

# 'Bad news' still selling well in the new South Africa

Long-term analysis of general media coverage in SA media: February 2000 - February 2003

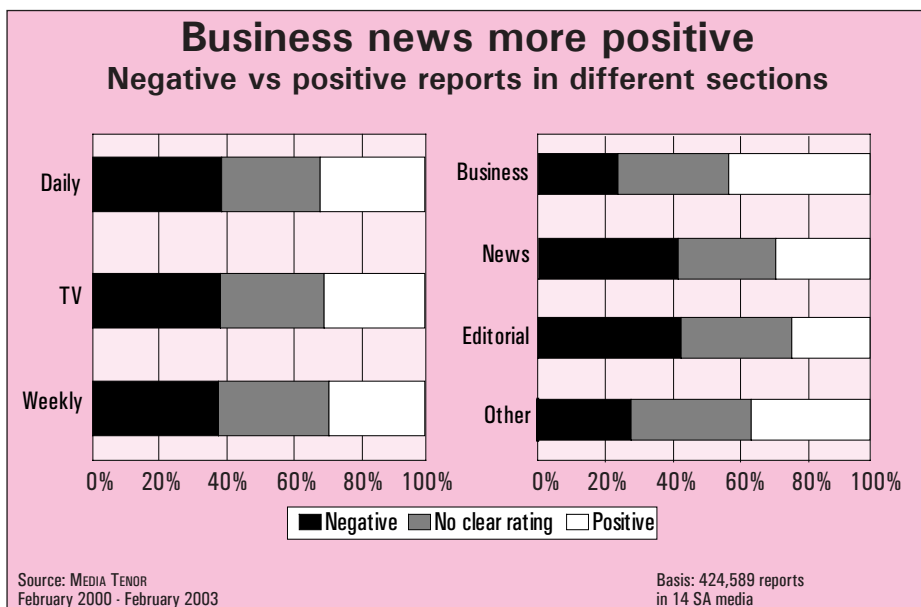
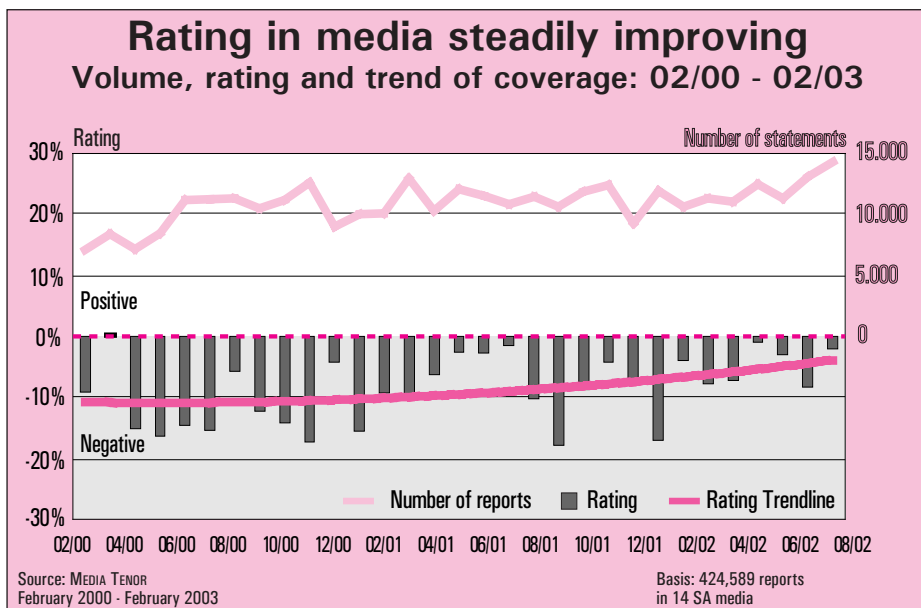
The concept of 'good news' seems far fetched and ludicrous in an age where 'blood guts and gore reporting' generates headlines. Newspapers choose to steer clear of what can be dubbed developmental news, instead opting for the more sensational. And no wonder. 'Good news' just doesn't seem to sell. Open any newspaper and the headlines will inevitably make any reasonable person cringe – but still we read on. People tend to filter out good news – it is too slow and just not memorable enough. But does this innate craving for the sensational 'bad news' contribute in any way to a positive perception of the world around us? Certainly not. If the media implicitly tells us what to think about and how to think about it, it should attempt to look at any given journalistic opportunity in a multi-perspectival manner. But how do South African media fare, considering that South Africa is celebrating 10 years of democracy, and media independence, next year? MEDIA TENOR looked at exactly how the 'good news'-'bad news' syndrome transpires in SA media, during a three year period from February 2000 to February 2003, in weekly, daily print as well as television media.

## SA media still largely negative

Liberating itself from national censure, South African media had to reshape itself after 1994 into a democratic role emerging very much as the watchdog of the people. Crime and corruption replaced the 'terrorist threat' of the Apartheid press, and inevitably good news became marginalised. This trend is still very much evident when looking at the results of the three-year research. Although there is a distinct upturn in positive reporting in the 424 589 reports generated since February 2000, South African media is still largely negative. This is of course mostly due to the predominantly implicitly negative context of reports, whereas the explicitly negative stance is steadily declining.

## Weekly media driving negative trend

Of all the media in South Africa, weeklies seem to be the most outspokenly critical. The MAIL AND GUARDIAN has an amazing share of 34% negative reports, followed by the CITY PRESS and SUNDAY INDEPENDENT (both 14%). THE SUNDAY TIMES and RAPPORT have a very similar share of 7% and 8% respectively. February of this year sees



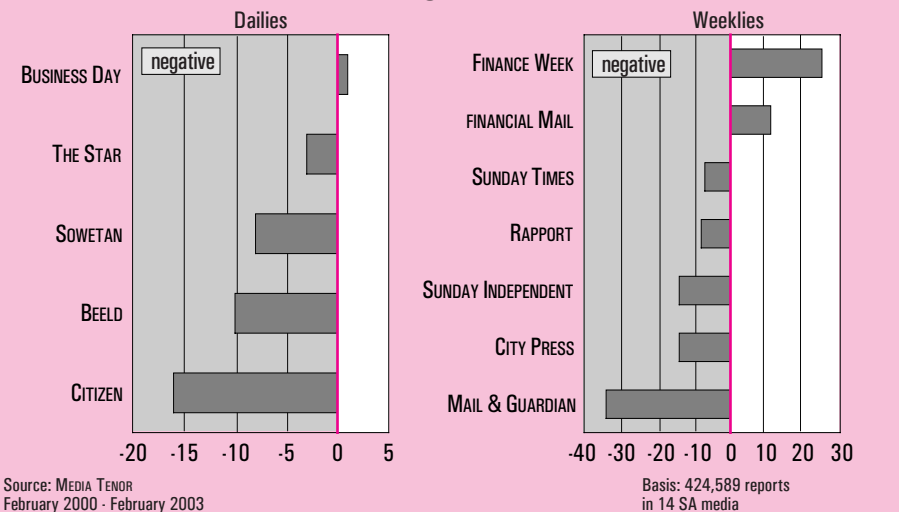
a remarkable decrease in both negative and positive reports and an upsurge in neutral coverage. Amongst the dailies (with an implicitly negative trend), the CITIZEN is the most negative (16%) followed by BEELD (10%), SOWETAN (8%) and THE STAR (3%). The BUSINESS DAY however, is generally more positive. The two financial publications, FINANCIAL MAIL and FINANCE WEEK also single themselves out from amongst the weeklies with more positive coverage (11% and 25% respectively). Although most reports are to be found in the news section of all South African media, more positive coverage is generated by the business and economic sector, almost double than the editorials. This is certainly contextually bound, but is generally reflective

of an ever improving economy. This positive trend with a surprising change in the explicit rating for the better, is also evident in TV media. E-TV on average covers far more reports than any of the SABC channels, yet it is the least negative (6%). SABC Zulu/Xhosa, Sotho and English news share a similar 9% negative rating with Afrikaans news at 8%.

## Africa still a lost continent according to media

President Mbeki has called for a new partnership amongst African nations. But if South African news is anything to go by Africa is still very much viewed as a lost media continent. Although Africa follows South Africa (receiving a 2% negative

### Financial media driving more positive agenda General tone of coverage: weekly and daily media



share), it receives a 29% negative rating. But the bad news does not stop there. The bulk of reports still goes to, and understandably so, Crime, Domestic issues, Health and Politics. These obscure such 'good news' as Research and Development, Culture and Sport that make their way into the media even though with a response that outweighs the negative by far. R & D, although receiving relatively little coverage, receives 36% positive reports in the weeklies, the same figure in the dailies and 51% (positive) in TV media. Culture receives a similar positive share (49% dailies, 39% weeklies, 73%TV), but also as little coverage. Sport however, receives a rather big chunk in terms of volume of coverage (the most covered topic in news excluding the sport section), as well as generating 16% positive reports in weeklies, 37% in TV and 28% in dailies.

#### Sacrifices for commercial interests

Although MEDIA TENOR's results certainly shows a definite positive trend in South African media, 'bad news' still dominate. The bottom line remains: 'bad news' seems to equate good circulation and unfortunately good circulation inevitably – albeit incorrectly, for many equates good journalism. This does raise the question whether 'good news' should be sacrificed for commercial interests. The recent dismissal of THE SUNDAY TIMES editor Mathatha Tsedu for a decline in KwaZulu Natal readership figures, is such a case in point. According to Tsedu his attempt to transform the paper to a more African character by calling for a more developmental approach, impacted greatly on its style and inevitably on readership figures, obviously frustratingly non commercial. But needless to say equitable coverage of both ends of the news spectrum is vital when our President's call for not an African but also a media renaissance, is heeded to create a truly democratic society. But so is the commercial. sp

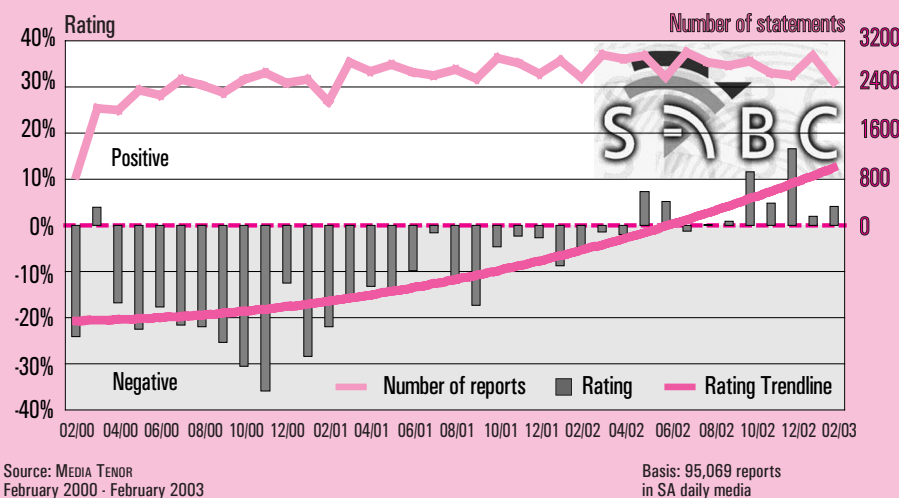
#### Basis

**Media:** BEELD, BUSINESS DAY, CITIZEN, SOWETAN, THE STAR, CITY PRESS, MAIL & GUARDIAN, RAPPOR, SUNDAY INDEPENDENT, THE SUNDAY TIMES, FINANCIAL MAIL, FINANCE WEEK, SABC TV NEWS, E-TV NEWS

**Time:** 1 January 2000 - 28 February 2003

**Analysis:** 424,589 reports in news, business and editorial sections

### Television increasingly positive Volume, trend and rating of coverage on SABC and E-TV



### Weekly media focusing on negative stories Volume, trend and rating of coverage in weekly media

