

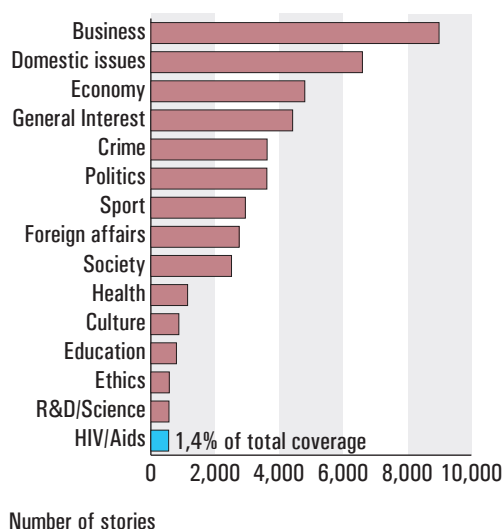
SA media's blind spot on AIDS

Pandemic gets just 1,4 percent of coverage

Research Links:
www.cadre.org.za
www.awmc.com
www.avert.com

The growing HIV/AIDS pandemic on the African continent has been largely ignored by South African media. Based on a long-term study of television news from 2002 and 2003 by **Media Tenor**, an in-depth research of daily and weekly print media in the first quarter of 2004 is confirming this trend.

Main issues in leading South African media January – March 2004



Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 03/31/2004

Basis: 47,097 stories
in 21 South African media

HIV/AIDS
on the bottom of
media's priorities

HIV infection rates in South Africa are among the highest in the world. UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, estimates that almost 30 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are infected with HIV. South Africa, widely acknowledged as the country hardest hit by AIDS, is estimated to have more than five million people who are HIV-positive in a population of 45 million. And with recent reports (“South Africa Needs More Graveyards to Bury AIDS Dead”, **Reuters**, 05/19/2004) suggesting that cities are running out of burial space because of the rising AIDS death toll, the overall picture is a bleak one indeed.

A **Media Tenor** analysis of 31,204 television news reports on the **South African Broadcasting Corporation's English news** and the independent **e.tv news** in a two-year period reveals that AIDS received only 1.4% of the total coverage. In 2004, the amount of coverage across all forms of media decreased to 1,2%, with 0,6% coverage on television news, 1,3% in daily newspapers and 1.3% in the

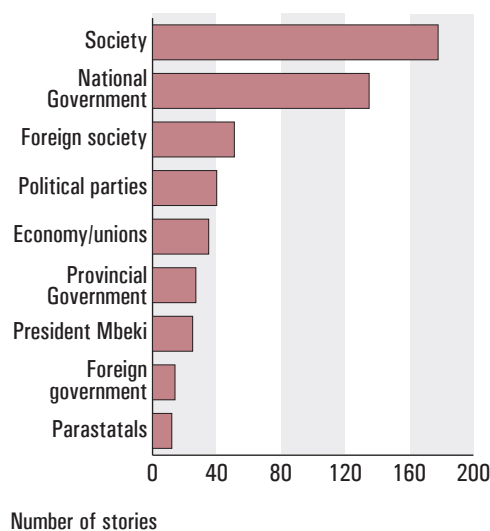
weeklies. In terms of the coverage of major topics, AIDS received only 0,1% more airtime or column inches than environmental issues – an indication that the media do not see it as the crucial issue it is.

Clearly, media have a vital role to play in raising public awareness about the pandemic by producing stories which promote the prevention of the virus and reduce the stigma from those who are suffering from it. Also, media can hold governments and society to account with respect to their AIDS policies and programs. However, a lack of knowledge on this complex topic has arguably led to reporting on AIDS – both in South Africa and the African continent as a whole – being sensational rather than educational.

From the negligible coverage that AIDS receives in the South African media, it would seem that all too often editors are reluctant to cover stories on HIV/AIDS. The reasons, according to “Reporting on AIDS in Africa: A Manual” (www.awmc.com), are many and varied but centre mainly around the belief by editors that AIDS is “old news” and that health-related stories are too “women-focused” or “soft”. The task of editors and journalists is to find innovative ways of reporting on AIDS to ensure that the public at large remains informed about issues of policy, prevention and treatment.

The main protagonists the media featured when reporting on AIDS this year shows society (32,1% of coverage) and the government (24,3%) as the leading actors. They were followed by foreign society (9,2%), political parties (7,2%) and economy/unions (6,3%). President Thabo Mbeki,

Main protagonists of AIDS coverage of leading South African media



Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 03/31/2004

Basis: 47,097 stories
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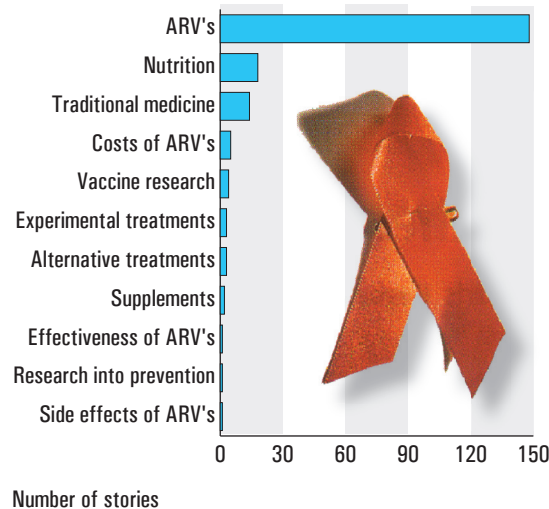
who has faced criticism over his government's slow progress in providing anti-retroviral drugs to those infected with HIV – in 1999 he controversially questioned the link between HIV and AIDS and has also in the past questioned the extent to which the disease had spread in South Africa – is ranked seventh on the list with 4,5%. In terms of the 2002/2003 television data, Mbeki ranked fourth on the list of protagonists.

The media's leading focus in AIDS reporting has centred on issues of treatment (36% of all reports in 2004 and 36,2% in 2002/2003 TV media). The research for 2004 shows that in terms of treatment, the use of anti-retrovirals (ARVs) (74%) has by far been the leading issue, with nutrition (9%) and the use of traditional medicines (7%) being the other main topics. This is hardly surprising since the issue of ARV treatment has dominated the AIDS discourse in South Africa in recent years. Health minister Manto Thabalala-Msimang has been particularly prominent in the media in this regard due to her reluctance to initiate a national rollout of anti-retroviral drugs.

Prevention was the next most reported-on issue on AIDS in 2002/2003, with 32,3% of reports addressing this issue. In 2004, however, issues of prevention made up only 14,8% of the coverage on AIDS. Has the media become less interested in stories about prevention? From the research it seems as though the media's attention has shifted to the government's policy on AIDS, in particular on the national rollout of ARVs. The research shows that the government and the president have been critically received in the media in terms of AIDS policy.

What might be the reasons for the low coverage of AIDS? In June 2003, **Media Tenor** published the results of AIDS coverage for the year 2002 – with similar results. The study was sent around to various news organisations for comment as well as reasons for the lack of coverage. Some of the financial publications (**Finance Week**, **Financial Mail**) stated that it was editorial policy to focus on AIDS only in an economic environment. **Business Day** replied that “a decision was taken not to focus solely on the ‘blow-by-blow’ political debates that surround the epidemic but rather focus attention on the relevance of the issue for business”. The daily Afrikaans newspaper **Beeld** said that there was a “fatigue” on the side of the reader, hence a decline in coverage. Generally, media organisations felt that there were many factors that influenced media reporting, such as editorial commitment, audience needs and wants, lack of story opportunities and ideas.

AIDS coverage in South African media: issues of treatment



Number of stories

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 03/31/2004

Basis: 47,097 stories
in 21 South African media

Many journalists are unsure how to address the subject, taking into account the sensitivity of the matter as well as ethical and legal implications in reporting on the private sphere of individuals. The key might be training of special ‘AIDS’ or ‘Health’ journalists that would be able to apply ethics and knowledge more appropriately. This training would also help to identify the different angles to a story. In the previous years, certain individuals were responsible for some of the coverage generated, being AIDS orphan Nkosi Johnson or AIDS activist Zackie Achmad. Recently, no individuals have claimed ownership of this issue on the media's agenda, and this lack of ‘personalisation’ has additionally lead to a decline in coverage.

According to the World Economic Forum during the African Economic Summit in Maputo in June 2004, HIV is one of the three major reasons for lack of direct foreign investment in South Africa. Unfortunately, media are contributing to the international perception that little has been done to address the issue.

ws/gr

Basis:

Media: The Star, Beeld, Citizen, Business Day, Sowetan

ThisDay, Pretoria News;

Rapport, Mail & Guardian, Sunday Times, Sunday

Independent, City Press, Financial Mail, Finance Week,

Sunday Sun, Sunday World;

SABC Afrikaans, SABC English, SABC Nguni, SABC Sotho,

E-News

Time: 01/01 – 03/31/2004

Analysis: 47,097 stories in 21 South African media;

555 stories on AIDS

Main focus of the media is the rollout of Neviropine (an anti-retroviral).

Open question:

Is the low focus of coverage on HIV/Aids in South African media enforcing the stigma surrounding the epidemic?