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Xenophobia in the headlines: an analysis of news media coverage of the Xenophobic protests in Jeppestown, South Africa in 2019

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ABSTRACT

The news media craft and contribute to discourse relating to xenophobia. This discourse can challenge, transform or reinforce beliefs and behaviours, impacting the insecurity and precarity of African foreigners living in South Africa. This case study explores the nature of balance in the media coverage of violent xenophobic protests in Jeppestown, Johannesburg, in September 2019. The study contributes to existing research on news media coverage of xenophobia, examining the media content produced and assessing the implications of imbalance. A qualitative content analysis on 60 news articles published about the Jeppestown protests examines the aspects of balanced news reporting as it relates to context and analysis, news framing, and representation.

The research shows that this media coverage contained little context and analysis of the protests. The limited representation of the protestors and victims was framed by a dominant criminality narrative, with language reinforcing the othering of foreigners. The implications of this media approach are far-reaching. It erases the personal experience, history, politics, and complexities of xenophobia. It also obscures the prevalence of xenophobia in contemporary South Africa, reinforcing and legitimising beliefs that underpin the severe marginalisation of African immigrants in South Africa.

Conversely, the study also highlights the benefits of balanced news media coverage that represents events and individuals accurately and fairly, brings different perspectives to the fore, and grapples with the complexities of the Jeppestown protests and xenophobia in general. As part of this, the case study considers the challenges – because of how media production influences which news is published, balance is interpreted differently as worldviews differ, and the media are inconsistently impartial regarding human rights issues – in instituting balance in the media.