REPORTING AIR POLLUTION IN SOUTH DURBAN

A CASE STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM IN DURBAN NEWSPAPERS FROM 1985 ÷ 2000

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ABSTRACT
This is the first extensive study of environmental journalism in South Africa. Through the use of quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles as well as interviews with journalists, the study examines the coverage of air pollution in South Durban in three Durban newspapers during the years 1985, 1990, 1995 and 2000. South Durban is home to a large number of heavily polluting industries, among them two petrochemical refineries, situated in the midst of large, and as a result of apartheid policies, predominantly black residential areas.

Firstly, the study finds that coverage was scarce in 1985 and continued that way for the rest of the decade. Coverage increased with the political changes in South Africa, starting in 1990. There was a marked increase in 1995, and in 2000 the issue was given extensive coverage. Government sources are dominant in the coverage throughout the period. In 1995 and 2000, South Durban residents and NGOs emerge as important sources.

Secondly, coverage changes from largely following a standard set of news values and structures, to become increasingly heterogeneous in both content and form. This development tends to favour the previously marginalised voices of residents. In short, the representation of air pollution in South Durban has intensified and changed during the 1990s towards a much stronger focus on the residents’ rights and concerns.

Investigating the journalists and their practices and views, the study finds that there is a significant divide between the reporters who have the environment as their beat interest and those who have not. Their views differ with regards to sources, the relationship between environmental and developmental issues, and professional ideals. Most importantly, the environmental reporters see themselves as advocates for the environment.

Environmental journalism has potential normative value for journalism in general, and the study concludes that the changing news discourse surrounding air pollution in South Durban brings a real democratic achievement.