

# In the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king

2003 MEDIA TENOR Award for Media Diversity: Analysis of ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT

**T**o what extent is the third place in a competition still a victory? Taking a closer look at the race in question raises this question. Among 19 contestants, the US program ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT came in third in the category 'International Television News' of the MEDIA TENOR Awards for Media Diversity. They were therefore ahead of the US competition of NBC NIGHTLY NEWS (rank 9) and CBS EVENING NEWS (rank 13) and behind the British ITN LATE NEWS and the South African SABC ZULU.

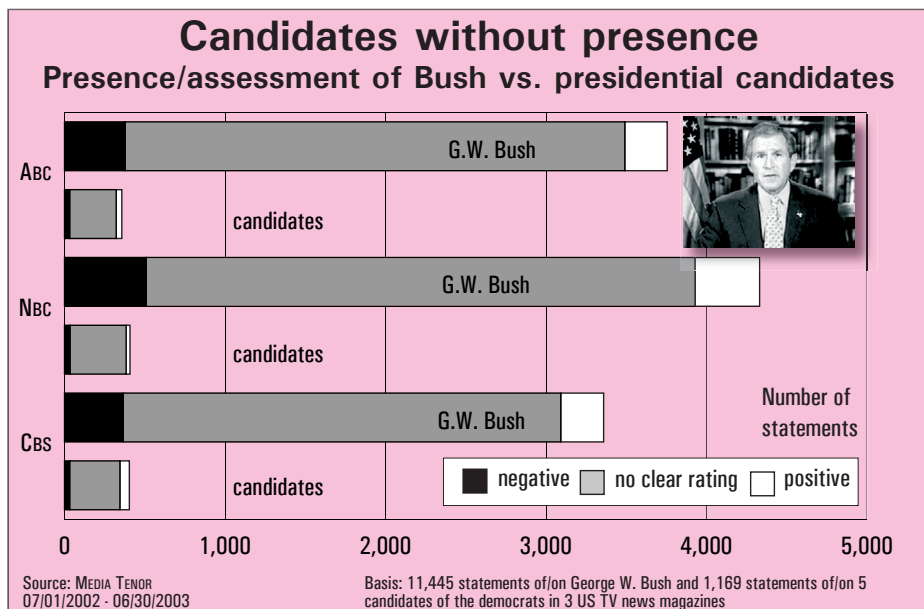
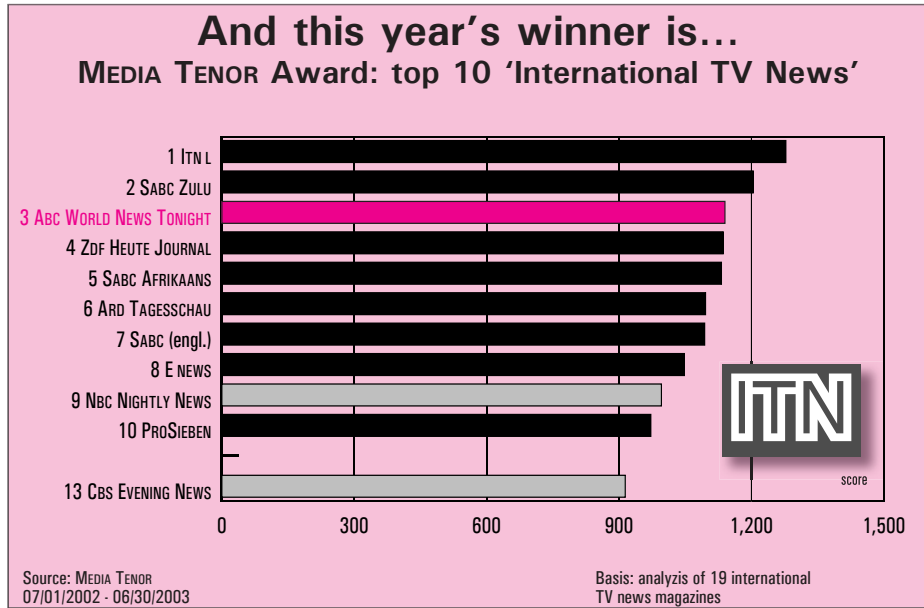
However, a comparative analysis of the three US formats shows that there are only a few differences between the three networks. They not only lack a significant diversity in their choices of topics and protagonists, but also fail to live up to one of the most important tasks of the media. In the period of analysis between June 2002 and July 2003, none of the US media offered to the front-runners of a democratically legitimized opposition sufficient space to present their own alternatives to the citizenry. The presidential candidates of the Democratic Party hardly appeared in the media analyzed.

### Quality control

The MEDIA TENOR prize for diversity in the media is meant to be a benchmark for the quality of journalistic work. It is awarded to media that excel both in diversity and quality of content. Included in the sample analyzed are also international TV news programs. The MEDIA TENOR Award is based on a total of 10 criteria that are applied to the nominated media in a continuous analysis. The methodology allows a comparison across different media, making it an instrument of true quality control. The category 'TV news' looks at characteristics such as diversity of protagonists portrayed, diversity of regional, national and international topics, share of coverage on women, variety of journalistic styles, diversity of political and business topics and representatives as well as objectivity towards the respective government.

### Lack of topical diversity...

A comparative analysis of the three US TV programs demonstrates, however, that there are hardly any differences



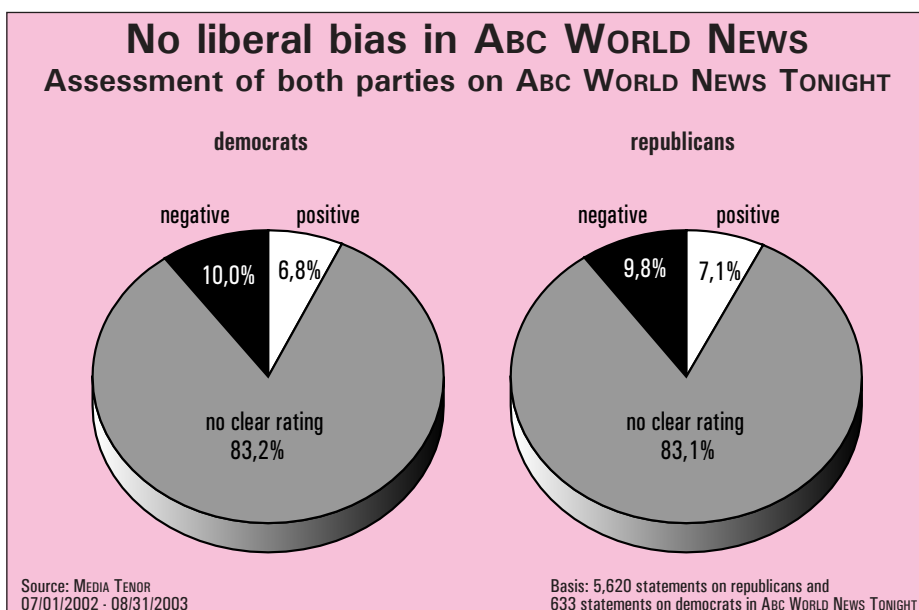
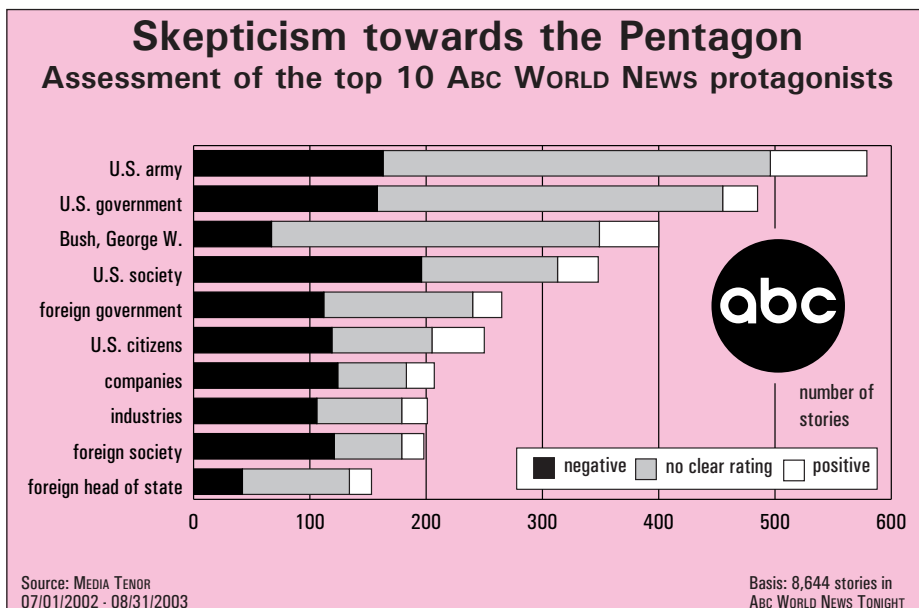
between formats. None of the media analyzed stands out with a distinct profile in its choice of topics. News stories with an international focus lead in all the three of them. With the focus on the coverage on the Persian Gulf and the deployment of US troops there, this hardly comes as a surprise. The events made foreign news coverage more newsworthy. It seems that previous to the war, this was mainly considered to be a high investment with insufficient returns, considering the low level of overall international reporting. But war coverage increases ratings, putting it into an altogether new category. Commercial considerations thus shape editorial decisions and the flow of information that reaches the audience.

### ...and of protagonists

This selection turns out to be almost identical across US formats. In the period of analysis from July 2002 till June 2003, the following subjects share the bulk of attention: US military (ABC 579 news stories, NBC 421, CBS 455), George Bush (ABC 400 news stories, NBC 437, CBS 393) and his administration (ABC 467, NBC 371, CBS 268). The analysis of the criterion 'objectivity' refutes conservative gripes that ABC was particularly critical of the Bush administration. Against all expectations, it turned out to score high in objectivity towards the government.

### ABC is not anti-Bush

The analysis of ABC news stories in com-



parison to CBS and NBC shows that 17% (N=400) of ABC reports on George W. Bush focus on a negative context, while the same applies to 19% of NBC (N=437) and 21% (N=393) of CBS stories. The suggestion that ABC was especially biased does not even hold true on the level of individual statements. A comparatively low 10% of a total 3,759 statements in ABC stories analyzed were negative. Its competitors turned out to be more critical (CBS 11% of 3,359, NBC 12% of 4,331). Aside from the negative coverage on George W. Bush's foreign policy, particularly in the context of the Iraq war, his domestic policies are also portrayed rather negatively (ABC 14% vs. 6% positive N=381; NBC 19% negative

vs. 11% positive N=503; CBS 16% negative vs. 7% positive N=416). The result of the analysis, which reflects a slightly negative coverage on particular aspects of Bush's policies, correlates with polling results that have detected a rising dissatisfaction among Americans with the current administration. According to the opinion research firm Zogby Int., the President's popularity dropped significantly, to an approval rating of only 48% in August and 54% in September. In the two months previous to the surveys, positive coverage of the President went down on all three TV networks by altogether 16%, while the negative portrayals went up by 14%. But increased criticism did not result in more coverage on the alternatives: The

analysis shows that Democratic candidates were almost invisible in the news.

#### No room for Democrats

During the period of analysis, the presidential candidates of the Democrats only occupy the lowest rankings in news coverage. Although the campaign for the 2004 presidential race has long started, the candidates do not make it onto the media agenda. In ABC news stories they only appear in 9% (NBC 9%, CBS 11%) or 255 statements, while 2,889 statements are made on Bush. Thus the Democratic presidential candidates remain below the awareness threshold on all three networks, and their messages are not communicated. Voters are deprived of a part of reality, which will potentially influence their electoral decision in the end.

The MEDIA TENOR analysis not only shows that there is little variety across formats, but also that the three US networks neglect their journalistic duties which are an integral part of media democracies.

The fact that ABC WORLD NEWS still comes in third in the MEDIA TENOR Awards for Media Diversity also reflects on the poor standards of other TV programs nominated. Therefore the third rank of ABC WORLD NEWS can be understood as a 'Primus inter Pares'. An award is not always a sign of excellence. rgd

#### Basis

**Media:** ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT, CBS EVENING NEWS, NBC NIGHTLY NEWS; ITV AT 6, ITV AT 10, BBC AT 6.30, BBC AT 10; SABC SOTHO NEWS, SABC ZULU/XHOSA, SABC AFRIKAANS NEWS, SABC ENGLISH NEWS; ARD TAGESSCHAU and TAGESTHEMEN, ZDF HEUTE, HEUTE JOURNAL, RTL AKTUELL, SAT.1 18:30, PROSIEBEN NACHRICHTEN; E-TV News

**Time:** 07/01/2002 - 06/30/2003; 07/01/2002 - 08/31/2003

**Analysis:** all stories in 19 international TV news magazines;

#### Award Criteria:

- Criterion 1: Use of styles
- Criterion 2: Diversity of depicted protagonists
- Criterion 3: Regionality of reporting
- Criterion 4: International diversity
- Criterion 5: Share of women depicted
- Criterion 6: Diversity in political reporting
- Criterion 7: Diversity in business reporting
- Criterion 8: Diversity in domestic iss. reporting
- Criterion 9: Objective reporting t. government
- Criterion 10: Diversity of industrial sector/ political sector reporting