

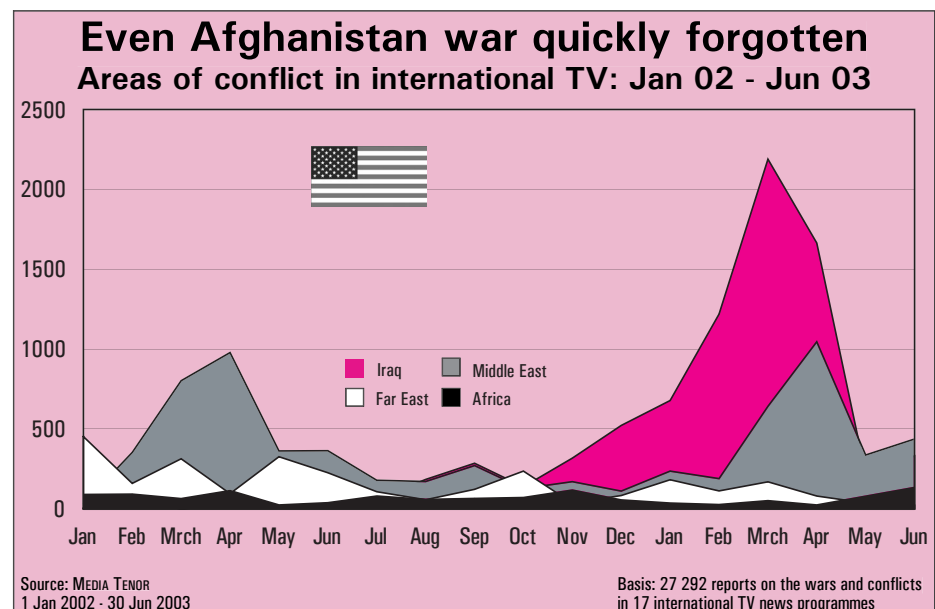
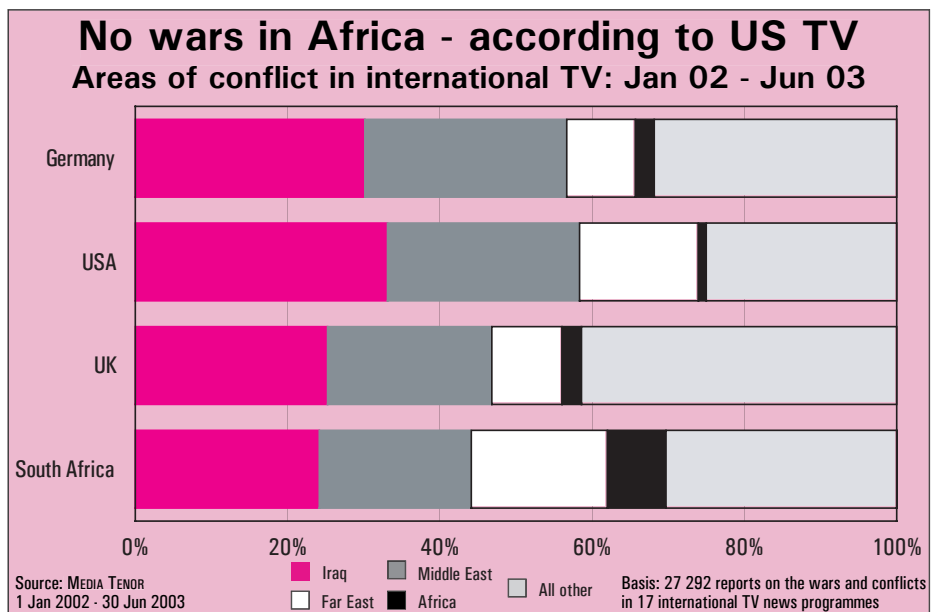
Africa's forgotten Wars

Coverage of wars and conflicts in Africa in International TV News programmes

In their annual report of 2002, Human rights watchdog Amnesty International said that September 11 had deepened divisions amongst people and nations. It has certainly changed the patterns in the way media report about global conflicts and events. Up to the 1990's various academic news flow studies established that news value was determined by certain 'gatekeeping factors' and that these factors were predominantly in control of western news agencies, particularly the United States. In 1965, Galtung & Ruge established the model of selective gatekeeping, which primarily dealt with factors that determined the selection and alteration of certain events, amongst them *intensity* (where matters of 'national interest' get higher priority than matters of regular level of significance'), *cultural proximity* (the closer the event to the culture and interest of the target audience, the more likely the selection) as well as *continuity* (once an event has been declared 'newsworthy,' it is more likely to sustain in the media and push other issues off the agenda). In 1995, US scholars Robert Stevenson and Isabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi came to the conclusion that although the US was still dominating news as a news superpower, other regions, including Africa, were starting to participate in a previously north-west oriented and geographically divided news flow.

Media patterns shifted

However, September 11 has turned the watch back to the pre-1990's, virtually eliminating all events and issues that are not related to either the United States or its coalition partners – especially when reporting on conflicts. According to the German research institute HIIK, seven of the 13 wars in the world in 2002 were fought on African soil, such as the widespread bloodshed in Burundi (800,000 casualties), the DR of Congo (300-500,000), Ethiopia, Ivory Coast and Liberia, aside from other unsolved conflicts such as in Rwanda, Madagascar and Somalia. Yet if one follows international news broadcasts, there seems to be virtually no other conflicts in the world but for the US lead. According to MEDIA TENOR research from 1 January 2002 until 30 June 2003, conflicts and wars played the most important role in all analysed television stations in Britain, Germany and the United States. But subtracting from this coverage Iraq



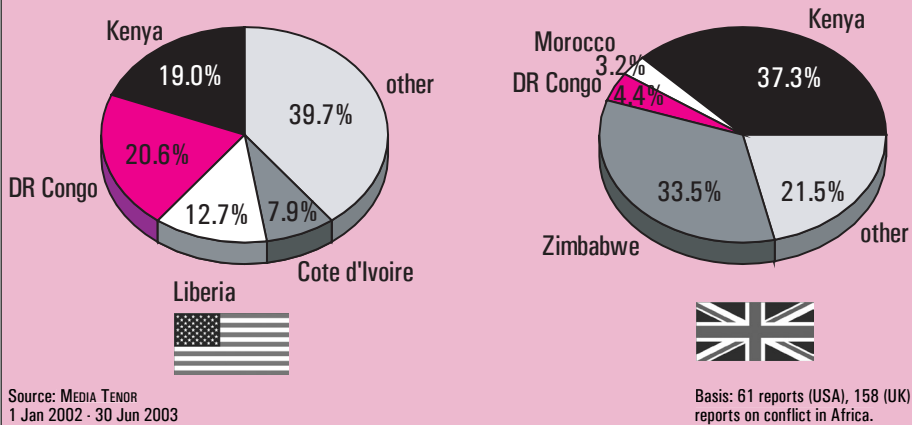
and Afghanistan, only 0.2% (n=507) of all reports (N=23587) focused on conflicts in Africa. Wars without the involvement of the Western nations, do not seem newsworthy enough to appear on international TV news agendas, and the little coverage given only focuses on the brutality of the conflict and not on possible solutions. This is contrary to coverage on the Middle East where international television increasingly highlights the peace process. A further analysis of the said 507 reports on conflict in Africa, reveal a further fallback to the gatekeeper model of Ruge and Galtung. Coverage becomes important only when it is in close proximity or colonialistically related to the centre. US television focuses on terrorism related coverage in Kenya (bombing in Mombassa) and Sudan, while UK televi-

sion highlights the situation in its previous colony Zimbabwe. Recently, US television highlighted events in its former rebel-ridden colony Liberia – most probably because of a possible US military involvement.

Victims playing a marginal role

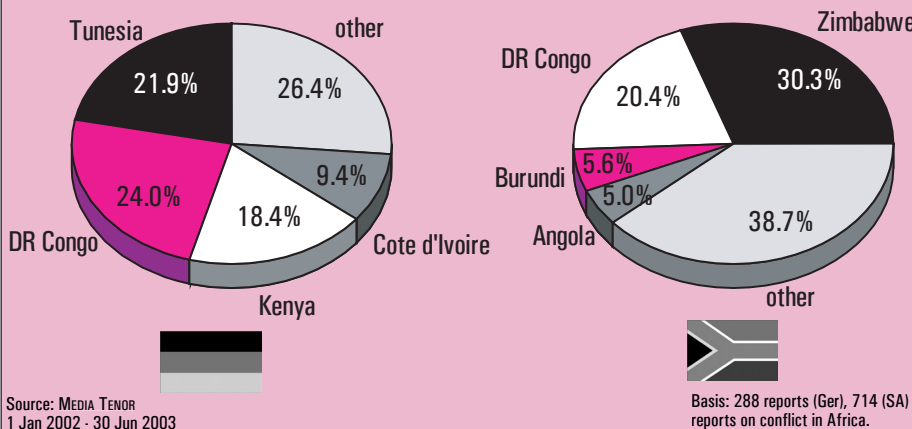
South African television however, is taking a slightly different approach in its coverage of wars in Africa. Of the total 714 reports, 71% focus on issues around peace and security. But similar to its international counterparts, it highlights not the predicament of the victims of conflict, but rather the actual conflict. The US, for example, focuses only 0.02% of coverage on the victims of the conflict (Britain 1% and Germany 7%). South Africa does at least devote a 4% share of its reports on the social factor of wars in Africa.

UK television not aware of Congo civil war?
Areas of conflict in Africa portrayed on TV: Jan 02 - Jun 03



Where US and British television are concerned, one might argue that the role of television has altered and therefore the editorial decision of what to report on has changed from what is newsworthy to what is suitable for governments. In 2000, Ankomah published a study in the *NEW AFRICAN*, supporting this assumption. He states that contrary to the 'fiercely independent' image of the Western media they 'usually follow the lead set by their home governments'. The war in Iraq has shown that Western democracies need to exert some control over, not just their, media in order to ensure the legitimisation and support for the military actions. War has become a media event and government lead public relation agencies are painstakingly careful of how a war can best be 'sold' to the mass media and population. But the time of hijacking the media's agenda for governmental purposes might just be over: Britain's Premier Tony Blair is in hot water after a report leaked to the BBC questioned the actual reasons for the coalition-lead war in Iraq; a recent Time/CNN poll shows that the approval for the military intervention has decreased from 59% in March to 49% in July 2003. So it might be high time to start looking at wars that have had a far more bloody impact on human life than any other conflict since World War II: Africa's 'forgotten' wars. This might just be the case now: all four countries analysed show a slight but steady increase of reporting on African conflicts. But maybe the declining approval of the military intervention in Iraq has something to do with it. A poll, collected by GALLUP from the 7th to the 9th of July shows that already 57% of the US public are favouring the deployment of troops to Liberia. Are African conflicts really moving into the international media's spotlight because of its importance or is this just another public relations campaign aimed at improving governments public image, considering that 2004 will see George W Bush's re-election bid. (ws/rg)

SA TV with broader diversity, countrywise
Areas of conflict in Africa portrayed on TV: Jan 02 - Jun 03



SA TV with focus on peace processes
Main issues in conflict reporting in SA TV: Jan 02 - Jun 03



Basis
Media: ABC, CBS, NBC; BBC, ITV; ARD, ZDF, PRO 7, SAT 1, RTL; SABC, E-TV
Time: 1 January 2002 - 30 June 2003
Analysis: 27 292 reports on conflicts
Sources quoted: Ankomah, R. 2000. In the name of national interest. *New African*, 377:16-27; Galtung, J. & Ruge, M.H. 1965. The structure of foreign news. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2: 64-90; Sreberny-Mohammady, A. 1995. TV news flow and studies revisited. *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 5 (2 & 3): 7-17.