

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Making the environment news: reporting industrial pollution in Durban

Journal Item

How to cite:

Barnett, Clive and Svendsen, Njord V. (2002). Making the environment news: reporting industrial pollution in Durban. *Rhodes Journalism Review*, 21 pp. 54–55.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjrpdf/RJR_no21/Pollution_in_Durban.pdf

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

**Making the Environment News:
Reporting Industrial Pollution in Durban**

Clive Barnett*

&

Njord V. Svendsen**

* Clive Barnett is a Lecturer in the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, UK. In 2001, he undertook research into social movement activism and media restructuring in South Africa, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, while based at the Graduate Programme of Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Natal, Durban.

** Njord V. Svendsen is currently a journalist in Norway. In 2001, he graduated with an MA from the Graduate Programme of Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Natal, Durban, where he researched the news coverage of air pollution in South Durban.

Browning the Environment in Post-Apartheid South Africa

The current round of corporatisation and commercialisation of media organisations has put severe pressures on serious, critical and independent news journalism around the world. Coverage of complex issues has, in many contexts, declined due to increased pressures for cost efficiency in news organisations. Current trends in media restructuring only further exacerbate the extent to which predominant definitions of newsworthiness often militate against sustained coverage of environmental stories. Environmental issues pose a severe challenge to established routines of news making, because they tend to involve long-term time frames, involve multi-faceted causal relations, and are characteristically associated with discourses of scientific expertise.

Our research on the news reporting of industrial pollution in the South Durban basin illustrates that serious journalism on environmental issues is certainly possible. Pollution has been a pressing concern for local communities in South Durban for decades. From the 1950s, the area was the site of simultaneous industrial development and forced relocation of African, Indian, and Coloured communities under the Group Areas Act. The residential areas of South Durban suffer very high levels of air, ground, and water pollution, not least because of their contiguity to two oil refineries and myriad petro-chemical industries. But sustained news coverage only really began in the early 1990s. This is all the more notable given a more general international trend for environmental news to decline in the 1990s. Of course, this upswing coincides with the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy in South Africa. But macro-level political change does not in itself explain this particular development. Our research indicates that the key to effective coverage of environmental issues is the quality of relationships between journalists on the one hand and activists and NGOs.

We start from the observation that news is socially constructed, in two related senses. Firstly, journalists depend on information produced by public relations companies, corporations, government ministers, social movements, and NGOs. Secondly, these same actors also engage in the strategic performance of newsworthy events to attract media coverage. In South Africa since 1994, institutional changes and economic restructuring of the news media have significantly transformed journalist's source strategies. In particular, the value to journalists of social movement activists as sources has been enhanced. At the same time, new political opportunities mean that the need for media coverage amongst movements has been heightened. One of the most important contributions of new environmental NGO's in South Africa during the 1990s was to redefine the environment from a 'green' issue to a 'brown' issue. This involved a move away from a predominant 'green' conservationism to a people-oriented focus on the relationships between pollution and poverty, in terms of health problems, working conditions, and living environments. One of the main strategies for effecting this redefinition, and thereby connecting up the interests of poor black communities with those of more affluent white communities, has been the deployment by activists of the vocabulary of environmental rights and justice enshrined in the new South African constitution.

Framing Pollution

The primary aim of activists in South Durban has been to challenge the culture of denial that has characterised corporate and state attitudes to pollution both before *and* after the end of apartheid. There is a forty-year history of local knowledge of health problems, leaks, and school evacuations, countered by a tradition of state and corporate secrecy, often combined with the deployment of scientific expertise to de-legitimise community complaints. The objective of activists has been to mobilise media attention in order to 'shame' powerful actors into changing their practices.

The changing pattern of news about industrial pollution in South Durban indicates a fundamental shift in the norms of journalism in a favourable, democratic direction. During the 1990s, the number of stories about industrial pollution in general, and air pollution in particular, in Durban's mainstream commercial newspapers (such as *The Mercury*, *Daily News*, and *Sunday Tribune*) increased almost exponentially. In the late eighties, there were fewer than ten stories on air pollution in a five-year period. Throughout the 1990s, there has been a steady increase in the number of stories, with nearly 60 stories on air pollution alone in 2000. The high point of the South Durban environmental activism in terms of media coverage came in September 2000, with a weeklong series of investigative news stories in Durban's leading daily paper, *The Mercury*. The 'Poison in Our Air' series of stories, written by Tony Carnie and based on extensive investigative work, provided unprecedented coverage of local community concerns in the mainstream media. Coverage in *The Mercury* was projected nation-wide, not least by attracting follow-up stories in national broadcast media. The stories used a human-interest narrative that focussed upon the unusually high incidence of cancer-related deaths in the South Durban area, particularly amongst children. This focus on children's health provides a universalising frame that enabled the plight of a specific set of poor black communities to be articulated with the concerns of a readership that is still predominantly white. This series also illustrates the fundamental shift in the pattern of sources represented in environmental news. Prior to 1995, official government and business voices dominate as cited sources in all coverage. But from 1995, the voices of individual residents, local community organisations, and NGOs emerge as equally legitimate sources.

The increase in representation of local residents' voices and the opinions of activist organisations is associated with a shift in the style of reporting that works to lend considerable authority to these otherwise relatively powerless voices. Stories about the quality of everyday life in South Durban, describing the routine experiences of living in the shadow of oil refineries and other polluting industries, have gained more and more prominence. The adoption of a storytelling narrative, focussing on individual life histories and hazards, is a means of reconciling the long-time frames of environmental change with the daily-ness of definitions of news. News coverage increasingly gives space and credence to a counter-discourse of local experience that contrasts with the 'objective', technical-bureaucratic discourse of business and government. The predominant focus of news reporting has increasingly been upon the conflict between different public, private, and civil society actors concerning the future of industrial development in the South Durban area.

The enhanced legitimacy of local communities as sources is underlined by the emergence, epitomised by the 'Poison in the Air' series, of a much more interpretative style of news reporting that compliments the adoption of storytelling forms of narrative. Environmental journalism in the early 1990s tended to be framed by a neutral, de-personalised narrative style, in which objectivity is established by the elision of the reporter's authorial voice. Since the mid-1990s, the presence of the reporter's voice in stories becomes much more common, explicitly interpreting issues and events. The interpretative presence of the reporter's voice is an important means of mediating between the specific concerns and experiences of South Durban residents and a more general readership, much of which has little direct experience of living conditions in this part of the city. By giving space to an alternative construction of pollution in the area, the articulation of ordinary experience with journalistic interpretation contextualises the discourse of science and expertise as just one perspective in a fundamentally contested public debate. *The Mercury's* reporting of South Durban is the outcome of the changing organisational dynamics of the Independent news group of which it is a part. These

include the parent group's commitment to a business-led agenda of economic development; the commercial imperative to reposition newspapers in an effort to engage broader readerships and retain revenue; shifts in the norms of reporting towards human-interest stories; and a gradual transformation in the general ethos of journalism. The conclusion that what is needed is further research and better monitoring provides a frame within which conflict can be discursively reconciled around a solution that all sides can agree to.

The South Durban case illustrates that, in a context of increasing commercialisation, the capacity of mainstream news media to pursue a critical watchdog role crucially depends on the capacities of non-media actors to collect, monitor, and distribute knowledge and information. The increase in news coverage of industrial pollution issues has been primarily enabled by the emergence of a single organisational 'voice', the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) in 1997, able to credibly represent the concerns of diverse communities in the area. Journalists involved in covering South Durban broadly divided into two camps in their attitude to community organisations and NGOs as sources. Those who have only occasionally covered the issue have tended to be somewhat sceptical of activist groups. On the other hand, journalists with the environment as their speciality beat have come to see local activists and community organisations as highly useful and credible sources. They are also much more inclined to accept advocacy journalism as a legitimate vocation.

The credibility of environmental activists and organisations as sources is an achievement of a varied communications and lobbying strategy undertaken by SDCEA, and associated NGOs such as *groundWork* and the Environmental Justice Network Forum. A key objective of these groups has been to establish legitimacy and credibility amongst journalists, in order to attract mainstream media attention, and thereby establish their public legitimacy in the eyes of government and business. As well as tried and trusted techniques such as holding public meetings in local communities to mobilise support, SDCEA has also adopted highly innovative campaigning strategies. For example, they have developed the 'Toxic Tour'. This is an excursion of the South Durban basin that takes in a series of key *sites* and *sights* of pollution, uncontrolled industrial development, hazardous chemical storage, habitat destruction, and much else. The Toxic Tour is a low cost but highly effective way of staging the problem of industrial pollution for local journalists, visiting activists, and academics, as part of a strategy of developing awareness and publicising the problems faced by local communities. The media-savvy of local environmental activists is also illustrated by the launching of a 'Bucket Brigade' campaign in 2000, an idea borrowed from US environmental justice movements. This is a simple strategy for empowering local by providing them with a basic capacity to monitor industrial pollution. The launch of the Bucket Brigade in South Africa was made into a rolling news story, organised as a national event, starting in Durban but moving on to pollution blackspots in other provinces. The aim was to publicise the inadequacy of both government and corporate monitoring of industrial pollution. The campaign attracted news coverage in both the print media and on national radio and television, and the Bucket Brigade campaign continues to generate news by providing local communities with a means of publicising the results of pollution monitoring exercises.

The case of news coverage of pollution in the South Durban basin indicates that the value of activists and NGOs to news organisations has significantly increased since 1994. This is down to a combination of shifts in news agendas and journalistic norms and the fact that, in this case at least, activists have been particularly effective in adopting a repertoire of campaigning and protest strategies that is well suited to changed criteria of newsworthiness. Through these strategies, activist groups have successfully performed

their own legitimacy as community representatives, and have also succeeded in staging the industrial pollution as a newsworthy story. Local activists and NGOs have in turn become important intermediaries enabling journalists to cover stories by providing spokespeople and contacts with local residents.

Learning from South Durban

The main objective of South Durban environmental activists has been to mobilise mainstream media attention as a means of acting upon national government ministries and major multi-national corporations. In this respect at least, they have actually been highly successful. The amount of coverage has certainly increased, and local residents and environmental organisations like SDCEA and *groundWork* have gained credibility and prominence as sources. In turn, journalists have begun to apply a broader repertoire of styles and approaches to their work, indicating an attempt to address a wider audience about the significance of environmental rights. In news coverage since 2000, it has become routine for government and corporate initiatives on environmental issues to be ascribed to the sustained mobilisation by communities and activist organisations. Furthermore, it is clear that media coverage has significantly altered the dimensions of public debate about environmental policy not just in South Durban, but at a national level too. For example, in early 2001, the Independent's national business paper, *Business Report*, established an environmental news beat, based in Durban. This illustrates the extent to which the potential environmental and social impacts of industrial and urban growth have become issues that business investment decision-making can no longer ignore. The example of South Durban is therefore indicative of the extent to which a culture of public accountability around environmental issues has begun to open up through the articulation of local and national activism with mainstream environmental journalism.

We do not want to idealise this particular example, nor under estimate the continuing pressures facing journalists in South Africa and elsewhere in covering contentious issues. There are four themes that emerge from this case study that we want to underscore in conclusion. Firstly, media transformation in South Africa since 1994 has transformed the norms of news making and newsworthiness. New technologies like e-mail have changed the speed, frequency, and range of distribution that political actors can attain in accessing news organisations. Initiatives to promote 'developmental journalism' in training and education have also enhanced the importance of environmental issues. In principle, all of these changes open up opportunities for new political actors to gain credibility as legitimate news sources. Secondly, the practical realisation of the democratic potential of news media depends on the ways in which activists, social movements, and NGOs engage with the changed imperatives driving news journalism in post-apartheid South Africa. The journalists interviewed in our research acknowledged that the presence or absence of community-based organisations is a crucial factor in determining the extent and nature of coverage of contentious political issues. Thirdly, this leads on to the observation of the importance of locally embedded activist organisations being able to network internationally, in order to access various resources, including technical assistance and discursive framing strategies. Taken together, these three factors indicate the prerequisites that must be met if civil society actors are to effectively mobilise the potential of news media to act as mediums of democratic accountability. To conclude, however, the fourth and final observation we want to make about this case study is a point of caution. One of the key reasons why this story has become a focus of extensive news attention is because of the importance of the South Durban industrial region as a hub of *national* economic growth. This same degree of national significance does not attach itself quite so easily to all contentious issues. This

underscores the point that the democratic role of the news media is not merely a matter of journalistic practice. It depends more broadly upon the capacities of progressive political actors to articulate the scales of everyday life with the scales at which effective political power is exercised, by adopting discourses and strategies that demand the attention of news media organisations.