

Haunted by disasters?

Canada's image in British, German and US television news 01-09/2003

Canadians are the happiest people on earth. Lovers of nature never had any doubts on this, but now the renowned Pew Research Center in Washington has even produced empirical evidence for the Canadian's bliss in an international poll. Still, anyone who would want to form an opinion on the country by watching British, US, and German TV news, would never believe in it. The 14 media outlets analyzed by MEDIA TENOR seem to be convinced that Canada is haunted by disasters. A lone bright spot: Its citizens are crazy about sports.

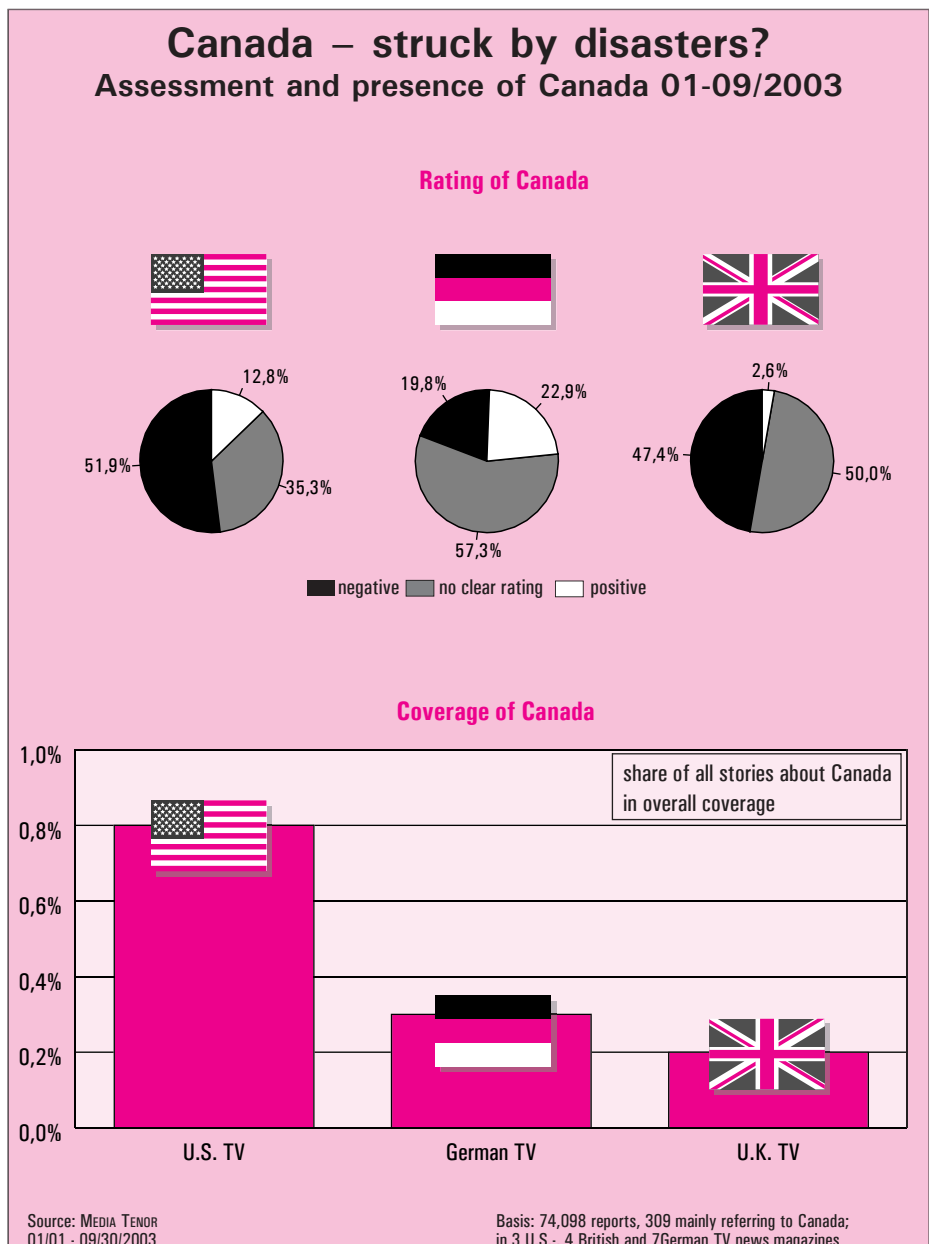
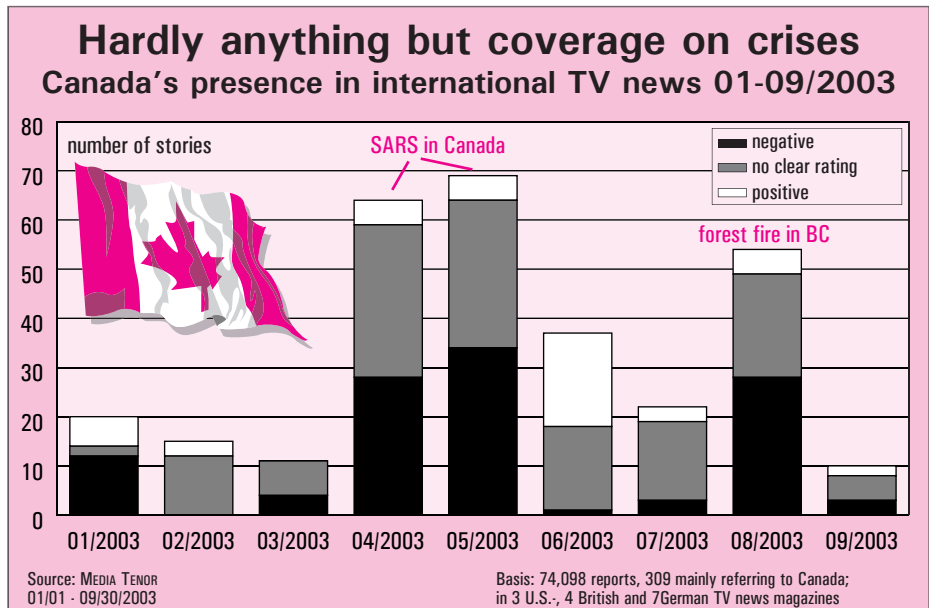
SARS and forest fires shaped 2003 media image

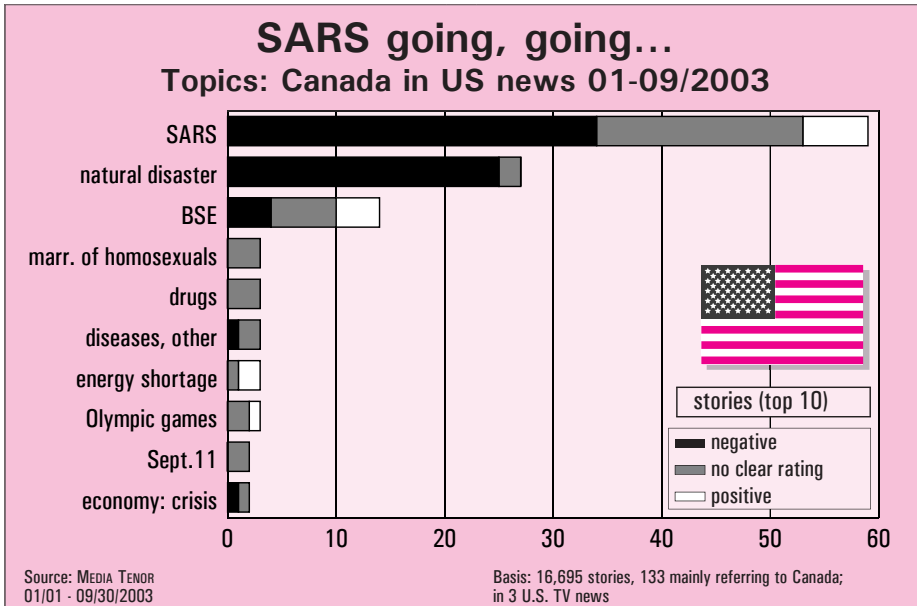
During the SARS crisis in April and May, Canada's presence in international TV news was comparatively high (see Graph 1). This 'success' was repeated once again in August: Devastating forest fires in British Columbia destroyed more than 800.000 acres of woodlands, which again increased coverage. Apart from news on disasters, the image of the G7-nation is primarily shaped by reporting on sports. Most editors entirely ignore the fact that the strong, export-oriented Canadian economy plays an important role in the process of worldwide globalization.

This topical structure leads to a coverage that is more negative than positive on average, as the first part of graph 2 demonstrates: US programs broadcast bad news on their Northern neighbor in more than 50% of the cases. British journalists also suggested to their audience that Canada was less than beautiful. Only the German television reported in a balanced way.

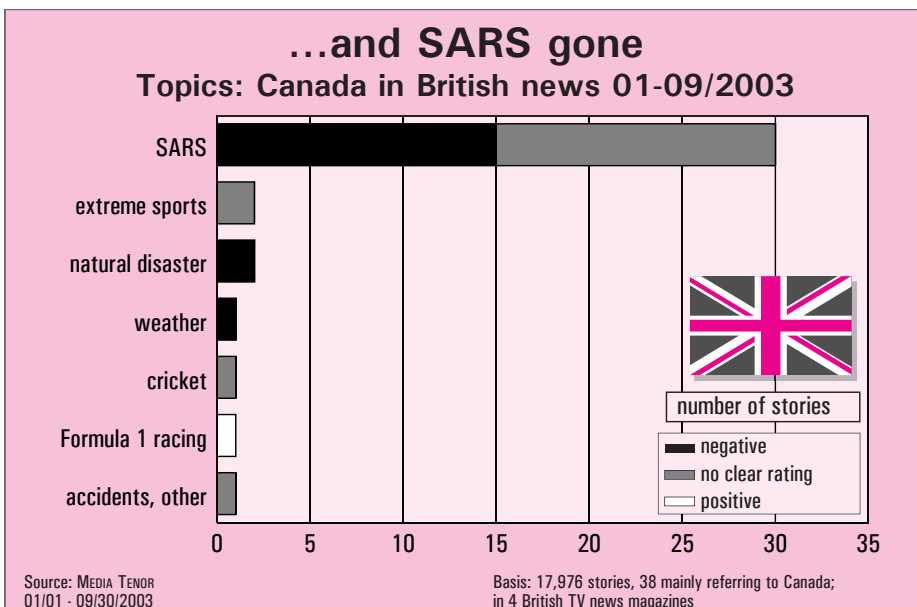
Canada is out of the picture

Looking at this bias in news coverage, the Canadian tourism industry can almost deem itself lucky that their country played no significant role in international TV news (see graph 2 second part): The US broadcasters ABC, CBS and NBC attributed only 0,8% of overall coverage to their neighbor. In the case of the German programs analyzed it was 0,3%, while the British news editors seem to have completely lost interest in their former Crown Colony: Only 0,2% of news stories dealt with Canada.

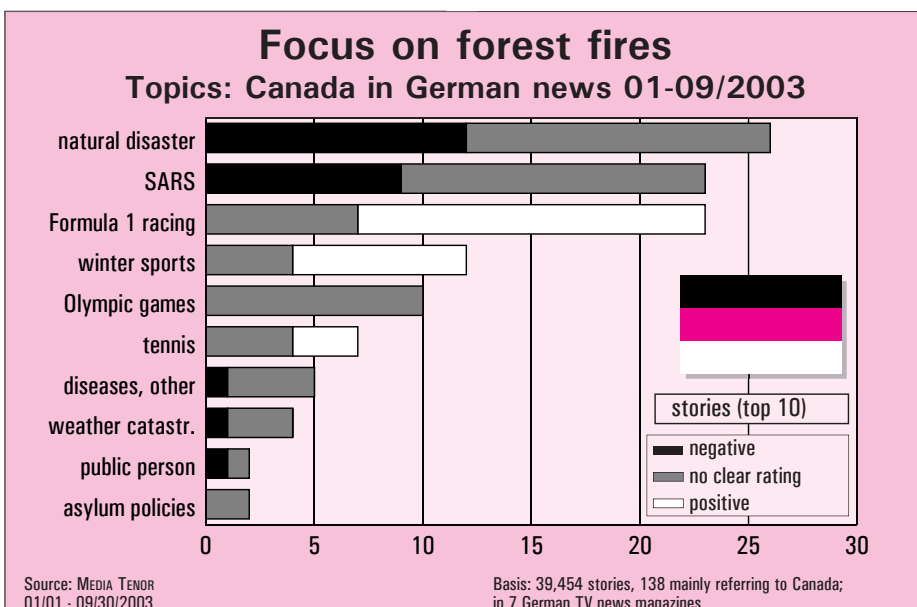




Bad marks for the news desks
Taking a closer look at the type of stories broadcast on Canada in the US, UK and Germany, the picture looks rather bleak. However, this says more about the editorial staffs responsible for it than about the object of their (dis)interest. Aside from SARS and natural disasters, the only subject of significant interest for US news was the only (!) Canadian BSE cow (see opposite graph). In this case, those affected would probably have preferred a little less attention: After all, agricultural and fishing products are the sixth most important group of Canadian exports. Most broadcasters, despite the fact that Canada is the most important trade partner of the US, largely ignored other business-related topics.



British TV news covered hardly anything on Canada except for SARS. Only sports news was still of some interest to them. At the backdrop of the extremely hot summer in their own country, German TV journalists reported on the forest fires in British Columbia even more extensively than on SARS.



TV completely misrepresented Canadas' realities
Coverage of the second largest country in the world therefore not only remained below the awareness threshold, but also completely misrepresented its realities. This is despite the fact that there are a number of interesting subjects on Canada to research, especially in the German context. Example reforms: The Canadian government has successfully consolidated its budget by cutting state contributions for education and culture, while simultaneously facilitating a stronger participation by private sponsors. It is obvious that there is more to learn from Canada than just methods for fighting epidemics and forest fires. sm

Basis
Media: Bbc SIX O'CLOCK NEWS, Bbc TEN O'CLOCK NEWS, ITV EARLY EVENING NEWS, ITV NEWS AT TEN; ABC, CBS, NBC NEWS; ARD TAGESSTAU/TAGESTHEMEN, ZDF HEUTE/HEUTE JOURNAL, RTL AKTUELL, SAT 1 18:30, Pro7 Nachrichten;
Time: 01/01 - 9/30/2003
Analysis: 74,098 stories in 144 international TV news magazines, 309 of them mainly referring to Canada
Study: Pew Research Center, Washington 2003