

Pistorius trial represents a turning point for the dailies

 By [Anton Harber](#)

14 Mar 2014

My university and I were lambasted by a colleague for stooping so low as to engage in the Oscar Pistorius trial media frenzy. When we held a pre-trial briefing for journalists by University of the Witwatersrand experts on forensics and gender violence, Independent Publishers Association president Mahmood Sangley asked: "Since when does the academy buy into the agenda of tabloid journalism?"

He quoted commentator Stephen Friedman, who responded to a request for comment with this: "I find it alarming that, despite the richness and the complexity of this country's two-decade-old attempt to build a democracy, the only issue you wish to discuss with me is a rather tawdry criminal trial. I am horrified by this misplaced sense of priorities."

Another colleague, a regular writer on media issues, Julie Reid of the University of South Africa, posted on Facebook her response to a call for comment: "Why are you so concerned with my take on media ethics in relation to this 'celebrity trial'? Why don't you call me to ask about media ethics each time a journalist misrepresents another so-called 'service delivery protest'?"

My view

I, on the other hand, have been willing to get my hands dirty, even as I roll my eyes at the over-the-top coverage and the amount of trivia one has to wade through. I think our university's role is to make its resources available to encourage better reporting and I do not believe interest in this case precludes interest in other issues.

On the contrary, the trial is stimulating a healthy national debate about our justice system, race, gender, privilege and the fear-and-gun culture of a significant section of this country.

It has produced the occasional excellent piece of writing, which may be all one can really hope for, and I would cite the thought-provoking work of Margie Orford, Sisonke Msimang and Rebecca Davis in particular. Interestingly, all are women and two appear in that persistent voice from the digital sidelines the Daily Maverick.

A new media ecology

This points to one of the reasons I am interested in the coverage of the case: we are watching every day the emergence of a new media ecology, driven by social media and forcing the traditional media to experiment and innovate as they struggle to keep up the pace.

Some daily newspapers are taking the view that they can't beat the other media, so they are focusing on what they do best. The Witness editor Andrew Trench chose to keep his eye on the local news that sets his paper apart, and Business Day offers only a single-paragraph page-three mention on occasion.

One is reminded of when Hendrik Verwoerd, then editor of Die Transvaler, covered the royal tour of 1947 only with a warning that traffic would be disrupted because of the visit by "a certain Mr and Mrs Windsor". Verwoerd went on to do other things.

A turning point

I think the trial represents a turning point for our generalist daily papers, unable to match the speed and conversational nature of electronic media. You will notice that few newspapers publicised the most recent audited sales figures, and that was because they were dismal, with the sole exception of the Mail & Guardian. I fear the Pistorius story will accelerate this trend.

Some are innovating, particularly through multi- and cross-media. Beeld has launched the online BeeldTV channel. Blogging and tweeting by reporters are superseding conventional reporting.

Talk Radio 702 reporters are now seen on Carte Blanche's pop-up television channel as much as they are heard on radio. It is hard to keep up - as the trial judge has learnt.

Of course, there is a danger that all of this is reduced to a circus and it has the corrosive social effect of the media mania around the OJ Simpson trial. A key difference here is that the judge has her finger on the off button for live broadcast, and this is keeping a hold on media conduct. And we do not have a jury, so a lawyer or witness who performs for the cameras runs the risk of irritating the judge.

Besides, it is just a fascinating tale, with an uncertain ending. And you can't say that about the elections.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote Diepsloot (Jonathan Ball, 2011), Recht Malan Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of The A-Z of South African Politics (Penguin, 1994/5), What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic (Jacana, 2010) and Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism (Jacana, 2010).

- Find bright new ways to connect to readers - 31 Jul 2015
- Publish and be damned in name of patriotism - 24 Apr 2015
- Criminal libel has no place in law books - 20 Mar 2015
- One step forwards, one back for democracy - 2 Mar 2015
- Investment in people keeps news groups afloat - 13 Feb 2015

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>