

HIV/Aids, education, not on political media agenda

Analysis of political coverage on South African television: January - October 2003

With the national elections approaching, the task for South Africa's media in reporting on politics will become increasingly difficult. 2004 also marks '10 years of democracy,' and by implication the media will be scrutinised for the way they are reporting on all aspects of democracy – including the elections. Without the luxury of an editorial page, long features and the possibility of guest articles, television media are particularly 'vulnerable' in this respect. Without the ability to include a range of opinions, television stands to be quickly accused of bias by any political party.

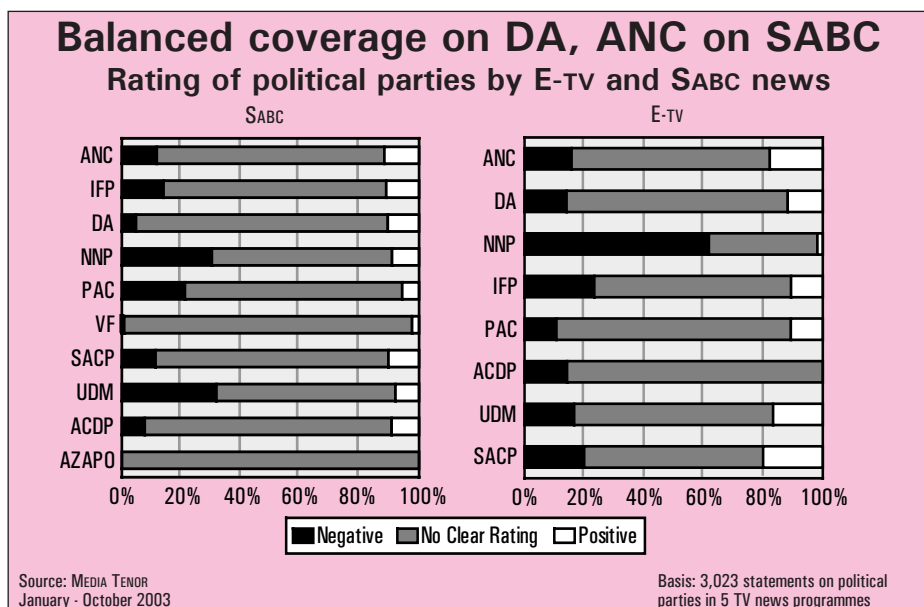
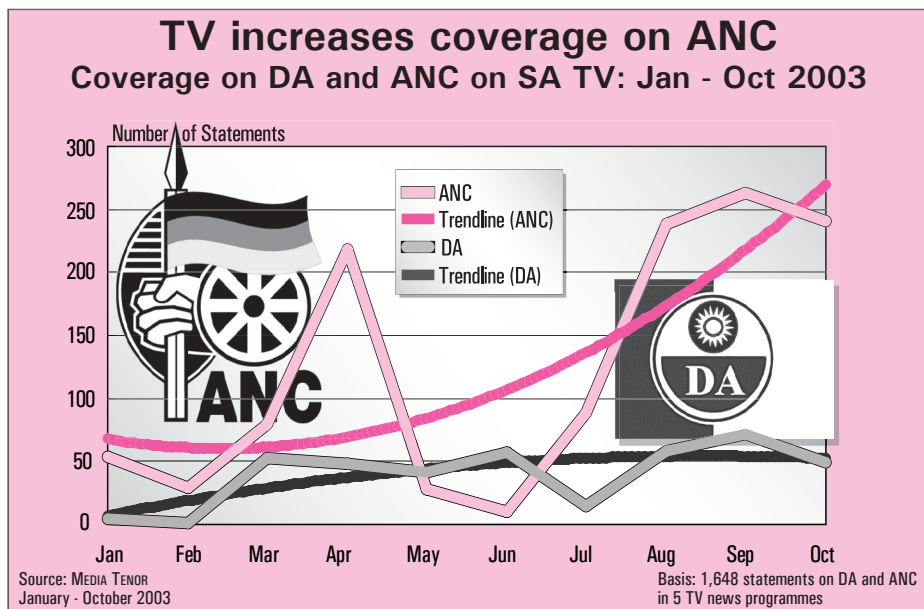
MEDIA TENOR's research into television news shows, that since June this year the number of political reports has dramatically increased. The average monthly reports until June had been around 300, but this figure jumped to around 500. Admittedly, the investigations into the affairs of Deputy President Jacob Zuma as well as recent spy allegations surrounding Bulelani Ngcuka formed the bulk of the increase in political coverage. A comparison of the two largest parties (based on the 1999 election results) shows that while coverage on the ANC increased from around 100 reports in June to 250 in September; the figure for the DA only marginally increased from 50 in June to 60 in September. Nonetheless, the DA received a far more continuous coverage than the ruling party, which received excessive coverage during its national congress in Stellenbosch and lately due to allegations of corruption.

The task of objective reporting will be particularly difficult for the public broadcaster that is currently in the process of selecting a new board. The selection process has not been without criticism. The ANC favoured selection raises fears from opponents that it would impact on the objectivity of the public broadcasters' reporting during the run up to the elections and beyond. So far, MEDIA TENOR's research shows that these fears are currently without ground. The SABC has displayed a rather balanced and objective view of political parties with the ANC for instance, receiving an equal share of critical and positive reports, and the majority neutral. The DA received slightly more positive coverage than negative, with the positive share similar to that of the ANC. The NNP and IFP received both a rather large portion of critical reports, the

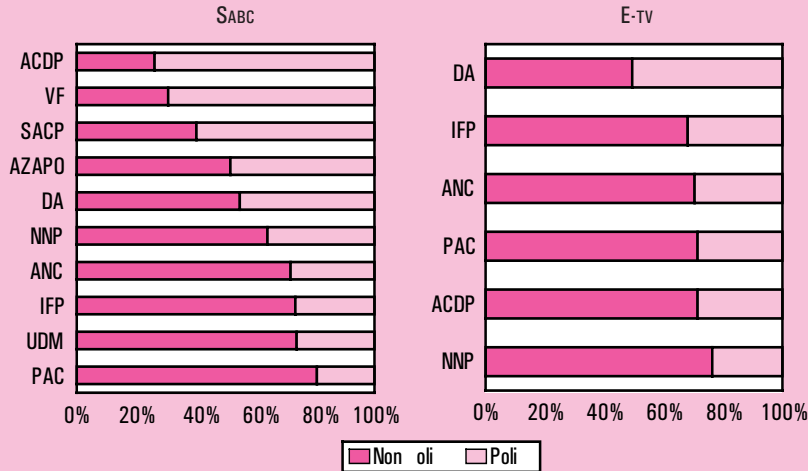
NNP for corruption allegations in the Western Cape and the IFP on its conflict with the ANC in KwaZulu Natal. The PAC received predominantly negative coverage, focusing on the fractions within the party as well as problems around its national congress. The public broadcaster's rival, E-TV, shows itself to be rather apolitical (for now), with only very few reports on political parties up to the end of September. The SABC (with four news programmes) screened a total of 2 632 statements on political parties compared to e-tv with only 391. While the SABC reflected issues related to all registered parties, E-TV chose to only focus on eight, ignoring some minority parties such as the Freedom Front, New Action Party (former AEB) and MF (Minority Front). The ANC and DA both received an equal share of positive and

negative coverage, while the NNP was slammed with almost 65% negative coverage, on E-TV.

Of even greater importance when television media reports on political parties, is the kind of information it chooses to screen. Television media, reaching proportionally the greatest share of the population has a duty to inform the viewer about policies and issues that the different parties are addressing. As part of the mandate of voter education, coverage should focus on issues rather than events or actions. MEDIA TENOR compared the share of policy related statements on political parties versus events or party-political matters, and found that it is the smaller parties that receive a fair share of policy related coverage. On the public broadcaster, the ACDP, with only six seats



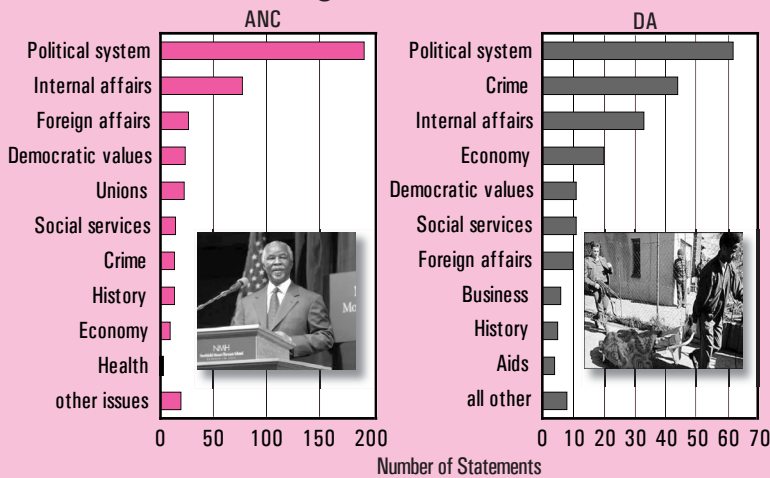
Smaller parties get issues better across Policy vs non-policy coverage on political parties



Source: MEDIA TENOR
January - October 2003

Basis: 3,023 statements on political parties in 5 TV news programmes

DA pushing crime, ANC domestic issues Main issues in coverage on DA, ANC on E-TV and SABC



Source: MEDIA TENOR
January - October 2003

Basis: 1,648 statements on DA and ANC in 5 TV news programmes

Aids not on agenda by political parties Issues not reported on in political coverage



Source: MEDIA TENOR
January - October 2003

in parliament received 70% of the total 65 statements on policy. The Freedom Front (127 statements), obtained a 65% share on policy. It seems that with the increase in the size of the party and the number of seats in parliament, the focus becomes less and less policy, but rather other issues. The DA probably generated still the most favourable share of policy related coverage among the larger parties with 42% policy versus 58% other. The ANC's share was 22% policy versus 78% other. The private broadcaster on the other hand, focused, with the exception of the DA, predominantly on issues other than policy. If elections would be held now, the type of information displayed by both SABC and E-TV would not be sufficient to adequately inform the voter about what the parties stand for. Instead, they would be voting for the party with the least scandals. When it comes to policy related issues, the comparison of the DA and ANC on television shows that the DA's focus (as shown by television) was largely on crime (even though the largest portion of coverage is focused on the DA attacking other parties' policies rather than introducing their own). The DA received further coverage on general domestic issues and economy. Like the DA, the ANC received a large share of coverage when addressing other parties' policy issues, but focused mainly on internal affairs followed by foreign affairs, issues where the DA for instance received significantly less coverage. The ANC was further quoted on its democratic values and union relationship, but economy and crime played minor roles.

Naturally, every party is trying to communicate the issues it feels the strongest about. MEDIA TENOR identified a few issues that received no coverage at all in party-political reporting on television during the course of the year: Science, Transport (including ways to combat the increased number of accidents), Environment, Education, Health, Culture and even HIV/Aids. The importance of these issues does not need to be underlined, but it seems that political parties choose to avoid them in the run up to the elections. These all are issues where either the parties have remained mum, or did not receive adequate coverage in Television media.

Basis

Media: SABC TV NEWS, E-NEWS.
Time: 1 January 2003 - 31 October 2003
Analysis: All statements on political parties