



Chapter 7

Mind the perception gap

Perception

Reality

MIND THE GAP

- South Africa's hidden textbook crisis
- Education Department in hot water
- SA must do textbooks by the book
- HIV fight requires wisdom
- SA loses ground in war on HIV
- HIV treatment needs a shift in thinking

114 million workbooks were distributed to schools between 2011 & 2013

78% of learners in **80%** of public schools



2 million South Africans on ARV treatment

Stephano Radaelli

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Introduction

The Information Age has led to more and more information becoming available the world over. It would therefore seem logical that people would be better informed, but this is not the case because, cognitively, people choose the information that they find relevant or of interest or which supports their worldview.

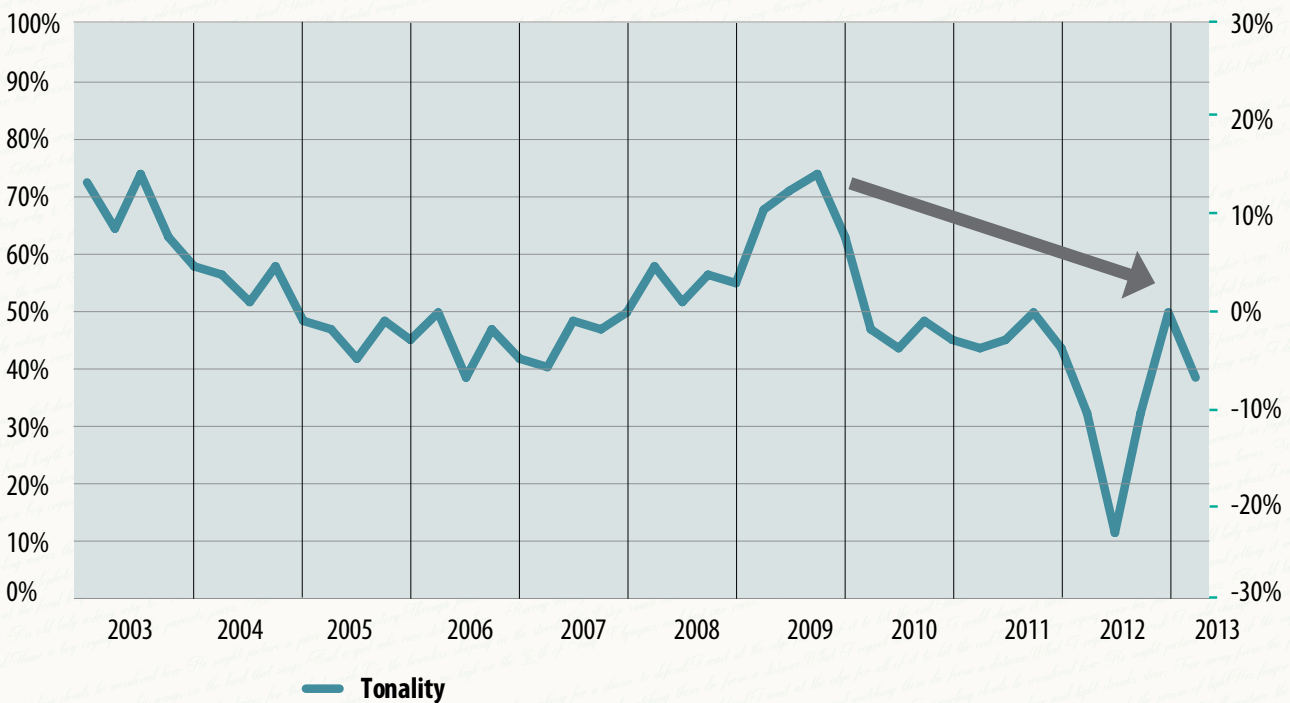
Public perception is defined as the difference between what the facts are and how the public feels about something (popular opinion) which can be swayed by factors such as cultural bias, prejudice, and, a particular set of beliefs and values.⁴⁸ Perceptions are not finite and academics⁴⁹ have shown that these can change⁵⁰ even though research shows that these shifts are not easy to attain. The distinction between what exists perceptually and what actually exists in reality can be best referred to as the 'perception gap'.

The media has an important role to play to keep the public informed of certain 'facts' and

'truths' as they exist in reality.⁵¹ The expectation would be on them to provide an objective and balanced view, based on the facts at hand. But media are also human and journalists/ editors can often represent facts from one particular point of view.⁵² They can therefore be criticised for playing a role in perpetuating the perception gap by creating a gap between the facts (reality) and their own version of reality. Through this they tend to further reinforce certain attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes.

An example of this has been in how the media has reported on education within South Africa. They have been critical of the government's handling of the delivery of textbooks in Limpopo, deteriorating conditions in Eastern Cape schools, and the closing down of schools in the Western Cape. This has influenced public opinion, with more people becoming negative towards government's performance with regard to education. This is illustrated in the table below.

Figure 1: Share of average tone (positive / negative) on government's performance with regard to education from 2003 – 2013



When information is therefore presented to the public based on a review⁵³ of '20 years of progress', this does not fit with what they have been exposed to in the media. Government's 20 Year Review reveals that the economy grew by 3.2% on average per year, from a GDP of USD136 billion in 1994 to a GDP of USD384 billion in 2012; job creation rose from 9.5 million in 1994 to 15.2 million in 2013; and 78 per cent of learners (more than eight million) in 80 per cent of public schools (close to 20 000 schools) benefited from the no-fee policy. The reality is therefore different to opinions that might have been formed. This disparity is created when media choose what they think is relevant for audiences, and represent a version of events that can be quite misleading. The media skews perceptions away from reality, which results in the perception gap.

According to Noelle-Neumann⁵⁴ and Scheufelle,⁵⁵ media have an important role to play in redefining public perception – and can contribute towards changing this perception gap. It is on this latter point that the media's role in future would be to rather focus on bridging the perception gap and deliver content that is more objective and closer to the reality as it exists in truth and fact.

Furthermore, the media should be sensitive to a range of issues and be able to present these in a balanced way. Currently, there are a number of ways that media reports reinforce or influence public perception – and not necessarily in a positive way. This is seen in:

- How the media select the stories and topics on which they report;
- The sources and commentators they use;
- The inadequate balance in representing society's demographics (for example, gender imbalances);
- The tone of their reporting.

The chapter will provide a context for areas where South African media have been the benchmark of news reporting globally – and where South African media houses get it wrong. It will cover these aspects over the past five to 10 years with global comparisons to news

reporting in North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. South African media has much to teach their counterparts in Asia, Europe and North America but there are other areas where South African news media does less well and this will be demonstrated.

In addition, an introduction to 'constructive journalism' and a case study from a Danish TV news station will be included in the conclusion as a possible direction in which South African media should be heading in future.

Closing the perception gap

Reporting issues – is there enough diversity?

Diversity in media is about embracing and focusing on a variety of issues that stem from different cultures, beliefs, ideologies and geographies. It is essential that, no matter how niche the target market, content differs enough so that audiences are informed about different themes, persons, events, organisations and economies from a range of perspectives. While it is impossible to represent this difference in daily news publications or broadcasts, over a longer period of time there should be enough diversity of content to ensure that the public is better informed across a range of issues instead of being restricted to a select worldview. This is about diversifying the news. Diversity in news reporting is important because it can broaden public perception and opinion about what is happening in the country and abroad.

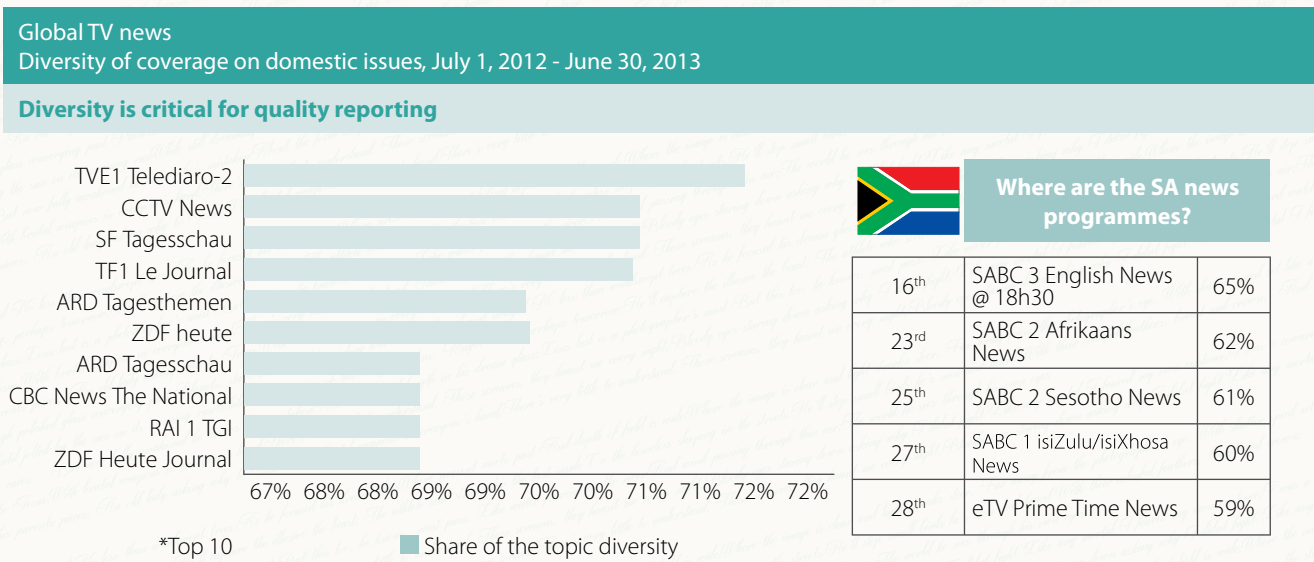
Prime-time TV news bulletins in South Africa have struggled to keep up with global diversity benchmarks in media reporting though. More specifically, countries such as France, Spain, Germany and the UK (refer to Figure 2 below) have produced more diversity of thematic content in their news than South African news programmes produce in a year. Media Tenor measures this diversity of news content according to (how often the media report on 24 selected broad themes, for, e.g. politics,

economics, sport, environmental affairs. Each prime-time TV news bulletin is measured proportionately based on the number of broad themes covered.

International prime-time news broadcasters ensure diverse news coverage. South Africa's prime-time TV news programmes, on the other hand, have struggled to make the top 10 over the years in diversifying coverage on domestic

issues. Rather, South African prime-time TV news programmes rank near the bottom – as is seen in the figure 2 below. Media Tenor analysed 28 international prime-time TV news programmes; e-tv prime-time news and SABC1 isiZulu/isiXhosa news fared poorly in terms of diversity on domestic issues, coming 28th and 27th respectively. The SABC3's English news at 18h30 was the best local programme, and even it did not fare well, ranking 16th.

Figure 2: Share of diversity on domestic issues (July 2012-June 2013)



It is a key responsibility of news broadcasters to highlight reality from different perspectives. Programmes with a strong diversity of issues offer their viewers a greater range of information outside the regular daily news headlines.

Media Tenor has conducted research that shows that four issues continue to ride the crescent of news reporting in South Africa: the economy, crime, politics and sport. This is illustrated in Table 1 on the next page, where, over a period of six years, South African TV news has focused primarily on the topics on the left of the table, while ignoring the issues on the right. The research indicates that for every 45 news reports on the economy (such as job creation) or 30 news reports on sport or crime in the South African media, one report emerges on social welfare, two reports emerge on science and technology, and six reports emerge on environmental affairs.

Given the dominance of economics, crime, politics and sport in local news, one might be led to believe that these are the only significant topics core to the nation's being. While many may argue this to be the case, there are other topics which are not covered extensively due to the primary focus on these four. This results in less information being published about other issues that the general public should know about, such as the environment, welfare, research and development, science and technology and consumer protection.

Table 1: Share of coverage on issues in the South African media (July 2007-June 2013)

Issues high on the media agenda in South Africa (2007 – 2013)		Issues quiet in the South African media (2007 – 2013)	
Economy	14%	Environmental affairs	2%
Sport	10%	Science & Technology	0.6%
Crime	8%	Welfare	0.3%
Politics	8%	Consumer protection	0.1%
Society	7%	R&D (companies and institutions)	-

According to the agenda setting theory⁵⁶ and the awareness threshold⁵⁷ in South Africa the media therefore creates the perception that the economy, crime and violence, politics as well as sport, are (the only) priority areas for all citizens. While they are indeed important, too much focus on these issues often results in other stories (for example, job creation and welfare) being largely ignored. The public are therefore less aware of these issues, although many could directly affect their quality of life. A perception gap therefore exists in South Africa in terms of the topics presented to the public and what is really happening in the country day by day.

The focus by the South African media on only a few issues also creates a distorted image of what affects people in this country. Media are often quick to expose scandals related to government, yet fail to inform citizens on important government initiatives of benefit to the broader public. For example, there has been minimal media coverage on the abolishment of public healthcare fees for certain individuals or on the Nurse Initiated Management of Antiretroviral Therapy (NIMART) initiative that has been instrumental in managing the HIV and AIDS epidemic. This often leaves the public with a 'sour taste in their mouths' and with little knowledge about key empowering developments taking place in their own country. It is crucial for media to re-think their position when prioritising content, in order to minimise the perception gap.

Different sources and voices in the media

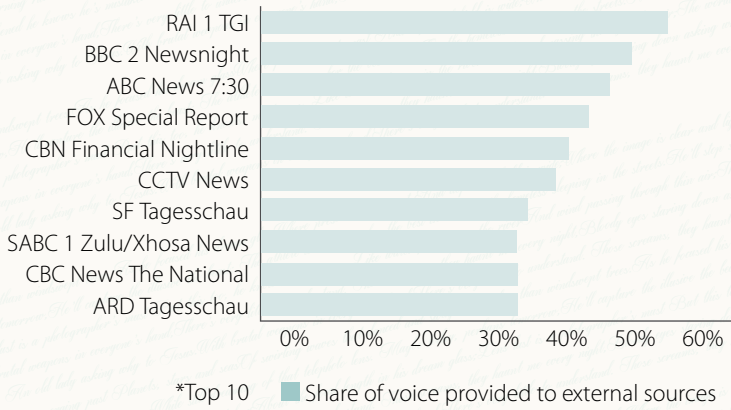
Diversity in the newspapers or on radio and TV news programmes requires not only the inclusion of a variety of issues but also of sources providing their version of events. Ensuring that differing sources have an opportunity to provide commentary is another important step in driving the transparency and legitimacy of programming. This can ultimately help to reduce the perception gap as a range of views are given voice ensuring a more informed society which also trusts the information it is receiving.

Producing print and broadcast news bulletins day-in and day-out requires expertise, as a lot of information has to be condensed into short news clips that still carry across the intended message. Because of space and time constraints not every source can be called upon to comment and often a journalist makes the comment instead. Many South African news broadcasts are guilty of using their journalists more frequently than they should to provide the comments on behalf of experts or the public – to the extent that on average almost eight out of ten reports by TV news in South Africa (81 per cent) makes use of the journalist only. The global average is seven out of every ten reports (70 per cent). This practice tends to blur the line between news and opinion, reducing the news to the opinion of an individual journalist.

Figure 3: Share of diversity of sources (July 2012- June 2013)

**Global TV news
Diversity of external sources, July 1, 2012 - June 30, 2013**

Diversity is critical for quality reporting



Where are the other SA news programmes?

27 th	SABC 3 English News @ 18h30	19%
28 th	SABC 2 Sotho News	18%
29 th	SABC 2 Afrikaans News	17%
30 th	eTV Prime Time News7	%

Giving reliable sources an opportunity to comment on events is the key to improving trust and restoring confidence in TV news. This way, the information is more trustworthy and it allows CEOs and politicians to know where their voice is more likely to be heard.

It would be preferable for the journalist to sum up alternative views and present all sides of an argument, so that public perception is not skewed in any one direction, but this is not happening and public confidence in news reporting has been diminished.

Global public opinion surveys, such as the Gallup poll on⁵⁸ 'public trust in TV news' reveals that just over four in every 10 people (44 per cent) trust in the content they see on TV news,

down from five in every ten (54 per cent) in 2004 – and similar shifts are replicated, in various studies from around the world.⁵⁹ Qualitative research in the form of focus groups conducted by Reuters goes further to suggest that global audiences⁶⁰ are losing trust in mainstream media because, with exposure to more information in the digital age, members of the public are becoming more scrupulous about how and when they interact with traditional media sources such as TV news.

Inadequate balance in representing the demographics

– gender biases

Society is known to be prejudiced, whether this is through sexist,⁶¹ xenophobic⁶² or racist behaviour.⁶³ The media often without realising reflects this reality. It is therefore hardly surprising that women are significantly under-represented in global print and broadcast media, receive very little coverage and are not quoted extensively. In a country where women are highly active in politics and business, this limited representation in the media tends to contradict reality and creates a perception that reinforces gender stereotyping and patriarchy.

As Figures 4.1 and 4.2 on the next page indicate, only 14 per cent of the protagonists in media reports in South Africa are female. Breaking the glass ceiling is not just a struggle for women in their professional development; it also applies to their global relevance. In a comparison of regions, Germany fares best at 18 per cent representation and Asian countries, namely China and Vietnam (not represented in the graphs below) the worst at seven per cent representation on global TV. Even where strong female leaders like Angela Merkel have

Figure 4.1: Share of coverage for males and females on global TV 2011- 2013

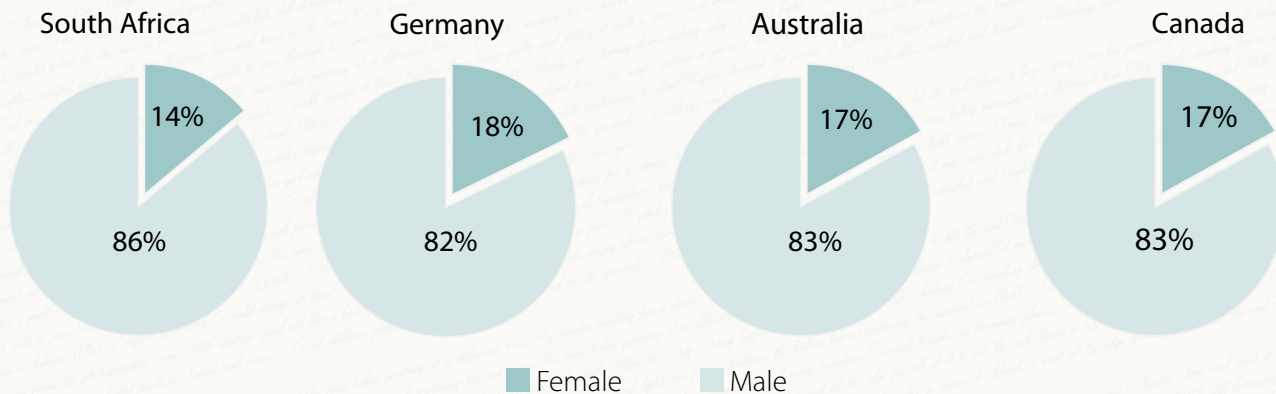
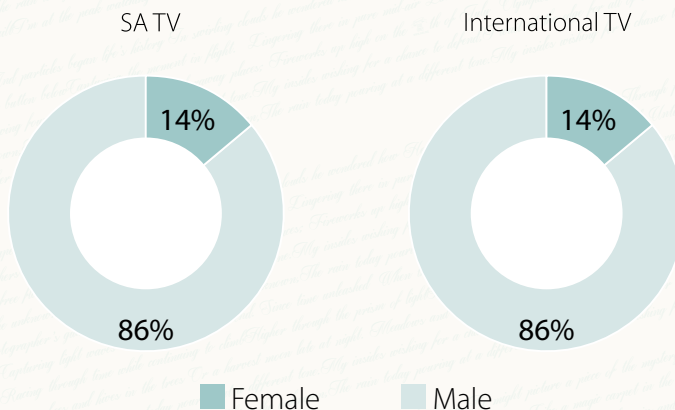


Figure 4.2: Distribution of male and female coverage (January 2013-July 2013)



been making an impact, women still seem to struggle for relevance in the global media agenda. Broadcast media should be re-looking at their equal representation policies because these figures are not where they should be.

Based on Figures 5 and 6, South African TV news also falls short of representing women in equal proportion to their numbers on executive boards or in parliament (14 per cent on TV news as against 17 per cent as executive board members and 42 per cent as parliamentarians). A perception gap is therefore created between the reality and what is portrayed by the media. Research by Media Tenor reveals that the media continue to highlight men in sport, almost ignoring the achievements of women. The only place where women receive some balance of representation is in human interest and celebrity gossip columns.

Figure 5: Top 12 countries where share of women on boards is highest⁶⁴

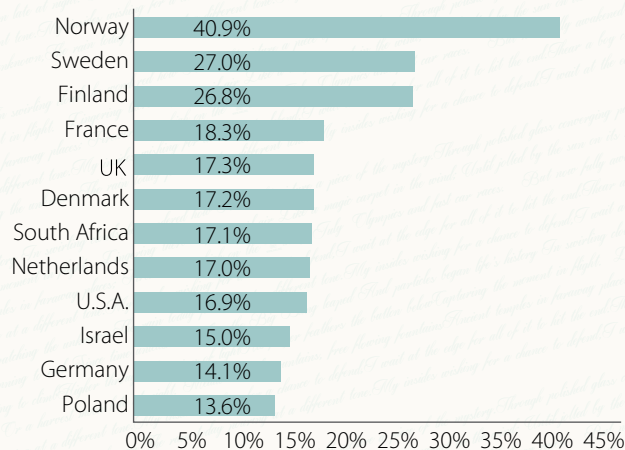
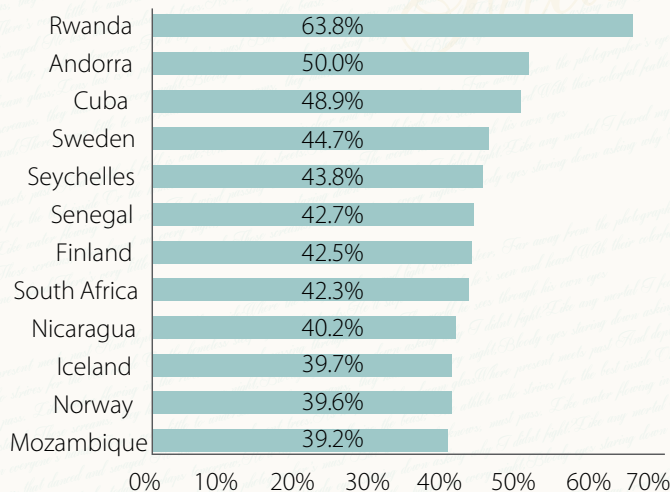


Figure 6: Top 12 countries where share of women in parliament is highest⁶⁵

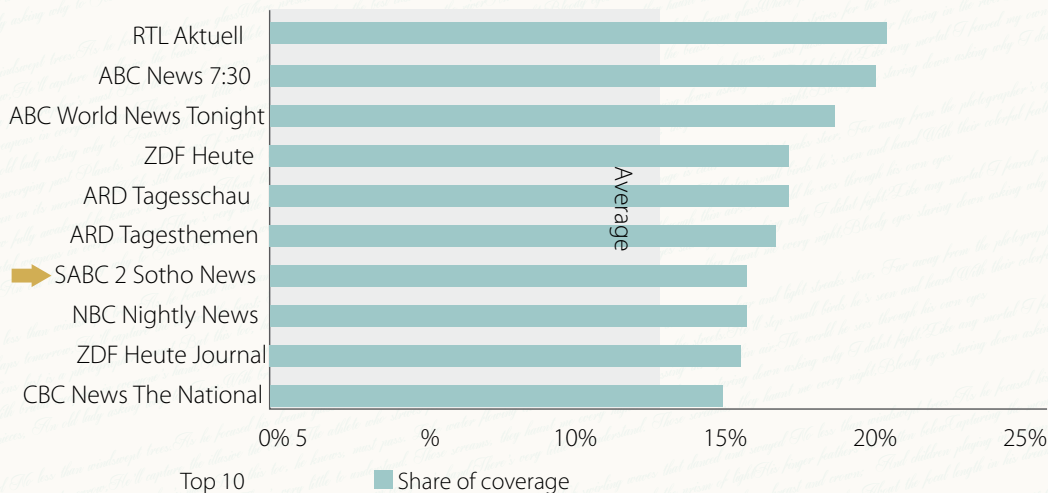


Based on media analysis of all 528 169 reports across 28 international TV news broadcasts from July 2012 to June 2013, SABC2 Sotho News was among the top performing news programmes in giving an above-average share of coverage to women. However, there are Australian, German and American TV news programmes which outperform the South African in this regard.

When programmes are failing to better represent women in their news stories, TV news

cannot claim that they have diversity of news coverage. South Africa appears to have a high level of women in politics and more women entering the corporate environment, yet the local media have failed to acknowledge this with better visibility of women. This creates a perception gap – leaving the general public unaware of the changing political and corporate world for women, and reiterating the patriarchal stereotypes so entrenched already in the public sphere.

Figure 7: Share of coverage on women in global TV news programmes (July 2012-June 2013)



Keeping the public informed on key policy areas

Even though news media could better diversify content in order to bridge the perception gap, the South African news media has certain strengths. Domestic policy issues position South Africa above its global peers – in particular the SABC vernacular language news broadcasts (see Figure 8 below). In many countries, media hike up the coverage on domestic policy around election time and allow it to slide between elections whereas South African media consistently ensure that their coverage of domestic issues remains high between election periods and increases just before general and local elections.

Coverage on domestic policies is vital if the public is to be kept informed on politically related issues. If coverage is low the public remains uninformed about the laws which regulate society and cannot join in the debate around topics with which they agree – or disagree – and government will be unable to receive buy-in from the citizenry on key policy initiatives.

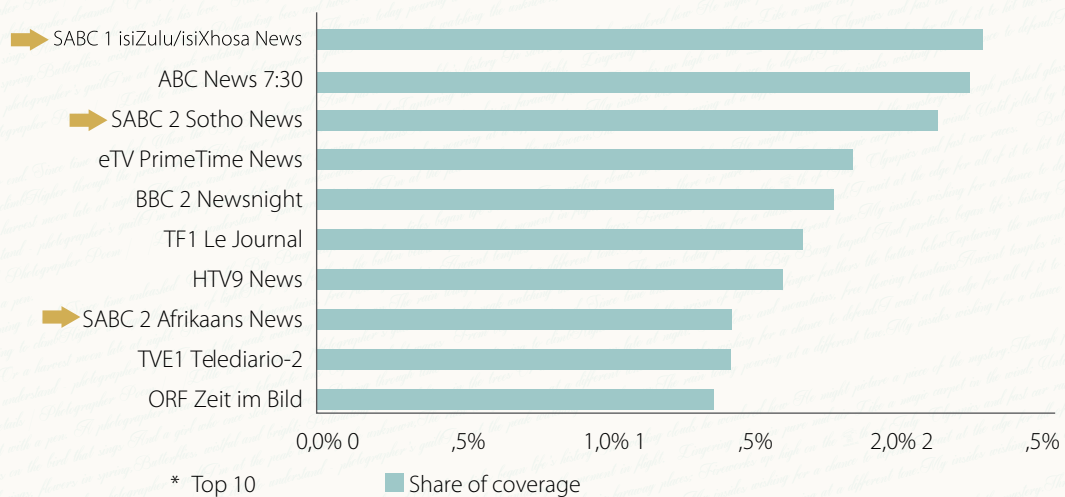
During the past 20 years of democracy, South African media has ensured that the public have been kept informed about key political decisions – and have reflected the positive and negative reactions.

Some of these issues are:

- New Constitution (1994-1996)
- Land reform, restitution and provision of housing (1995 – ongoing)
- The adoption of the outcomes based education (OBE) curriculum in the basic education system (1999-2010)
- Rolling out of 'free' antiretroviral medication to AIDS patients (2003 – ongoing)
- E-tolling and the upgrading of the national freeway system (2010 – ongoing)
- The National Development Plan Vision 2030 and its progress (2011 – ongoing)
- Privacy of information Bills and Acts (2011 – ongoing)
- Nationalisation of certain industry sectors such as mining (2011 – ongoing).

Two policy issues which have struggled to gain international media attention in the past few years have been health and education – and yet these are the two most relevant government policy issues covered by our local media. Almost a third of media coverage on government is dedicated to either one of these policies (see Figure 9).

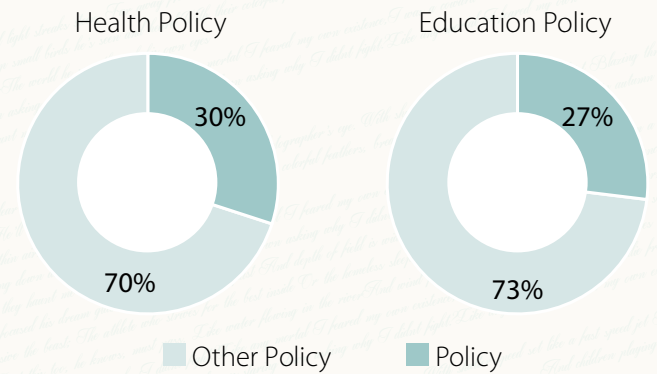
Figure 8: Share of coverage on education in global TV news programmes (July 2012-June 2013)



Despite this there are some limitations. Media Tenor’s research indicates that local media have not helped the public understand the true extent of these two policy areas in particular because they have often chosen instead to sensationalise certain incidents or focus almost solely on a few issues such as the textbook scandal in Limpopo or generators failing in public hospitals.

Keeping health and education issues high on the agenda ensures that basic services in these sectors are improved – and ultimately trust of these sectors is built up.

Figure 9: Share of coverage on health and education issues for South African government policies in print and TV news July 2012-June 2013



Keeping a positive tone

Figure 10 below illustrates how South African TV news programmes provide a more upbeat image of the news than is common in most European and North American TV news programmes.

Figure 10: Tone of coverage on global TV news programmes, 2011-2013

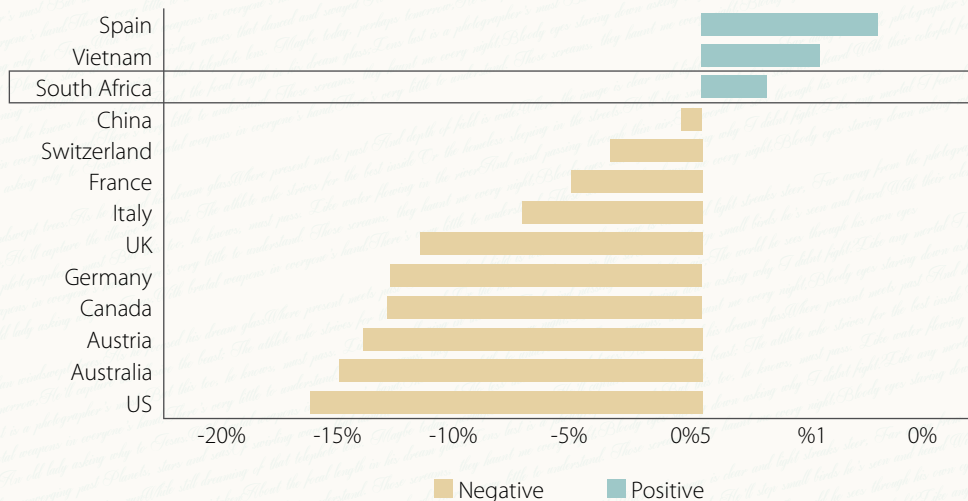
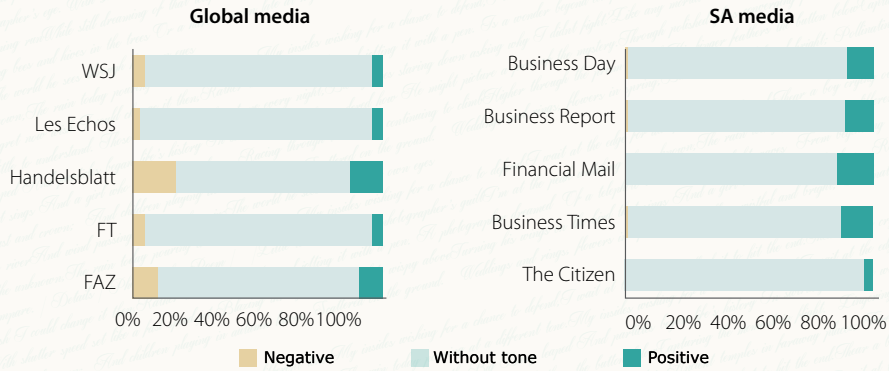


Figure 11: Comparison between news from Financial Times and Business Day, 2012-2013



Figure 12: Comparison between global financial news and South African financial news on bank CEO'S



Media Tenor's research reveals that the positive coverage emerges mostly when journalists simply relay public relations communiques from both private and public sectors which carry a positive tone (see Figure 13). Secondly, as the two issues most frequently reported on in South Africa are economy and sport, and these two are usually viewed positively, the tone of the reporting is also more positive.

South African financial newspapers and magazines also adopt a different approach to reporting and do not focus on scandals and regulatory matters, instead covering issues such as corporate social responsibility and the expanding progress made by companies. This also results in a more positive tone in the media, as these issues are generally viewed positively. While a negative tone can at times be adopted towards the private sector, it is less so than that of the public sector.

Figure 13: Share of tone of voice by journalists vs. public/private entity on own affairs

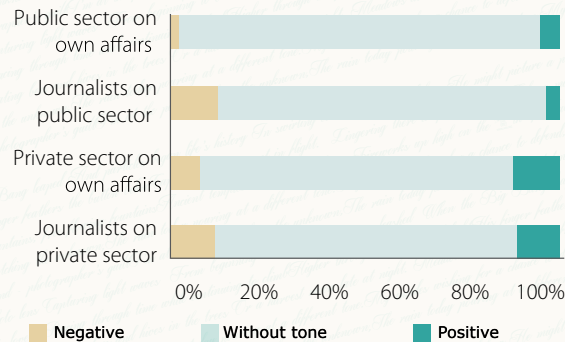
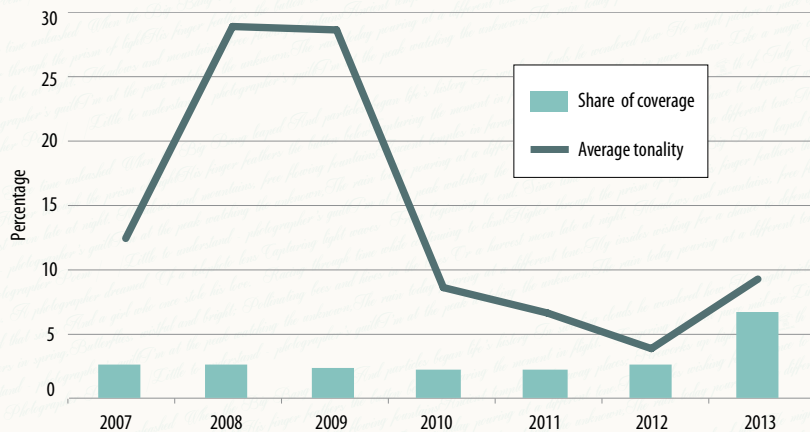


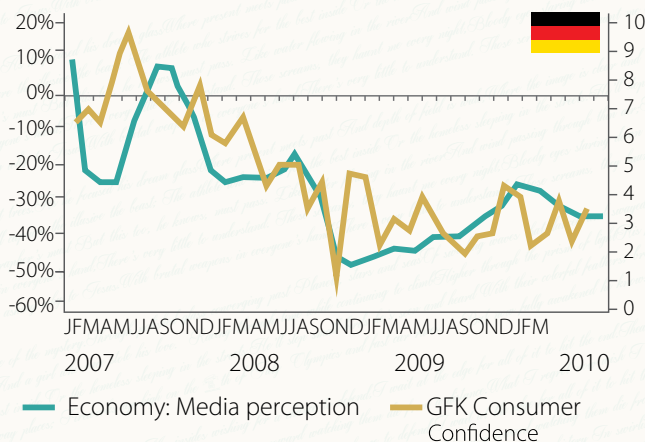
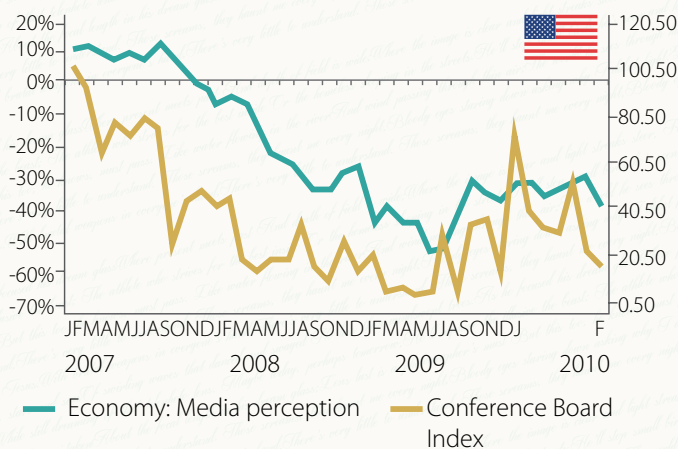
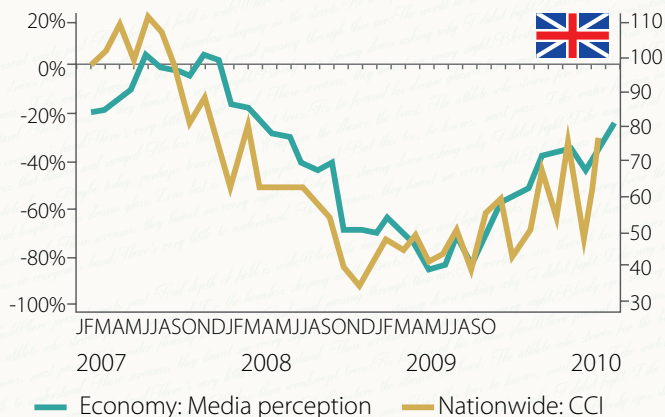
Figure 14: Growing presence of CRS related coverage with positive tone in South African business media, 2007-2013



Reports that carry a cautionary tone, or one of dread, have an influence on readers. Research by PEW Research⁶⁶ and similar organisations often reveal that South Africans are more optimistic than their counterparts living in the UK or in Germany. Media Tenor has drawn correlations between survey data and media

tone on a number of issues. Analyses reveal that the tone of a report plays an important part in affecting how the residents of a country view their world and the world outside. The graphs below help illustrate this point. In Figure 15, the data reveals how a positive or negative tone from the media when writing

Figure 15: UK, US and German media reporting on their economies and drawing correlations with survey data on consumer confidence



about the country's economy can lead to public perception becoming more optimistic or pessimistic about the country's economic circumstances.

The important point is that the media tone has the power to sway perceptions whether or not this representation is true. The constant portrayal of a negative image of the world or the

country in question reduces public confidence and instils greater pessimism.

'Constructive journalism' challenges media around the world to minimise this negative manner of reporting in an effort to bring back trust in the media and to encourage audiences to become solution-oriented.

Constructive journalism

For years, academics and media leaders have been in search of the perfect formula to create news content that appeals to the masses and is not all doom and gloom. 'Development' or 'peace' journalism became the focus for some academics although it had little buy-in from chief news editors. It quickly faded and media resorted to 'old tactics' to keep the bottom-line in check – until Ulrik Haagerup stepped into his role as head of news for a Danish TV station where his unorthodox approach proved successful. His approach was labelled as 'constructive journalism' and helped restore audience ratings and revenue to this TV station. He has since been knighted by the Danish royal family for his outstanding efforts in journalism.

A: No. Rather, instead of only focusing on the negative side of the story, the journalist is required to seek out solutions to these problems.

This is still premised on the principles of development journalism and peace journalism, but the approach used by Ulrik Haagerup has instilled more public trust in the type of news received. The news fed to society should not continue instilling in readers and viewers a sense of hopelessness, mistrust and pessimism. The value of news reporting is that it has the power to influence people. Therefore, it is vital that news broadcasters and news media houses realise this power and understand the responsibility that comes along with it.

Q: So, what is constructive journalism?

A: The premise of this approach is that journalism follows a formula that incorporates a positive approach to news.

Q: Does this mean that journalists should ignore conflict, corruption, disaster, crime and similar negative news stories.

The highest role of the news sector is to give people critical knowledge, and knowledge is the tool that allows citizens to think constructively about problems and be a part of advancing solutions. Ulrik Haagerup, Head of News, Danish Radio.

Table 2: Summary of areas where South African media compares to its international counterparts

	South Africa	Asia, Europe & North America
Keeping the public informed about key policy areas, e.g. education and health	↑	↓
Diversity of news and sources	↓	↑
Accurately reflecting country's demographics	↓	↑

Conclusion

In summary, the perception gap lies between what the media houses choose to deliver to the public and the true reality of the situation. South African media create a distorted image of what affects people in the country by focusing on too narrow a range of issues. It is important for media to report on matters to encourage perceptions of the country as developing and making progress in the scientific field. This would provide the public with a wider perspective.

Similarly, unequal treatment of gender in the media results in under-representation of women's issues. Better representation of women is a first step towards re-defining the perceptions of women; creating greater awareness of the challenges facing women in business, sport, politics and society; and questioning stereotypes in the minds of the public.

Unfortunately, content that further entrenches perception gaps in South Africa will continue if

the old formula to keep audiences interested goes unchallenged. A shift is required towards diverse issues of interest to the masses so that people can identify themselves and their circumstances through the media. Constructive, solution-oriented news is necessary and likely to bridge the perception gap. That being said, South African news media need to continue keeping key policy issues such as health and education at the fore so that public engagement with and participation in improving these two sectors can continue through debate and public forums.

Let the news media not fail society by keeping it uninformed and pessimistic about the future of the country. Let them take on the responsibility of challenging perception gaps with constructive information; of bridging perceptual beliefs with reality; and of representing key issues facing the majority of the population in an unbiased and constructive manner