

# The war is back on the agenda

Impact of the WALL STREET JOURNAL and television network news on the concerns of Americans 2002-2003

The end of the Iraq war pushed economic issues back onto the American media – but the uncertain situation in Iraq and the continuously rising death toll among Allied troops overshadowed news coverage in the summer, as well. Thus concerns about the economic situation or the future of the healthcare system only made it briefly into the top ranks of American preoccupations.

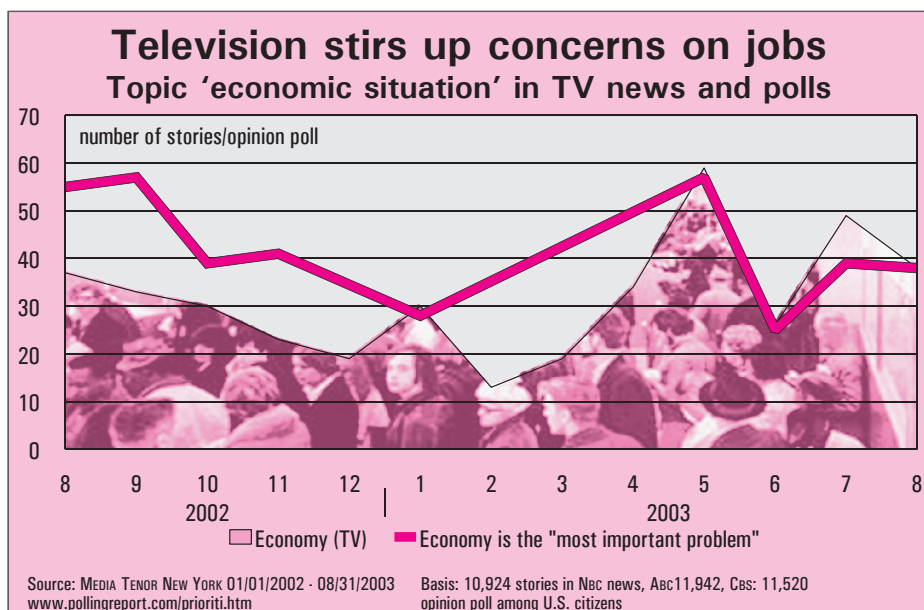
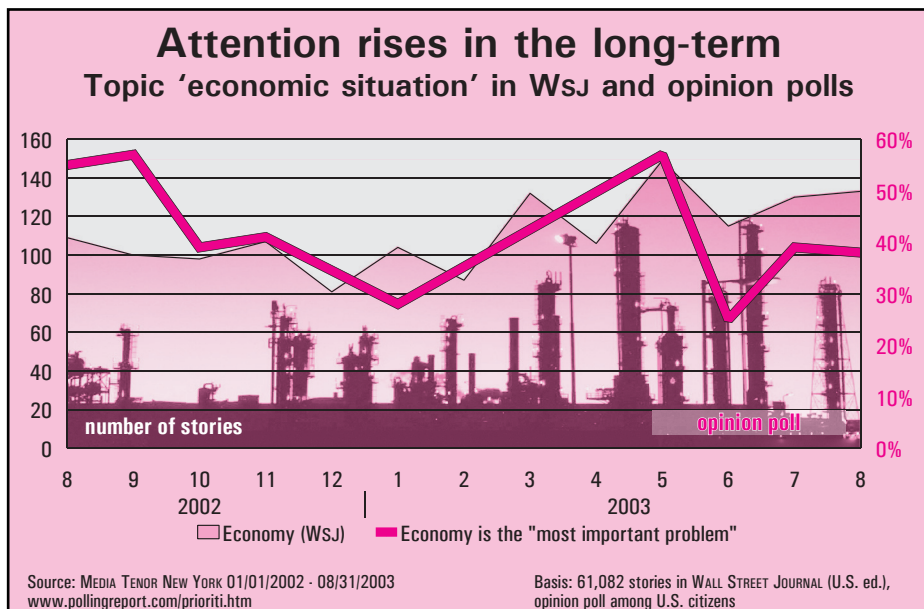
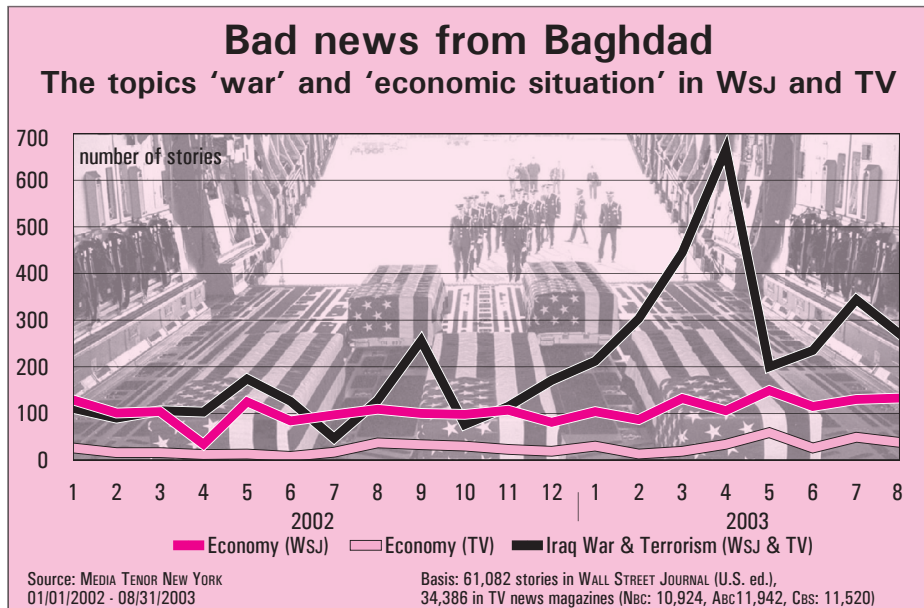
Politicians must be able to respond to their voters' anxieties. Communication science calls it 'Agenda Surfing' when public figures take clever advantage of current trends in public and published opinion. But even for top politicians it is not always easy to raise the types of problems onto the agenda that can easily and quickly be solved. As soon as the 'wrong' topics gain importance, approval ratings start to drop. The father of the current president suffered that fate, when concerns on the economy dominated the headlines after the end of the first Gulf War and paved the way for Bill Clinton's entry into the White House.

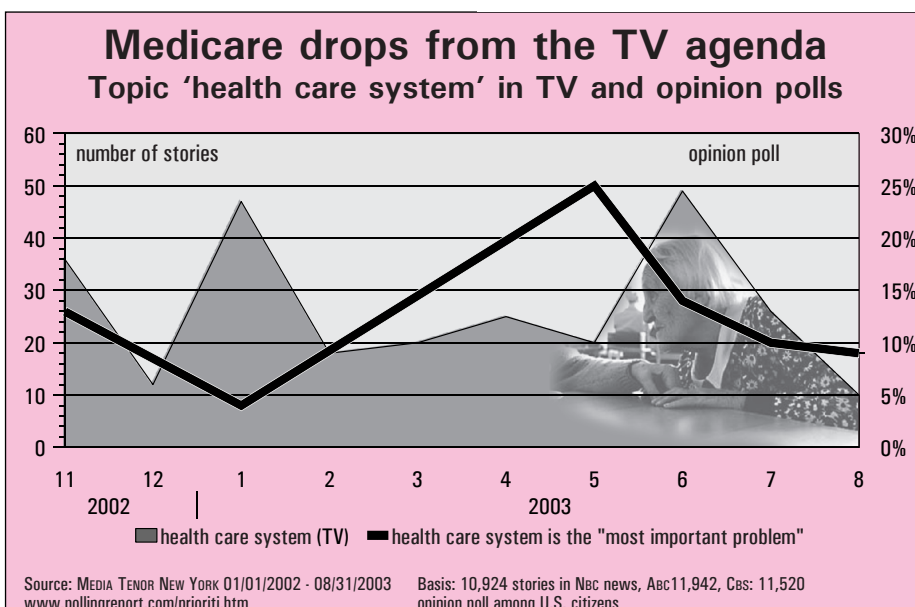
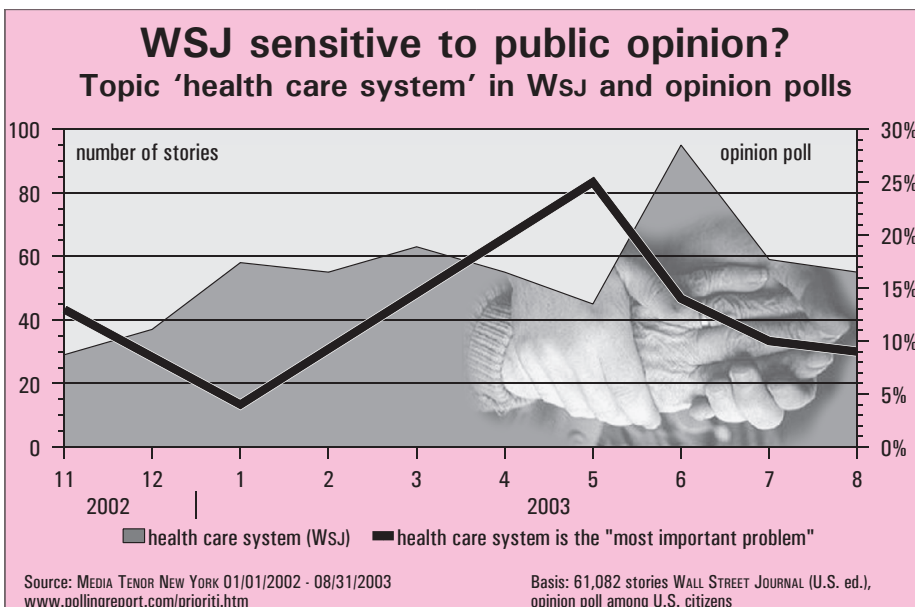
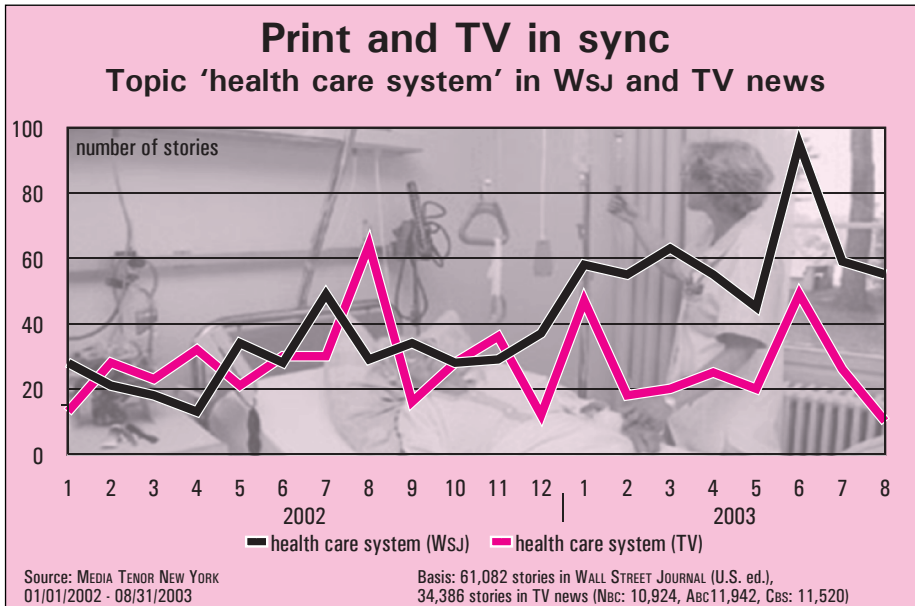
### Hasty declaration of victory

The short military campaign in Iraq was also a media event: In April, a third of all stories on ABC, CBS and NBC evening news dealt with the battle in Iraq and the war against international terrorism. Even in the WALL STREET JOURNAL the share was 5,6%. At least for some journalists, Saddam was toppled surprisingly quickly, and already in May coverage went down significantly. Only in July the media started to catch onto the fact that the victory was not the same as peace (see top graph).

### Television news focused increasingly on the economic situation in May

In the meantime, however, other topics gained importance: In May, in particular, television news focused increasingly on the economic situation, having paid only little attention to this topic in previous months. News topics on television changed much more dynamically than in the WSJ. From February till May, the importance of coverage on the economic situation grew from 0,7% to 3% on ABC, NBC and CBS. The WSJ, on the other side, already showed significantly more inter-





est in it in March, thus laying the foundation for its rise in public opinion polls. At the beginning of the year, only 28 percent of those interviewed considered the economic situation and unemployment to be important problems. In May, the figure rose to 57%.

Once the awareness of an issue has been created, fresh news will usually keep it alive for several months to come. In August, 38 per cent of interviewees still saw the economic situation as an urgent problem.

#### Who influences whom?

Sometimes the dynamic between media and issue awareness works the other way round. Regarding the topic 'health care system', public awareness of it had already reached a top position in May. A quarter of Americans considered it to be a crucial issue. But the WSJ and the three television networks only increased its prominence in June. Since July, however, healthcare has virtually disappeared from the news – with a respective drop in public opinion.

The risks for the election campaign are obvious: If the Bush administration does not succeed in bringing peace to Iraq, even the foreseeable recovery of the US economy will not guarantee his reelection – let alone other domestic problems facing the government. ck

#### Basis

Media: WALL STREET JOURNAL (U.S. ed.), NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT, CBS EVENING NEWS

Time: 01/01/2002 - 08/31/2003

Opinion polls: CNN/USA TODAY/Gallup Poll. Oct. 21-22, 2002. N=1,018 adults nationwide  
 CBS News Poll. Nov. 2-4, 2002. N=1,867 likely voters nationwide

NEWSWEEK Poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. Nov. 7-8, 2002. N=1,000 adults nationwide

CBS News/NEW YORK TIMES Poll. Jan. 19-22, 2003. N=997 adults nationwide

Nbc News/WALL STREET JOURNAL Poll conducted by the polling organizations of Peter Hart (D) and Robert Teeter (R). May 17-19, 2003. N=1,000 adults nationwide

CBS News Poll. Aug. 11-12, 2003. N=798 adults nationwide

The Harris Poll. Aug. 12-17, 2003. N=1,011 adults nationwide

Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll. Sept. 9-10, 2003. N=900 registered voters nationwide; alle quoted by: www.pollingreport.com