtful in its coverage and attitude towards immigration, highlighting the positive impact of labour migration on the development of the economy and national reconstruction programmes, and coverage tends to be more analytical. However, the general tenor running through English-language newspaper reportage on foreign migration issues is more negative, more unanalytical than critical.

It is important, though, not to draw too strong an association

between media coverage and public behaviour on these issues. Research has shown that it is notoriously difficult to make direct, cognitive links between media representation and public attitudes and the academic community is highly divided on whether the media is a creator of attitudes or simply a reflector of attitudes that already exist (or both).³ Nor was our research intended to try and track this psychological link. As a result, we cannot make definitive statements about the role of the media in creating or inciting anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa. We do, however, feel that there is sufficient evidence from our research to draw a strong correlation between the way the print media covers migration issues and public attitudes in South Africa. The fact that press coverage of cross-border migration is so negative, coupled with the fact that South Africans get their information about cross-border migration from second-hand sources, suggests that there must be some association. The print media may not be the only reason that xenophobia exists in the country — indeed, many South Africans do not read newspapers due to illiteracy — but the print media does appear to be a significant part of the equation.

Finally, it should be noted that the media certainly has a right, even a responsibility, to report on xenophobic attitudes and actions in South Africa. Xenophobia exists in South Africa and it would be counter-productive to try and ignore or stifle these popular sentiments with an overly politically correct editorial policy. But the print media also have a responsibility to make sure they are not contributing unduly to the problem of xenophobia by internalising xenophobic language, uncritically reproducing anti-immigrant stories and research, or giving unrestricted freedom to xenophobic reporters. Blatantly racist editing and reportage would never be condoned in the new South Africa and neither should blatantly xenophobic editing and reportage. The South African print media will need to be more circumspect with respect to its own attitudinal biases when it comes to cross-border migration issues, and will need to think more creatively about mechanisms for a more balanced and critical coverage of this extremely important topic.

OVERVIEW OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN PRINT MEDIA

There are approximately 100 daily and weekly newspapers in South Africa. English-language newspapers dominate circulation, and evening newspapers have larger circulation than the morning contingent⁴, except that in recent times, *Sowetan*, the largest morning daily, has dislodged *The Star*, the largest evening daily, in terms of circulation size.⁵ Most importantly, the overwhelming majority of newspapers in South Africa are

controlled by a few large conglomerates, and management and editorial control of most of South Africa's mainstream press remains largely in white hands.

Under apartheid, there was little scope for any kind of an "alternative" (let alone black-owned) press, and there can be little doubt that the mainstream print media pandered to the ideological whims of the apartheid state, both in terms of the white supremacist views of the apartheid state as well as the anti-communist rhetoric of the government and capital.⁶ Since the end of formal apartheid in 1994, there has been a significant restructuring of media ownership in the country, with an estimated 40 black empowerment consortiums with some media interests. The process of change has been slow, however, with only one of the four major newspaper publishers in the country having significant black ownership — Times Media Limited (TML).⁷ The media has also come under increased scrutiny and criticism in the past five years, with accusations of racism still dogging the mainstream press.⁸ Moreover, the circulation and readership of a more independent, "alternative" press remains relatively small.⁹ Most of these alternative papers have had to depend heavily on overseas (mostly European) funding, and thus remain highly vulnerable financially. Without subsidies most face a gloomy future.¹⁰

English is not the only newspaper language medium in South Africa, of course. There are important Afrikaans- and African-language papers that also shape public opinion, but which are not considered in this report. It should also be noted that an estimated 10 to 15 million South African adults are considered "functionally illiterate". Rural Africans have the highest illiteracy rates (at more than 80%), but a surprising 40% of whites cannot read at Standard Five/Grade Seven level.¹¹ This does mean that these people do not read newspapers, or that they are unaffected by the kind of migration reportage described in this paper, but there is clearly a large percentage of the South African public that is not *directly* affected by print media reporting.

Nevertheless, English-language newspapers dominate the print media in South Africa, and millions of South Africans read English-language newspapers on a daily basis. *Sowetan* alone, with a predominantly black readership, has more than 1.5 million daily readers. The English-language press is also read by the most important decision-makers and policy advisers in the country regularly, and no doubt influences coverage in non-English newspapers as well as television and radio. With the advent of on-line newspapers on the Internet, the sphere of influence of the English-language press is only likely to grow in the future.

METHODOLOGY

As noted earlier, research on media and immigration in South Africa to date has been restricted to impressionistic evaluations of particular migration events/issues based on a limited number of press clippings. This study, by contrast, draws on a comprehensive data base of all English-language South African newspaper clippings related to cross-border migration from 1994 to 1998: articles, editorials and letters to the editor.¹² The selection of this database and the methods of analysis are therefore critical to the credibility of this report and are summarised here in some detail.

DATA SOURCES

Newspaper articles were drawn from the SAMP media database, a collection of migration-related newspaper clippings from all English-language papers in South Africa, several newspapers in Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique, and a variety of wire service articles available on the Internet (eg SAPA). Hard copies of articles were collected from a daily search of the newspapers by a research organisation that specialises in tracking reportage in the print media while Internet sources were taken from a weekly scan of wire service reports. In total, there are more than 3 000 articles dating back to 1975 on file. However, only articles since March 1993 have been entered into an electronic database for easy reference, and it is this electronic database that served as the source of articles for this paper.

Articles are serially filed according to a referencing system that combines the date of publication, name of author, title of article and newspaper source. Articles are also key-worded to allow for referencing of key issues, events and people. At the time of data selection (September 1998), there were approximately 1 200 articles entered in electronic format. A random selection of articles consisted of selecting every ninth article from a chronological print out, for a total of 132 articles, constituting approximately 11% of the total electronic database (Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sample by source and date).

That some newspapers have a higher proportional representation in the sample is due to their being published more frequently and/or to their coverage of migration issues more regularly (eg *The Star* is published daily [with its weekend version also giving regular coverage], while the *Mail & Guardian* is published weekly). It should also be noted that it is not our intention to single out any particular newspaper (or journalist) for praise or criticism, and for this reason we have kept direct

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE BY SOURCE AND DATE

Source of Article	Number of Articles	Percentage of Total Sample
Argus	9	7%
Business Day	4	3%
Cape Times	6	5%
City Press	4	3%
Financial Mail	2	2%
Mail & Guardian	9	7%
SAPA (Internet)	18	14%
Sunday Independent	2	2%
Sunday Times	8	6%
Sowetan	20	15%
The Star	38	29%
Other	12	8%
Total	132	100%
Year of Publication		
1994	26	20%
1995	14	11%
1996	31	23%
1997	25	19%
1998	36	27%

Note: Percent columns may not add to 100% due to rounding.

references to specific newspapers and journalists to a minimum in the main body of the paper. Having said that, the research does show a remarkable similarity in the nature of the coverage across the newspapers, with no one publication standing out as better or worse than the others.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analyses of the data took two inter-related formats. The first step was to assess the articles for their depth of analysis and their attitudes towards immigration. Our intent here was to determine what percentage of the articles in the sample was pro- or anti-immigration and what percentage was analytical in their coverage of migration issues, and then place these results on a two-dimensional graph. To accomplish this, a pair of co-ordinates was assigned to each article depending on the qualitative characteristics it possessed. These co-ordinates were then recorded on two orthogonal scales measuring the different qualities of the reports surveyed (see Figure 1). The first (horizontal) scale is designated the “attitude” scale and it measures how pro- or anti-immigration the articles are. The second (vertical) scale measures the “evaluative” character of the articles — that is, whether they are analytical or unanalytical in their reportage.

Superimposing the scales on each other thus produces a four-quadrant grid with each scale graduated from -5 to +5. On the “attitudinal” axis, -5 and +5 respectively denote “very anti-immigration” and “very pro-immigration” while zero (0) represents the neutral point. On the “evaluative” axis, a -5 represents a “very unanalytical” article and a +5 represents a “very analytical” article.

An example of what would be considered “unanalytical” is an article that uncritically reports facts and figures about “illegal immigration”. Articles which simply tell the reader that “X number of illegal immigrations were arrested at the weekend” or that “illegal immigrants cost the South African taxpayer X billion rand per year”, without any critical interpretation of these “facts”, or any attempt to contextualise the facts within the broader debates on migration would be considered “unanalytical”.

Our definitions of “pro- and anti-immigration” (the vertical axis) were as follows. Pro-immigration articles advocate a free(r) movement of peoples across borders in South and Southern Africa and are generally sympathetic towards the plight of migrants and refugees in the region. Anti-immigrant articles generally call for a decrease or complete shut-down of the number of migrants/refugees coming into the country and are largely antagonistic towards the presence of migrants/refugees in the country.

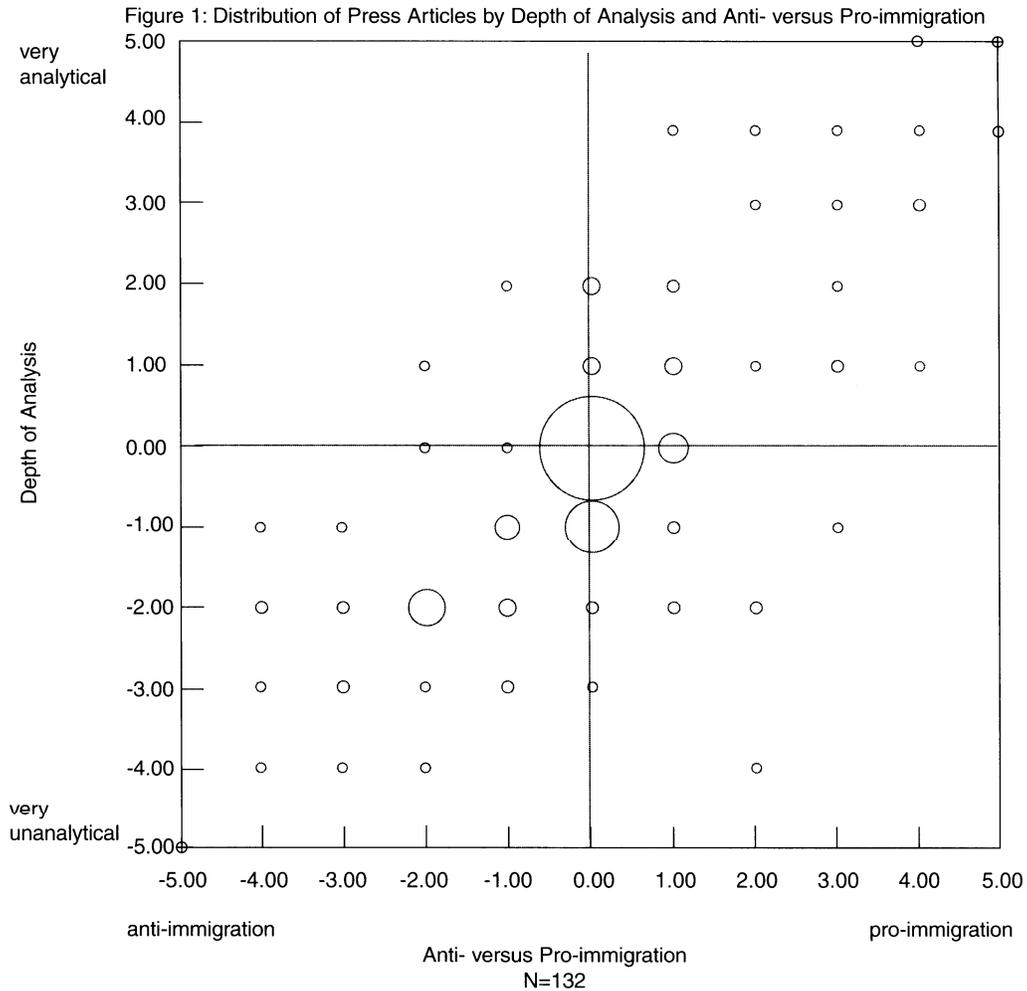
Admittedly, this qualitative analysis has its biases and limitations. The selection of the criteria and the subjectivity inherent in the ranking of the articles is clearly open to debate. Nevertheless, the method allows us to quantitatively represent an otherwise abstract evaluation of media coverage.¹³

The second method of analysis was a critique of the language used in the articles and the kinds of associations made between immigration and other social and economic developments (eg crime). This closer textual analysis of the articles concurs with previous research claims that the print media in South Africa tend to be “hostile to immigrants”¹⁴, but takes it one step further by providing a quantitative count of the percentage of articles that use a particular phrase or make specific accusations/associations about the role of migrants in the country.

DEPTH OF ANALYSIS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRATION

We begin our assessment with a summary of the attitudinal and analytical character of the articles, a visual summary of which is provided in Figure 1. Three trends emerge from the analysis.

Firstly, on the horizontal (evaluative) axis we see a relatively equitable distribution of reportage. There are slightly more articles that are anti-immigration (33%) than pro-immigration (29%), but this difference is



relatively small. We also see a large number of articles on the neutral point (38%), which means that they were neither overtly pro- nor anti-immigration. At first glance, these results suggest that there is a relatively balanced coverage of immigration issues taking place in the press, but the large number of articles on the neutral point is problematic, reflecting the tendency of journalists/editors to merely catalogue statistics on migration-related events in media reports (eg the number of deportations of undocumented migrants over a certain period of time). These are the “statistics-happy” reporters and editors, and, as we shall see, this apparent neutrality does not necessarily constitute good reportage or a lack of bias.

The second point to highlight from the figure is that the overwhelming majority of articles (70%) are either at or below the mid-point of the vertical axis (ie the axis which assesses how “analytical” the article

is). Unlike the horizontal axis where the mid-point is neutral, the mid-point on the vertical axis simply means that the article was mediocre in terms of its level of analysis. Only 30% of the 132 articles assessed are above the mid-point in this respect, and only 13% rate a +4 or +5 on the analytical scale (ie “very analytical”). In some instances, reports also lacked coherence and/or contradicted their own stories — a clear indication of hasty and irresponsible reporting as journalists failed to cross-check their facts or the veracity of the information they came across. Clearly there is a need for reporters to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the issues and debates. Our earlier comments about journalists not having the time (or the support) to devote to in-depth studies of issues is particularly relevant here, and highlights the need for editors and owners of newspapers to address the lack of specialisation in their reportage on critical issues such as cross-border migration.

The third, and most important, point to highlight is that the data shows a clear distribution trend from the bottom-left quadrant to the top-right quadrant of the figure, with very little data in the other two quadrants. In other words, articles that are anti-immigration in their coverage also tend to be unanalytical (bottom-left quadrant) while articles that are pro-immigration tend to be more analytical (upper-right quadrant), with several articles at both extremes and a large proportion of articles at the mid-point of both axes. Not all articles fell into these two quadrants but the data certainly suggests a trend.

In sum, our analysis of the sample points to print media that is largely “unanalytical” in its coverage of migration issues (70%), with another third (33%) of the coverage being blatantly anti-immigrant. This latter figure, as we shall see, increases substantially when one considers the more subtle forms of discrimination and xenophobia that permeate the headlines and text of newspaper reports on the subject. This negativity is only partially balanced by pro-immigration, analytical articles. In fact, “balance” may not be the appropriate term to use here as the reportage shows more of a polarisation of analysis than anything else does, with little scope for debate or cross-referencing of other interpretations of migration issues. As a result, newspaper readers in South Africa will have found it very difficult to arrive at an informed position on issues of cross-border migration and the role of (im)migrants in the country.

CHANGES OVER TIME

There does, however, appear to be a change in the quality of reportage over time. As outlined in Table 2, the number of articles in the bottom-left quadrant of Figure 1 has decreased as a percentage of the sample for each given year. In 1994 and 1995 fully half (50%) of the articles were classified as “anti-immigration”. This figure dropped to 28% in 1997 and

TABLE 2: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OVER TIME

Year	Percentage of articles considered "anti-immigration"	Percentage of articles considered "unanalytical"	N
1994	50%	58%	26
1995	50%	57%	14
1996	39%	42%	31
1997	28%	48%	25
1998	17%	42%	36
Total	33%	70%	132

17% in 1998. Similarly, there was a considerable fall in the percent of articles considered "unanalytical", from a high of 58% in 1994 to a low of 42% in 1996 and 1998.

Some of this change is due, no doubt, to the increasing number of articles being submitted to newspapers by NGOs and research organisations with a more analytical and/or pro-immigration bent (which, in turn, was likely a response to the kind of superficial and negative coverage that characterised migration reportage in the early to mid-1990s). But the results also support anecdotal evidence that there is a growing awareness of the complexities of migration on the part of journalists and editors in the mainstream press and a recognition of the need to develop more balanced and nuanced coverage of the issues. How far these changes will go, and how deep the commitment to balanced coverage is, remains to be seen, however. Moreover, optimism in this regard must be tempered by the fact that media coverage remains polarised and much of this coverage is extremely negative, racist and xenophobic — as shown by a closer, textual analysis of the sample in the following sections.

PERPETUATING STEREOTYPES

One of the most damning indictments of the print media in South Africa is that they perpetuate negative stereotypes about migrants and contribute to xenophobia in the country.¹⁵ Whether the media create these attitudes on their own or simply reflect the prevailing attitudes of the day (or both) is a moot point, and, as noted in the introduction to this report, cannot be resolved here. What we can provide is irrefutable evidence of the type and scale of migrant stereotyping that takes place in English-language newspapers, and discuss why this is a problem in the South African context. We look first at three of the most common stereotypes — migrants as job-stealers, migrants as criminals and migrants as "illegals" — and then address the use of sensational

language and headlines, the conflated use of the terms migrant, immigrant and refugee, as well as the questionable use of statistics on the number of undocumented migrants in the country. We then look at the cumulative effects of these negative references and the number of multiple references made in each article. The fact that so many South Africans believe that migrants from neighbouring African countries are criminals, job-stealers and carriers of disease, is all the more reason to be concerned about the print media's role in creating and/or perpetuating these stereotypes.

MIGRANTS AS "JOB STEALERS"

One of the most common refrains in the print media about the impact of cross-border migration on South Africa is that migrants "steal jobs". The general impression given is that migrants (mostly "illegal") are flooding into the country to find work, despite high unemployment rates of 35%-45%. As one respondent in a survey conducted by the *Mail & Guardian* complained: "We have people roaming on the streets with degrees, but they do not get jobs because companies have given jobs to foreigners."¹⁶ Demands expressed in newspaper publications to deal with the situation include the imposition of strict controls on foreign migration, putting a stop to the issuing of work permits for foreigners, and revoking those work permits that have already been issued.¹⁷

More radical voices have even demanded that all foreigners in possession of fake immigration documents be jailed until the year 2000, after which they should be deported.¹⁸ In one notorious incident, an irate mob killed two Senegalese and one Mozambican national suspected of being "'job-stealing' foreigners".¹⁹ Hawkers and traders are singled out for particular attention in this regard and are given extensive coverage in the press, with many articles and reports clearly supporting the allegation that "foreigners are unacceptably encroaching on the informal sector and therefore on the livelihoods of our huge numbers of unemployed people".²⁰

Journalists and editors are certainly right to argue that these issues are critical to migration debates. The problem here is that no one knows for sure what the overall impact of international migration has been on the labour market in South Africa and it is impossible to say with any certainty how migration affects unemployment. To assume that immigration leads to worsening unemployment among South African citizens is extremely problematic and ignores a growing body of research which argues that migrants create jobs as well as compete for jobs in South Africa.²¹ One of the articles surveyed even went so far as to say that the research challenging the popular notion that migrants steal jobs is weak and disingenuous: "Researchers and so-called experts

regurgitate studies done elsewhere in the world that say that immigration, no matter how uncontrolled, is good for the economy because newcomers start their own businesses and create jobs...There is usually very flimsy evidence to support these claims and it often seems conclusions are reached before research is done.”²² Not all research is good research, of course, but to dismiss the very real debates about labour markets out of hand in this manner only serves to polarise the migration debates even further.

Equally concerning are the repeated references to migrants as a drain on the South African fiscus. Many of these articles make direct reference to the costs of immigration, either quoting government and police officials or simply extrapolating provincial estimates to the country as a whole. Consider the following: “The government has to spend about R397 000 on each illegal alien, which translates into about R1.98 billion being spent on maintaining illegals last year”²³ and “This year alone it cost more than R210 million — a tenth of the entire amount budgeted for the [Reconstruction and Development Programme] — just to house, educate and police and give medical care to only one sector of the problem: the illegal Mozambicans.”²⁴ Budgetary estimates vary widely, from R200 million a year to R2 billion a year but all reports making reference to this issue seem to agree that the situation is “very serious” with non-nationals posing a “threat to South Africans as far as services are concerned.”²⁵

The problem, once again, is a lack of reliable information. No one knows for sure what the budgetary impact and service delivery implications are as a result of cross-border migration. Research has shown that African migrants do want access to basic services like water, health care and education in South Africa²⁶, but it has also been shown that many of these migrants are willing to pay for the services they receive, and are sensitive to the fact that housing and other basic needs are in short supply in South Africa.²⁷ Moreover, it would also appear that most migrants of African origin are in the country on a temporary basis, meaning that it is unlikely that they will become long-term users of services.²⁸ More importantly, without reliable estimates on the number of non-nationals in the country it is impossible to estimate what it costs to host them. The media are certainly justified in reporting the estimates made by police, government and researchers on the costs of immigration in South Africa, but given the dearth of reliable information these figures should not be reported without a strong qualifying statement on the lack of reliability of these estimates. It is also worth noting here that 14% of the articles in the sample made direct reference to the Human Sciences Research Council estimates that there are between 2.5 and 4.1 million undocumented migrants in South Africa — despite growing

criticism of these estimates as completely indefensible.²⁹ By contrast, only 3% of the articles surveyed made reference to these figures as problematic.³⁰

MIGRANTS AS “CRIMINALS”

Crime is another example of how the print media contributes to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in South Africa. Fully 25% of the articles reviewed associated migrants directly or indirectly with crime in South Africa. Some articles went as far as laying the blame for the high levels of crime in the country squarely on the shoulders of non-nationals: “The high rate of crime and violence — mainly gun-running, drug trafficking and armed robbery — is directly related to the rising number of illegals in SA.”³¹

“Illegals”, as the last quote attests, come under particularly harsh scrutiny and are regularly linked to drugs, guns, corruption, counterfeiting, fraud and prostitution.³² One article reported that the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) had seized 228 weapons from “illegals” during an anti-crime blitz, and alleged that with these weapons these migrants would be able to commit a number of serious crimes, including bank robbery, rape and housebreaking.³³ Other articles merely associate migrants with criminal activities by making reference to migrants in the same sentence, as a reference to an anti-crime operation — eg “Security force personnel arrested 931 people, including 464 illegal immigrants, during high density crime operations...”³⁴ Although less direct, the association is no less accusatory, and is a typical example of the kind of statistics-happy reportage referred to earlier.

No one would deny that foreign nationals are involved in crime in South Africa, and that many of these criminals are in the country without proper documentation. It is also very likely that the level of involvement of non-nationals in crime has increased in South Africa since the end of apartheid and with the increasing globalisation of crime in general. The problem here is that the research has simply not been done to allow for the kinds of accusations being made. Anecdotal evidence of the involvement of non-nationals in crime may very well be newsworthy, but the uncritical association of migrants with the majority of crime, or with particular types of crime, in South Africa is simply indefensible. The use of nothing more than statistics to represent migrants as criminals is particularly problematic because it also decontextualises and dehumanises the migrants alleged to have been involved in crime and does not allow the reader to try and situate these figures within the broader reality of crime in the country, or to try and understand why (and if) these alleged crimes have been committed.

Most disturbing of all, however, is the way in which the print media

tend to nationalise and racialise crime involving migrants. Criminal syndicates, smuggling and drug-trafficking are usually associated with particular groups of foreign nationals in South Africa, with black Africans being portrayed either as perpetual criminals or more prone to commit serious crime than immigrants from non-African countries. In the process, crime is not only “racialised”, it is also “africanised”. There are articles, for example, which deterministically associate Nigerians and Moroccans with controlling the drug trade (especially that of cocaine), while Congolese are identified with passport racketeering, Zairians with diamond smuggling and Lesotho nationals with the smuggling of gold dust and copper wire (back to Lesotho). Mozambican and Zimbabwean women have been portrayed as indulging in prostitution and Mozambicans are alleged to be operating an international car-stealing syndicate.³⁵

It should be noted that the article about prostitution does say that Thai, Romanian, and Bulgarian women are also involved in these “criminal activities”, and there are regular reports about Taiwanese and Chinese “illegals” said to be responsible for the smuggling of poached contraband, suggesting an additional layer of racial and ethnic bias at play — but these reports are not as frequent as stories about crimes committed by African nationals.³⁶ More importantly, there is an almost complete lack of references to crime and illegality on the part of Western Europeans and North Americans in South Africa, despite the fact that nationals from these regions also commit crimes and some are in the country “illegally”.³⁷ When African (and to a lesser extent Asian) migrants are associated with a criminal act the event becomes newsworthy, while the same crime committed by a white foreigner is ignored or given less publicity.

To be sure, not all journalists perpetuate these stereotypes and many have begun to question the association of migrants with crime. As one article points out: “Far from immigrants causing most of the crime in South Africa, most gave crime as the reason they didn’t want to stay here longer than necessary.”³⁸ It is not our intention, however, to prove the case one way or the other. Immigrants do partake in criminal activities and they are also victims of crime. The point here is that there is a need for the South African press to be more objective and impartial in its coverage of foreign migration and crime. The way the press has portrayed and africanised crime in South Africa shapes public definitions of the “crime and violence problem” in the country, and no doubt contributes to a simmering potential for conflict.³⁹ The print media’s explanations of crime are overlaid with racist/nationalist ideologies that serve to knit together the enigma of crime and its causation.⁴⁰

Importantly, the criminalisation and africanisation of migration is

just as true of black-orientated newspapers as it is of white-orientated newspapers. The coverage of the *Sowetan*, for example, the largest daily in the country with more than 1.5 million predominantly black readers, a largely black editorial staff, and majority-ownership by the largest black consortium in the country, is no different in this respect than the white-orientated newspapers surveyed for this study. Similarly, black journalists (from all of the papers surveyed) are no less likely to be xenophobic than their white counterparts, in terms of the way that migration is nationalised and migrants are stereotyped. That this is so should come as no surprise, given the high levels of xenophobia across virtually every demographic group in the country.⁴¹

MIGRANTS AS “ILLEGALS”

Related to this issue of migrants as criminals is the use of the term “illegal”. Although it is seldom explained in the South African press, the term “illegal” is used to refer to anyone who has over-stayed a visa, given false information/documentation to enter the country or to obtain formal documentation, and/or those who have entered South Africa clandestinely. Despite the fact that the term has been widely criticised in academic and non-governmental literature on migration for its criminalising implications — with the terms “undocumented” or “irregular” being the preferred nomenclature by groups like the International Organisation for Migration and the United Nations — it is widely used in the South African press. In fact, the term “illegal” was the most common negative index in the articles, occurring in 38% of the sample.

In using this terminology, the press has pre-defined thousands of otherwise law-abiding migrants as lawbreakers and described their very presence in the country as a crime despite the fact that there may be good logistical or financial reasons for why they have entered the country without documentation or over-stayed a visa (eg the costs and difficulties in obtaining visas in some neighbouring countries). More importantly, there is no questioning of the legislative framework defining the legality of migration in the first place, despite the fact that the apartheid-era legislation currently on the books, the Aliens Control Act, is rooted in a history of racism and anti-semitism, which has been challenged on numerous occasions as being in violation of the new South African Constitution.⁴² Even the recent White Paper on International Migration, a discussion document put out by the South African Department of Home Affairs, admits that the Aliens Control Act is not always consistent with the Constitution and other national legislation.⁴³ The media has paid considerable attention to this White Paper in other respects, but has failed to make any mention of this issue of “legality”. In doing so, “illegal migrants” are all the more easily

constructed as scapegoats on whom the ills of society can be blamed. Not surprisingly, the term is used primarily to describe migrants from other African countries, and is hardly (if ever) used to describe those Europeans or North Americans who are in the country without proper documentation.

The common use of the term “aliens” (found in 24% of the sample) to describe non-nationals exacerbates the problem by driving yet another degree of “otherness” between the citizens of South Africa and “aliens” from outside the border. The fact that the term was initially used to single out Africans and Jews in the early parts of this century is reason enough to discard it as part of the contemporary reporting language (in the same way that no respectable South African journalist would ever use the term “kaffir” uncritically).⁴⁴ Official government documents on migration (eg the White Paper) unfortunately continue to use the term, lending it a certain degree of legitimacy and neutrality (it is also commonly used in the United States), but there can be no denying that the term has taken on a pejorative flavour in South Africa, and is commonly used in the same sentence or article as the term “illegal” or associated with negative and/or stereotyped behaviour of non-nationals. The implied sense of “difference” and “unwantedness” can only serve to aggravate sentiments of xenophobia in the country and should therefore only be used with extreme caution.

The press can be criticised for not making a concerted effort to address this issue of language in its reporting and for not acknowledging the controversial nature of the terms. Only 6% of the articles surveyed used more neutral terms to describe non-nationals. Also problematic is the conflated use of the terms “migrant”, “immigrant” and even “refugee” to describe non-nationals — regardless of their status in the country. Permanent residents, work permit holders, tourists, refugees and new citizens represent very different categories of (im)migrants and should not be lumped together into one, indistinguishable group. In total, 30% of the articles in our sample made this mistake.

SENSATIONALISM

Sensationalism also typifies reporting on migration issues in the press. Headlines are particularly bad in this respect, with bold titles like, “Illegals in SA add to decay of cities”, “6 million migrants headed our way”, “Africa floods into Cape Town”, and “francophone invasion” being common examples.⁴⁵ We also come across repeated references to aquatic or mob metaphors like “hordes”, “floods”, “flocking”, and “streaming” in the text of articles.⁴⁶ In total, 25% of the articles surveyed used sensational headlines and 9% used sensational metaphors in the text of the report.

It was also common to see negative references to other countries in Africa, with comments like, “as long as South Africa remains the wealthiest and strongest country on a continent littered with economically unstable and dysfunctional nations, it will continue to attract large numbers [of migrants].⁴⁷ References to “Strife-torn Central Africa” and “Africa’s flood of misery” are two other examples of negative images with one article suggesting that “Johannesburg’s inner city is now assuming the appearance of a typical sub-Saharan African city”, prognosticating doom for South African urbanites if the migration trend continues.⁴⁸ Twelve percent of articles made these kinds of negative references.

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE COVERAGE

Taken on their own, the percentages cited thus far for each of the negative indices may not seem that high. But the cumulative affect of these references is quite shocking, with more than half (56%) of the articles containing at least one negative reference and 20% of the articles having four or more different negative references in a single report (Table 3). It was not uncommon, for example, to find an article which made reference to migrants as “illegal”, as “alien” as “criminals” and as an “economic burden” all at once. Two of the articles surveyed even managed to make reference to all 10 of the indices summarised in Table 3.

Factor analysis also showed a high degree of correlation between the various indices with r values as high as .558 for the relationship between articles that viewed migrants as an “economic burden” and articles that gave inflated estimates of the number of migrants in the

Type of negative reference in article	Percentage of sample
Makes reference to migrants as job-stealers and/or as a general burden on the South African economy	24%
Associates migrants with crime	25%
“Nationalises” and/or “africanises” crime	11%
Refers to non-citizens as “illegals”	38%
Refers to non-citizens as “aliens”	24%
Uses negative metaphors to describe migration into South Africa (eg floods, hordes, waves)	9%
Presents negative images of other African countries	12%
Uses inflated statistics on the number of (im)migrants in South Africa	17%
Uses sensational headline(s)	26%
Percentage of articles that use at least one negative reference	56%
Percentage of articles that use two or more different negative references	36%
Percentage of articles that use four or more different negative references	20%

country. Similarly, the correlation between negative images of Africa and the “africanisation” of crime, and the use of the term “illegal” and a sensational title, were very high ($r=.462$ and $r=.376$ respectively).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, coverage of cross-border migration issues by the English-language press in South Africa leaves much to be desired. Highly sensationalised, africanised and negative reporting of migration issues is generally in the form of superficial, statistics-happy articles that do little to inform the reader about the complexities of migration or how it fits in with broader social, political and economic developments in the country/region. Readers are all too often left with little more than incriminating innuendoes and sensational accounts of what migrants are alleged to have done.

Not all migration reportage is negative, however. There is an increasing number of articles that develop a more detailed analysis of the issues at hand, and there are journalists and editors that are clearly “pro-immigration” or are questioning the negative stereotypes about migrants and migration. It should be pointed out that 44% of the articles surveyed did not make any reference to the negative indices described in Table 3. It would also appear that a more balanced coverage of migration issues is evolving over time.

Nevertheless, it is incumbent on the press in South Africa to both recognise and address its inadequacies when it comes to issues of migration. The following recommendations could help the press (and, indeed, the media in South Africa in general) to adopt a more informed and balanced reportage on migration. The single most important recommendation would be for newspapers and wire services to assign one or two journalists to migration issues on a regular basis, and to give them the time and resources necessary to cover the issues in an informed and critical manner. There are clearly resource constraints here, and not every newspaper has the luxury of assigning one person to a particular “beat”, but given the importance of the issue at national and regional level (a point borne out by the sensational coverage given to it by the press already), and the fact that migration is set to grow in importance over the coming years, there is justification in giving it the kind of resources required for meaningful coverage. The fact that most of the daily newspapers are owned by a handful of syndicates makes the resource issue less of a constraint if the research and writing are done in a more centralised manner.

A second recommendation is that journalists and editors pay particular attention to how they report the immigration statistics they receive

from “official sources”. The almost universal acceptance by the press of the “fact” that there are somewhere between 2.5 to 4.1 million undocumented migrants in South Africa is a perfect example of the need for a more critical assessment of where these numbers come from, how they were obtained, how realistic they are, and what their implications are for how people think about cross-border migration. There is a growing body of literature on both the quantitative and qualitative impacts of migration in Southern Africa and journalists/editors should know what the debates are and who their sources are. Journalists should also be prepared to listen to a variety of sources and not just the perspectives and “expert opinions” of white authorities (especially the police) who are usually considered more reliable and unbiased than those of black people.⁴⁹ Indeed, interviews with non-nationals are few and far between in the press — particularly non-nationals from other African countries.

Thirdly, editors should attempt to strike a better balance in the coverage of migration issues. We recognise the need for free expression of ideas, and it would be a serious mistake to ignore, or to try and cover-up, the widespread opposition to migrants and immigration that exists in South Africa. But newspapers also have a responsibility to recognise the need for more balanced coverage and should be willing to address actively the racist and nationalist immigration biases of the past. A recent debate in *City Press* giving two sides to the migration debate is a good example of how this can be accomplished.⁵⁰

Finally, journalists and editors should address the sensational and criminalising language that is used in articles about migration. The terms “illegal” and “alien” should either be dropped completely and replaced with more neutral terms like “undocumented” or “irregular” migrants, or at least placed in brackets, and a clear distinction should be made between the different types of non-citizens in the country. Permanent residents, contract miners, tourists, refugees and undocumented migrants are very different categories of migrants and should be recognized as such.

The press does not bear sole responsibility for high levels of xenophobia in South Africa, but it clearly contributes to the problem and must recognize the role it plays in creating and reinforcing ideologies, discourses and policies related to cross-border migration and the lives of migrants. Given its strategic importance in this area, it is critical that the press adopts a more balanced, in-depth and evaluative approach to the way that it covers migration issues in the country. As South Africa becomes more integrated into the region, and as it moves hopefully toward an increasingly democratic future, the role of the press cannot but assume an even greater importance in constructing what, and how, South Africans think about migration issues.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 See for example, M. E. McCombs and D. L. Shaw, 1993, "The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty years in the market place of ideas" *Journal of Communication*, 43(2); D. McQuail, 1994, *Mass communication theory: An introduction*, London: Sage; J. Havick, 1997, "Determinants of national media attention" *Journal of Communication* 47(2); D. McQuail, 1997, "Accountability of media to society: Principles and means" *Journal of Communication* 12(4).
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- 5 See G.S. Jackson, 1993, *Breaking Story: The South African Press*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- 6 W.R. Johnson, *Dismantling Apartheid: A South African Town in Transition*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994, p 120.
- 7 Ferial Haffajee and David Shapshank, "Gloves off in the battle of the paperweights" *Electronic Weekly Mail*, 8 March 1999.
- 8 The South Africa Human Rights Commission is currently soliciting opinions on racism and the media as a result of these allegations.
- 9 G.S. Jackson, *Breaking Story*.
- 10 P.E. Louw, "The Growth of Monopoly Control of the South African Press", in Louw, P.E. (ed.), *South African Media Policy: Debates of the 1990s*; Anthroppos: Bellville, South Africa.
- 11 Statistics are taken from a Harvard University/University of Cape Town study undertaken in 1995, and reported in the *Mail & Guardian*, 2 June 1995.
- 12 Letters to the editor are not direct reflections of a newspaper's attitude towards migration, but were included in the sample because they do reflect editorial decisions about what should be printed in the paper — particularly when the

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 - 28 D. McDonald *et al*, "Challenging xenophobia".
 - 29 On this point see J. Crush, "The discourse and dimensions of irregularity in

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- 30 It is worth noting here that even the recently released White Paper on International Migration also reproduces the same misleading statistics without any qualifications (Republic of South Africa, *White Paper on International Migration*, Government Gazette, Pretoria, 1999, p 18).
- 31 Anon., “No turn of the tide: A policy is needed urgently before the problem becomes explosive” *Financial Mail*, 9 September 1994.
- 32 P. Olivier, “Illegal aliens ‘costing SA taxpayers R2-bn a year’” *The Cape Argus*, 17 August 1996; Anon, “Illegals pushing up bills in SA” *The Star*, 15 April 1996; Anon, “5052 people arrested by SANDF and police last month” SAPA, 13 August 1998; Anon, ‘Troops arrest 2 500 illegal immigrants in Kruger Park this year’, SAPA, 26 August 1998; K. Ross, “Swoop on car gang” *Daily News*, 9 May 1995.
- 33 Anon, “5 052 people arrested by SANDF and police last month”.
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- 39 H. Kagee, “Ad hoc immigration policies feed xenophobia as Africa moves south” *The Cape Argus*, 1 February 1997.
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