

REPORTING AIR POLLUTION IN SOUTH DURBAN

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

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INDEX

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The press and the environment	3
The aim of the study	3
The case of South Durban	4
The structure of the dissertation	5
Chapter 2: Theories	7
Media and the environment: A research overview	7
Theories of news	16
Normative theories of journalism	18
Theories of discourse	20
Critical discourse analysis	21
Summary	22
Chapter 3: Methods	23
Data collection	23
Sampling criteria	23
Methods of analysis	24
- Content analysis	24
- Critical discourse analysis	25
Chapter 4: Content analysis	29
Democracy puts South Durban on the map	29
Enter residents and NGOs	31
Summary	33

Chapter 5: The discourse of air pollution	34
Conflict and change	34
Who is speaking?	35
- The absence of residents	35
- Representing residents: From margin to centre	36
- Representing business: The reporter as interpreter	39
- Representing air pollution as disease: The reporter as storyteller	41
What are they saying?	43
- Air pollution as a health topic	43
- Air pollution as law and human rights	44
- The changing discourse of government and business	45
- Vocabulary: From neutral to expressive	45
Summary	46
Chapter 6: The practice of environmental journalism	48
Why are they saying it?	48
Objectivity or Advocacy?	50
Sources	54
Developmental issues and environmentalism	56
Democratisation or marketization	57
A resource for renewal? Environmental journalism as investigative journalism	60
Summary	63
Chapter 7: Conclusion	64
Bibliography	69

	Page
List of figures	
Figure 1: The development of newspaper coverage of South Durban	30
Figure 2: Sources represented in 1995 measured in percentage	31
Figure 3: Sources represented in 2000 measured in percentage	32
Appendices	74
Agenda of questions serving as basis for interviews with journalists	74
Newspaper articles	

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.

