

More 2010 scare stories to come between exploding boobs, bloodbaths?



By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetZA](#)

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Cape Town geologist Dr Chris Hartnady is an unlikely person to turn up in a front-page story of a national British tabloid but he did just that - much to his own surprise.

Earlier this month Hartnady, a former UCT professor who is now the research and technical director of geoscience consultancy Umvoto Africa, was "quoted" in the *Daily Star* tabloid as saying [an earthquake could hit South Africa during the 2010 FIFA World Cup](#). (Wayne Rooney "could be shaking in his boots" at the prospect, said the paper).

Crying foul

Facebook and Twitter were quickly awash with indignant South Africans crying foul over the story and over an earlier *Daily Star* splash claiming British football fans were facing a [machete bloodbath fuelled by a race war](#) after AWB leader Eugene Terre'Blanche's death.

Hartnady told Bizcommunity.com this week that he never spoke to the paper. It's clear to me that an enterprising *Daily Star* hack was noodling around on the web and came across this [December 2009 opinion piece](#) by Hartnady in the *Cape Argus* (and reproduced on [Umvoto's website](#)) in which he warns that South Africans need to be more aware that we do *infrequently* have earthquakes and there need to be risk analysis and contingency plans in place to deal with a future disaster.

The happy hack cut and paste the following section of Hartnady's sober thoughts:

"A major earthquake disaster in the region is inevitable because wide areas of southern Africa are affected by the slow, southward spread of the East African rift system. It is not a question of if, but when. And the consequences would be so expensive in terms of mortality and economic cost that the risk of being ill-prepared is unacceptably high. Major earthquakes can lead to large-scale loss of life and property due to building collapse, fires and landslides on unstable slopes, and catastrophic disruption of dam walls and water mains, and roads, railways and fuel pipelines."

Broke it up into different quotes

The British journalist broke it up into different quotes, attributed to them to Hartnady but didn't phone him to check facts and get more information. If he had, of course, Hartnady would have torpedoed the newspaper's angle that there was a quake risk during the world cup. In fact, even the sentence before the above extract above clearly states:

“The continent has limited historical records and there have been just three or four events of a magnitude of seven or higher on the Richter scale since 1900 — compared with hundreds globally in the last 30 years.”

Hartnady says that there is no scientific basis for predicting earthquakes of a specific size at a specific location and on a specific date but he's taking a pragmatic view of the *Daily Star's* scurrilous story:

“To be frank, I thought it was rather hilarious. I console myself with the thought that - sensationalism notwithstanding - it may have some beneficial awareness-raising consequence. Maybe even Wayne Rooney could now be interested in becoming an ambassador for earthquake-preparedness in Africa.”

Smear campaign?

But, jokes aside, what lies behind the *Daily Star's* screaming headlines of bloodbath and natural disaster? Should we as ordinary South Africans be annoyed? Yes, we should. Both stories are patently ridiculous. Should we be surprised? No, we shouldn't. Does it amount to a smear campaign? Yes and no. What does it say about the British press's view's on South Africa? Far less than you think and to understand why, you have to look at where the *Daily Star* fits into the British media world?

I lived in London in the mid-1990s and my first job (before I got a proper one in book publishing) was as office dogsbody in the Morning Group office servicing a large portion of the South Africa's morning newspapers. One of my tasks was to read the five national tabloids - the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Star* - to scan for South African news. I quickly became an expert on how to spot fake boobs and I can also tell you I always left the *Daily Star* 'til last.

The national tabloids are by their nature conservative (though not necessarily supporters of the Conservative Party) because that is the market they serve. The *Daily Star* is on the right-wing loony fringe and is regarded as such by the vast majority of British newspaper readers. Its 800 000 plus average sales a day may sound a lot to us in SA but the UK has 10 national papers. *The Sun*, according to the February 2010 British Amps, has 2.9 million readers and the *Daily Mail* 2.1 million.

Not influential

Nor are the *Daily Star's* readers influential. They are the residents of the council estates. You seldom even see people with the paper on the Tube as most of their readers are simply not economically active.

The *Daily Star* - and indeed all successful tabloids across the world - truly treats itself as a product rather than a newspaper. Tabloids look at what their readers love and hate and dish it up in feisty bold capital letters on the front page. So the *Daily Star* knows that their readers love saucy celebrity stories to brighten up their God-awful lives, hence its front-page lead a few days after the earthquake story on [Jordan's horror boob scare](#) (they may explode or drown her if she takes a dip in the sea). Their readers also love football, hence their focus on the coming world cup and they hate immigrants, who take jobs away from them, and generally anything foreign because it's, well, foreign.

If it sounds like they are peddling prejudice, you're dead right. But this is not unique to the British tabloids. Before the [xenophobia riots in SA](#), our own *Daily Sun* tabloid cynically tapped into their readers' fear of foreigners in copy. Probably chastened by the horrible violence of the 2008 riots, the paper seems to have toned it down since then.

In a way, you have to admire how the UK tabloids can take a body of truths and amp it up into something less than truthful - a prediction of doom - but for which they cannot be sued. Their “machete war” story is based on fact: the AWB did threaten to avenge Terre'Blanche's death immediately afterwards and ANC Youth League President Julius Malema did sing “Kill the Boer” on many occasions.

It's a fine line and tabloid editors are not ill-educated like their audiences but highly skilled at editing and they know the law.

Afrophobia

I'd say there is an element of Afrophobia in the *Daily Star's* stories and probably even racism because the paper is tapping into its readers' prejudices.

Branding expert [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#) wrote a very interesting piece here on Bizcommunity in February about [Afrophobia among Germans](#), some of whom don't think the world cup should have ever gone to Africa. He warned of the risk of other nations "brandjacking" the 2010 World Cup and "applying one of the most lethal forms of competitive branding: once reserved for states at war with each other, the practice of belligerent branding is aimed at sowing doubt and fostering fear in the mind of the consumer".

The hand-wringing over race relations in South Africa that followed Terre'Blanche's death will play straight into the hands of brandjackers. And, frankly, it doesn't help to have [Malema going on Mugabe-style rants](#) when BBC reporters ask him uncomfortable questions.

Influential broadsheets

But, by and large, the international press that counts - the influential broadsheets - treated the Terre'Blanche saga as we in SA did: in a textured manner. *The Guardian* newspaper, for example, even has an entire [South Africa page](#) that deals with our interesting country in all its complexity, good and bad.

But, brace yourself, as there will probably be more world cup scare stories to come from the *Daily Star*. "South Africa" is the ninth most-searched term on the *Daily Star's* website (according to its own list) in between "Germany" and "Crossword" so the paper will know it's on to a good thing here. "Jordan", by the way, is number five.

For more:

- Bizcommunity Opinion: [Why are European soccer bosses crying wolf over 2010?](#) [Dr Nikolaus Eberl]

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