

Eskom and Africa

Country images and the impact on corporate communications

In an analysis of British **The Sunday Times** and **The Economist** Cameron Duodu (2000) argues that Western media make the mistake in generalising Africa. Quoting a World Bank source as saying 'Africa will take years to climb out of poverty,' he underlines the fact that companies as well as media, have not realised that some African countries were indeed diversifying their exports and others were achieving good value. This generalisation of Africa, according to **Media Tenor's** research, is to be found in numerous articles as well as media reports. These indicate that the image of Africa is still largely described as negative with crime, famine and war, amongst others making headlines.

Various researchers analysed international news flow from the 1950s to the 1990s (e.g. Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977; Atwood, 1984; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996) and concluded that the Third World, and especially Africa, were largely being portrayed in a bad-news-syndrome fashion (see Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Cohen, Adoni & Banz, 1990; De Beer & Steyn, 1996). These and several other studies dealt with specifically news content on Africa, all of them coming to the same conclusion: the image of Africa is one-sided and warped.

Annas, for instance, notes that Africa is not favourably portrayed in Western media and that news

out of Africa 'is exceptionally negative and limited to regions of conflict' (Annas, 1997: 198). The author compared articles in the American **Newsweek** and the German **Der Spiegel**. His study finds that both publications cover Africa extensively and also focus on a variety of African countries. But nonetheless, Annas observes that the focus of reporting is mainly on crises, and that only Newsweek indeed reported on economic development, culture, religion and sport. He concludes that:

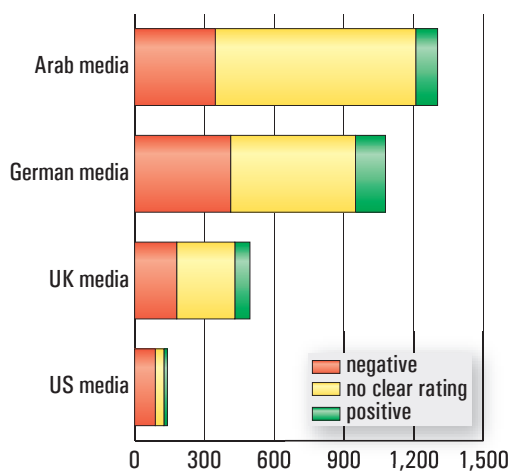
- there is a steady flow of news out of Africa,
- the majority of news comes from a relatively small number of countries and,
- and that a large percentage of news can be regarded as conflict or crisis driven news.

The last point is supported by a study conducted by the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project reported in 1993, that indicated that two-thirds of mainstream international news coverage about developing countries concentrated on conflicts and disasters (see Cate, 1999).

All studies on the image of Africa have revealed similar patterns:

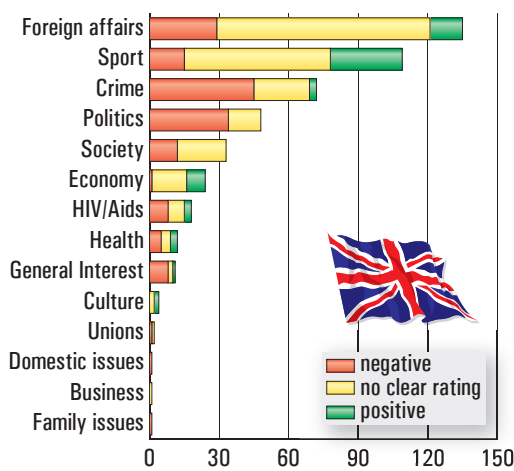
- International media perceive Africa as a continent of instability, crime and poverty,
- Achievements, albeit elections or democratic processes are benchmarked from a Western perception, including Western accounting and gov-

Coverage on Africa in US, UK, German and Arab TV News



Number of reports
Source: Media Tenor 07/01/2004 – 06/30/2005
Basis: 3,019 reports in international TV news

Issues receiving coverage in UK TV News: July 2004 – June 2005



Number of reports
Source: Media Tenor 07/01/2004 – 06/30/2005
Basis: 496 reports in UK TV News

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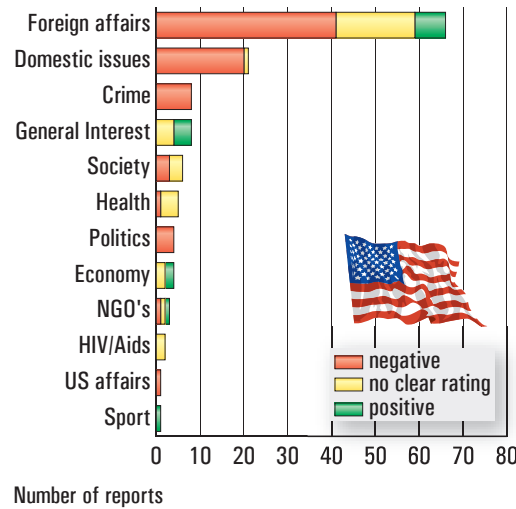
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Issues receiving coverage in US TV News: July 2004 – June 2005



Source: Media Tenor 07/01/2004 – 06/30/2005

Basis: 141 reports in US TV News

ernance practices. Cultural differences between Africa and the Western World have not been taken into account,

- Media tend to focus on events rather than a continuous analysis of progress, and although some researchers witness a slight increase in 'developmental' news, it is still marginal compared to the overall coverage,

- Coverage tends to be without depth and focuses on a few protagonists: governments, major politicians and politics in general (see also Blay-Amihere & Alabi, 1996).

The reason for this is in most cases the lack of insightful information on African countries. As witnessed during the UN World Racism Conference in 2001 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, journalists use the opportunity of major events to travel to the relevant country and then report from the experiences gained in a very short time back to their respective countries. The information received is incomplete and based on the circumstantial knowledge gained.

But reality and depiction of reality are often largely different. No doubt, conflict, famine and dictatorship still exist in Africa, but so it does in the rest of the world. African countries are starting to emerge as economic powers, though not yet comparable to the rest of the world, but certainly improving greatly to 20 years ago. Botswana is still considered the most economically sound country in Africa and

the investment by international countries in African countries (such as Virgin forming Virgin Nigeria) are an indicator that indeed Africa is becoming increasingly an interesting business partner for international organisations. But the reluctance is still great to not only invest in countries, but also to support African companies and organisations moving into Africa.

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Recently, South African telecommunication giants MTN and Vodacom have increased their ownership of telecommunication services in West and East Africa. South African Airways has acquired parts of Air Tanzania and AngloGold has acquired Ashanti in Ghana. But the business flow in Africa is still difficult, since it often requires the agreement of international shareholders who are reluctant to agree to a further expansion based on their general perception of Africa. This is further underlined by the recent comments of Swedish insurance company Skandia, facing a take over attempt by South Africa's Old Mutual, with the CEO of one of Skandia's shareholders commenting on 'South Africa's political and economic risk' (*Business Day*, 3 October, 2005).

Problem statements:

1. Do African companies have a role to play internationally in adding to a better perception of Africa?
2. How can this perception be created? Advertising, funding of projects, public relations, roadshows, trade shows?
3. What role do African countries/governments play in assisting corporations that are getting involved in their countries in creating a better perception? In other words, does foreign direct investment into an African country has the right to ask certain perception targets from the country involved?
4. Who is responsible for the creation of a better image for Africa? Governments? Corporate organisations?