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News counts

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Now is not the time to ignore the news, argues Wadim Schreiner.

I cannot wait for the elections next year: The intense and sometimes uncomfortable political pressures will hopefully have subsided by then, or at least a definite direction would have been given.

The biggest relief will be that media would hopefully have battled it out by then – the question: "Where to from here, South Africa?" Battle lines have been drawn; media have positioned themselves alongside or against a particular "camp", although this positioning would obviously be vigorously denied by editors and journalists. At the moment, everything is politics. Even the "bread and butter" of journalism – crime reporting – has become politicised.

One could be forgiven for becoming news-fatigued. After all, what is the reader/viewer to make of all the mixed messages? But now is not the time to ignore media. More than before they are setting the country's agendas, influencing perceptions, and at the same time allowing a discourse this country has rarely seen. The amount of debate, critical and sometimes frank, is astonishing. I doubt it would be possible to raise some of the issues in countries that have proclaimed themselves to be democratic champions – the United States, for instance.

Research indicates that the number of articles in leading local media on politics, compared with other issues such as health, education, business and culture, has increased almost fourfold (from 965 per month in 2003 to 3,245 in 2007).

Almost 60 percent of all coverage in the South African media is now, in some way, linked to politics. For the first time in the new democracy of South Africa, the leading political party and government were put against each other as opposition.

Whatever the government allegedly did wrong, the ANC would reportedly address next year.

Voices that previously did not take part in any major news debate are now regular columnists: unions, youth organisations, politically aligned sources, political "experts", are all driving their interests. A few examples from media analysis highlight this new direction: Coverage on Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), an issue that had almost "died" in 2007 in the media, is back on the agenda. The focus now is increasingly on broad-based empowerment and particularly in terms of benefits for non-executives.

Corporate social investment programmes are getting more coverage, but not the usual happy-children-in-front-of-schools-sponsored-by-major-company. Now the emphasis is on: How can this be sustained?; Are these projects really paying off?

Executives are increasingly being taken to task. The "greedy executive" is back in the media, after some proud displays at the time of releasing allegedly great financial results in the past few years. Black CEOs are, in particular, taken to task by the media, with black CEOs at state-owned enterprises having it especially hard. Drawn into the government-opposition debate, they are often portrayed as failures and incompetent. Their leadership is being assessed and visions and directions analysed, possibly as a reaction to the alleged lack of political leadership in the country.

Corporate governance is increasingly becoming an important issue, and corporates are well advised to develop media strategies ahead of possible media scrutiny.

Media research is becoming more crucial, as are the methodologies involved. The time of measuring reputational and PR "success" in terms of advertising value (AVEs) is definitely over. Not that it ever was a credible methodology.

Companies will require an issue-based analysis, not only focused on their own organisation or even industry, but the news environment overall. What is the latest political coverage about?; How could this affect me?; Who has received good coverage on BEE deals and why?; Which newspaper, radio station takes what position towards a particular issue?; Why do some executives get praise and others a hammering, when it seems that business is equally good?

More than before, media research will provide answers to the strategic positioning of a company. With more and more opinions available, reputation is up for grabs and news analysis might just be the key to survive these difficult economic and political times.

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