

# 'Aids fatigue' still media's excuse?

South African media focus in 68.4% of all reports on the pandemic in South Africa, with little coverage on the issue in other countries, particularly our African neighbours.

## Research shows that Namibian and South African lack in civil society duties

According to official figures published by the South African Department of Health in 2004, the HIV infection rate amongst antenatal attendees (other statistics are not freely available), has grown from 24.5% in 2000 to 29.5% in 2004. Of even further concern are statistics on infected age groups, which show that 25-29 year olds' infection has increased from 30% to 38% and that amongst those younger than 20 years, 16% were infected. According to research by the Medical Research Council (MRC), HIV/Aids is responsible for around 44% of all deaths in the country in 2004, and for the age group 15-49, an incredible 70% of deaths were attributed to HIV/Aids.

Nevertheless, HIV/Aids seems to take up a small space in the media environment in South Africa, as **Media Tenor** research confirms. For the period January 2004 – August 2005, less than 1% of the coverage in leading print and electronic media reported on the pandemic.

Conversely, the coverage on the notorious debates around President Thabo Mbeki's stance on the pandemic and the reluctance of the Department of Health to distribute the anti-retroviral drug Nevirapine coupled with the consequent clash with the Treatment Action Campaign have slightly declined allowing prevention coverage to become more prominent (see

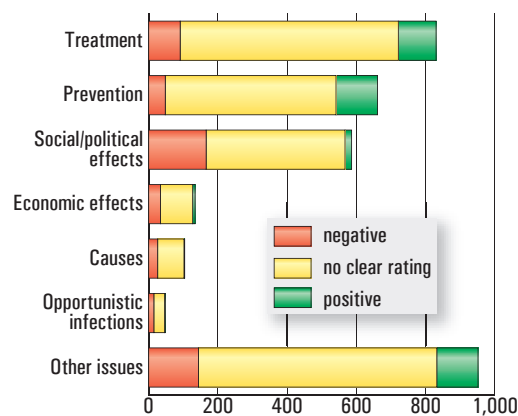
**graph 1**). It could also be argued that the debate has been quite fruitful not only for its contents, but also in accentuating the importance of civil society in a democracy, and that in the absence of such a debate, media might have 'ignored' the issue overall. While 69% of the treatment coverage in the media deal with anti-retrovirals (and only 2% with alternative treatments), prevention coverage focuses in 24% of the coverage on condom usage and 16% with general HIV/Aids education awareness. Testing, as propagated by many NGOs, allowing people to at least knowledge on their status, only features in 17% of all reports dealing with prevention. Socio-economical effects of HIV/Aids feature only very little, probably because of the reluctance of large corporations to tackle the issue from a corporate policy point of view. Although HIV/Aids policies for the corporate sector exist, few are clearly defined, mostly due to a lack of feasible ideas from a corporate perspective.

Daily newspapers report largely negatively on the pandemic, while television news, particularly the public broadcaster, try to highlight some of the achievement in the fight against Aids. Critics of the public broadcaster (and their ranks are currently growing) would probably argue that this is largely due to the intense focus that the **SABC** places on government and developmental news, which, according to those critics, are at the same time particularly positive.

South African media focus in 68.4% of all reports on the pandemic in South Africa (see **graph 2**), with little coverage on the issue in other countries, particularly our African neighbours. Uganda, one of the previously prime examples on how to tackle the issue (though scientists are now divided about the real effectiveness of the campaign), received almost non-existent coverage, for instance.

**Media Tenor** has previously presented research results with similar conclusions. Two years ago, editors replied to the research results by arguing, amongst others, an 'aids fatigue' amongst their readers. While this argument has proven incorrect by many other external studies (amongst them research conducted by Witwatersrand University's Anton Harber where 95% of respondents in rural Kwazulu Natal reacted positively on whether they wanted to read more on HIV/Aids); one could also argue that in order for fatigue to set in, coverage must have reached a point at some prior period, of saturation. **Media Tenor's** research of the past five years indicates however, that this has never been the case. At the same time, a similar sentiment is surfacing about the large coverage on crime and corruption – and here the 'fatigue' excuse seems not to work for the media. According to Christian Keulder, political researcher and Director of **Media Tenor** Namibia, HIV/Aids is simply not sen-

### 1 HIV/AIDS related issue groups receiving coverage in SA media

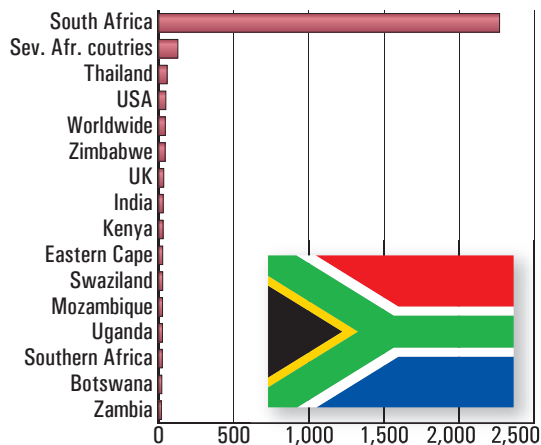


Number of articles

Source: Media Tenor  
01/01/2004 – 08/31/2005

Basis: 3,318 articles  
in 27 South African media

**2 Coverage on HIV/AIDS according to the area in SA media**

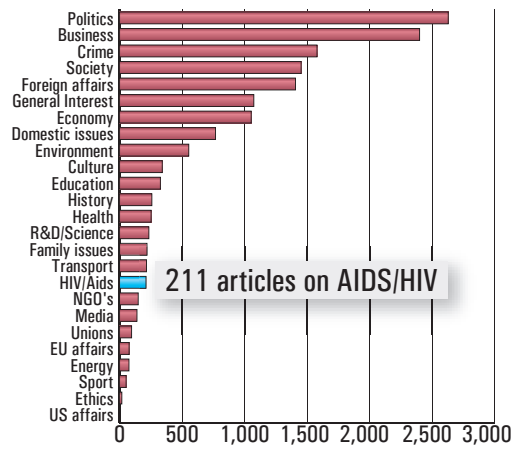


Number of articles

Source: Media Tenor  
01/01/2004 – 08/31/2005

Basis: 3,318 articles  
in 27 South African media

**3 HIV/AIDS in comparison to other issue groups in Namibian media**



Number of articles

Source: Media Tenor  
01/01/2004 – 08/31/2005

Basis: 15,591 articles  
in 6 Namibian media

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sational enough compared to the socio-political ills that occur with high frequency. There are two reasons why crime and corruption will always attract more coverage in a recent study conducted by Keulder, on the relation between crime coverage in the media and actual corruption cases, particularly when compared to HIV/Aids: First, as members of civil society (or public watchdogs) the media pit themselves against the state and any issue involving the state is therefore newsworthy. Since most corruption involves the state, and much of HIV does not, they will consequently give more attention to corruption. Secondly, given the fact that corruption often involves high profile people/officials/politicians (like South Africa's former Deputy President Jacob Zuma) it has much more sensational value than HIV which involves mostly ordinary people.

Research done by **Media Tenor** Namibia on the Namibian media's coverage on the issue of HIV/Aids indicates a similar trend than in other sub-Saharan country. Less than 1.35% of the coverage in the media, analysed during September 2004 and March 2005 dealt with HIV/Aids (see slide 3). However, contrary to South African media, the issue of treatment played a minor role, with the main focus on prevention and socio-political effects, this is probably due to the South African Government's reluctance to roll-out anti-retrovirals and having been pressured by civil society. A particular emphasis in the prevention coverage was placed on Aids education with a relatively absent focus on condom use. A considerable higher portion of coverage, compared to South Africa, was spent reporting on research on possible treatments. Similarly to South Africa, Namibian media highlighted Aids issues in their own country (87%) with considerable critical coverage.

So while the volume of coverage is low, cause for concern is that the reporting is mostly of a local nature (and confined to capital cities and dominant regions) rather than truly nation orientated and there seems to be no correlation between prevalence rates and volumes of coverage. This it seems is also reflected in the relatively quiet stance on the topic of members of the legislatures and executives of both countries with a few ministers or MPs charged to raise the public profile of HIV/Aids.

The lack of HIV/Aids coverage, particularly informative and substantive coverage, is a cause of concern. Even though media might argue that HIV/Aids is just not current news and therefore should be afforded a different position than the current/hot affairs environment, the lack of addressing the different issues (which are usually quite current) facing the country in regards to HIV/Aids are worrying. Understandably, government will highlight its achievements and play down areas where the progress has been less convincing, but South African media, and also Namibian media, should realise that they are failing in their duty as agenda setters.

**Basis:**

**Media:** Beeld, Business Day, Business Report, Citizen, The Star, Pretoria News, Sake, Sowetan, E-TV News, SABC Afrikaans News, SABC English News, SABC Sotho News, SABC Zulu/Xhosa News, SABC 3: News@One, SABC Business Focus, Business Times, City Press, Financial Mail, Finance Week, Mail & Guardian, Rapport, Sake Rapport, Saturday Star, Sunday Independent, Sunday Sun, Sunday World, The Sunday Times, New Era, Allgemeine Zeitung, The Namibian, Namibia Today, Windhoek Observer, Namibia Economist

**Time:** 01/01/2004 – 08/31/2005

**Analyse:** 3,318 articles in South African, 211 articles in Namibian media

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