

corporate sustainability in media

# There is public interest in our corporates

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I am astounded at the steady decline in coverage of corporate sustainability issues in the media. I say this because over the past three years we have been looking at the way corporate organisations are being portrayed in the media according to a set of sustainability criteria. This declining coverage is at odds with increased calls for greater transparency in reporting and introduction of integrated reporting, something all JSE-listed companies have had to adhere to for over a year. It raises questions about whether communication strategies employed by corporates are in line with the expectations of the audience. Also, this decline might be construed as a deliberate attempt by companies to refrain from making sustainability commitments to the wider public through the media, while at the same time trying to control the message to investors through reports and one-on-one meetings. It is too easy to lay the blame on corporates. Some responsibility lies with the media. Journalists should pick up on the unresponsiveness of corporates on issues of

increasing interest to society. By now, in year four of the global economic downturn, media should be capable of spotting sustainability trends and proactively assess companies' sustainability performance by scanning annual or other reports available.

I can already hear the responses from journalists and media organisations: "Sustainability and financial reporting are for the business press." They are wrong. The wider public is interested in what's happening to the industries and to the companies we are buying our products from, as well as how sustainable they are. Instead, the public only reads about corporate business issues when BlackBerry suddenly stop working, as we assume the public has taken an interest because it affects them. On that, the decision to choose a BlackBerry or another smartphone is taken every two years upon renewal of the contract, so it would be good to know about a company's sustainability rather than the pointless marketing raves we find in most of the specialised media. If the

Fourth Estate wants to be taken seriously, it should also start 'nailing' the corporates in a similar way it vigorously pursues government. It seems acceptable to criticise government because it is taxpayers' money that is being wasted, but corporate money is off limits. When a large telecoms company spends millions in advertising money on a minor colour-adjustment rebranding strategy, just to have a failure in network services a few months later, it seems to be okay as it isn't taxpayers' money. But it's not, as it remains the consumer's money after all.

Media around the world are quick to pronounce economic doom and gloom, and reading most of the assessments in the press about the European Debt Crisis makes you want to hide your money under your bed. What we need is media that scrutinises the information critically, listens to what the different opinions are and give us the information to guide some of our decision making on global economic issues, but also on our own local corporates. «