

UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

ABSTRACT

By

Thembeka Ntuli

It generally appears that headlines, story content, photographs and sources in different South African newspapers are often the same. This conformity poses a major threat to democracy as diversity in all facets of the media is important in order to help the public make informed choices. Using the case of the Schabir Shaik trial, the study investigated the extent of conformity in the news output of selected newspapers: *The Citizen*, *The Star*, *Sowetan* and *Natal Witness* from January 2001 to June 2005. Only selected front page stories and editorials of the newspapers were studied.

Thematic content analysis, quantitative and qualitative methods were used to explore the subject. The study was predominantly informed by theories of news production which posit that news is not the actual truth; it is in fact a selective representation of the world. The notion of objectivity was extensively debated and it was observed that complete “objectivity” as an ideal is unattainable especially when one considers that news-making processes are complex and influenced by a number of diverse factors. The study also argues that sources play an important role in shaping news content because they set parameters and define terms of reference. It emerged in the results that the sharing of news and reliance on similar sources across publications breed homogeneity; that most news is covered in an episodic/dramatic fashion for the purpose of profit and that objectivity is frequently not practised in newspaper editorials. The study concludes that media should promote diversity in all facets and strive for balance when covering stories.