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Business Media: The real agenda-setters

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Media Tenor's **Wadim Schreiner** looks forward to the day business media will admit to having a particular agenda.

At a conference at the Gordon Institute of Business Science a few months ago, a fellow journalist colleague was astonished at the notion that individual journalists possibly have agendas. She admitted that editors might be pushing for certain topics, but individual journalists, no, that was just simply impossible as they are primarily reporting on the facts of the day and the timing of printing deadlines would never allow anything sinister. I am convinced that such agendas exist, and I am also not sure why it should be considered sinister.

As much as President Thabo Mbeki or ANC President Jacob Zuma might wish, media in South Africa will not be neutral, and should for that matter never be. But what is missing though is media admitting to their impartiality.

Instead, every attack on the media is considered an attack on media freedom, an often convenient justification in order to avoid potential consequences. Sadly, those individuals or organisations attacked by the media conversely, don't have similar abstract and vague concepts such as media freedom to hide behind. I think it is far more unethical to claim being objective when inherently not, than admitting to reporting in a biased manner and with an agenda.

For those observing media from a scientific and academic point of view, 2007 has been pure excitement. For those, who were the focus of media attention, 2007 should have served as a serious wake-up call: the South African media are alive, kicking – and getting better at doing it by the day.

Business media lead in critical reporting

For the above mentioned Gibbs conference, I researched the content of political coverage in a selection of South African print and electronic media, with the aim of identifying certain emerging trends and patterns: which media really matter when it comes to shaping an agenda? What role did television play? Firstly, coverage on the government generally has become considerably more negative, starting in November 2004 (with a rating score of 50 on a scale of one to 100), dropping to 41 in August and September 2007.

A sure catalyst here were the focus on the Schabir Shaik as well as the Zuma trials and the subsequent dismissal of the latter as deputy president, and later the handling of Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's dismissal of her deputy. Since then, it is all the way down, a trend confirmed by Markinor's survey on government performance.

But if one thinks that it has been largely the likes of the *Mail & Guardian* or *Sunday Times* that have been driving negative coverage against government or the president, this is not the case. It has been primarily business media lashing out negative sentiment, particularly towards the president.

While all media types, except SABC TV news, showed considerable more negative coverage on the president, financial media had the highest share with almost one-fifth more negative coverage than positive. This was found to be a trend, starting in mid-2005 and continuing all the way towards the end of 2007. Non-financial media such as *The Star* or the *Citizen*, did not increase either volume or tone of coverage to the same extent as financial media.

In terms of volume, *Business Day* drove the largest coverage of debate around government and the president in particular, but this is not surprising considering that it is the only dedicated daily financial medium. Both *Sake* and *Business Report* abstained largely from making any opinionated comments, while both *FinWeek* and *FM* raised criticism equally.

Looking at the coverage of *Business Day* in particular and its use of commentators and analysts on various issues around political and business policies, it is impossible to argue that this type of coverage has been driven by audience demand. Surely, the audience of *Business Day*, *Financial Mail*, *FinWeek* and *Sake* are more or less similar in terms of LSM, age, income, colour, blood group or any of the other more or less useful definitions of a target audience.

I have serious doubts that (*Business Day*'s) Peter Bruce increased his team of columnists on the basis of so-called reader demand, with the same audience begging *Sake*'s Charles Naudé to go easy on the president, or (the SABC's) Snuki Zikalala's alleged lack of criticism of the president or the government because viewers did not want to see some of the negative sides of the president.

It might be time that media admit that there is an agenda they pursue.

And there is nothing wrong with it, even though the concept might seem a bit foreign to us here in South Africa.

Under-estimated by politicians?

Coverage in *Sunday Times* raises prolonged debates amongst many groups, but it is the point-targeted agendas of the likes of *Business Day*, *Financial Mail*, and to a lesser extent *Sake* and *FinWeek* that raise the blood pressure of those people who really impact on the development of the country: business and political leaders.

The influence exercised by business media has considerably greater impact on the medium to long term economic and social development of the country than most of the other publications, no matter how large they are.

Sure, international media had a field day when *Sunday Times* broke the story about Tshabalala-Msimang's alleged misconducts, but primarily because it had fed into the international media's notion of a corrupt and incapable Africa. The real damage would be extensive as continuous negative coverage on economic, political and financial issues in business publications would cause investor concerns – and ultimately damaging the long term prospects of the country.

Ministers come and go and are considered corrupt and liars all over the world – investors know this. But when business media, possibly perceived as a voice of peers, are changing their coverage, this should get political leaders really jittery. Instead, political leaders often focus their attention on non-financial media's coverage of government, as these media are read by the constituencies. They are equally obsessed with radio and consider appearance on various shows as the ultimate tool to impact on the public perception. But while it is politically important that the wider public has the "right" information around social delivery, the public in South Africa is likely to continue voting for the ANC, delivery or non delivery. Those entities that matter in terms of policy shaping, are likely to use business media to communicate their messages.

Indeed, we should be looking forward to this year: It will be joyous to watch the continuous power play between the media and government, but it will be the business media that should be particularly closely observed. I personally will be looking forward to the day business media will admit to having a particular agenda, whatever that agenda is. I might not always agree with the agenda, but at least I know where they stand. Kind of the way business media felt initially about Mbeki: better the devil you know...

Wadim Schreiner is the CEO of Media Tenor SA.

■ This is an edited version of *The Media* magazine's February cover story. This edition's content will be archived on TheMediaOnline by 15 February.

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