REPORTING ABORTION
An Analysis of Media Coverage of the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act

Media Monitoring Project 1997

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MISSION STATEMENT
In accordance with internationally accepted standards of media practice, the Communication Charter and within the framework of human rights, the Media Monitoring Project shall promote and assist the efforts and understanding of the general public and associations of a public character as regards the duties and responsibilities of the media in a democratic South Africa.

PROJECT PURPOSES
To analyse and research the content, selection and manner of presentation of news, current affairs and information on radio, television and the printed media through the use of appropriate methodologies.

To inform the appropriate monitoring bodies, interested parties and public at large of the results of the analysis at regular intervals and to draw attention to infringements of the duties and obligations of the media as laid down by the various international instruments.

To educate the media, political parties and the public in the principles of human rights in communication, especially as they affect the freedoms involved in the democratic process.

GOALS
✓ Balanced and informative news in TV, radio and the print media
✓ A diverse and representative balance of news sources, accessed within news bulletins
✓ Educative and informative current affairs programming
✓ Effective, balanced and critical communication of the democratic processes occurring in the country, both within the legislative framework and within civil society
✓ A human rights perspective be recognised and referenced within the selection, content and context of all news and current affairs in the print and broadcast media

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By Zureida Garda & Edward Bird

The issue of abortion exists within the framework of human rights, and within that, of women’s rights. South Africa’s constitution now upholds internationally lauded principles of human rights, yet issues such as abortion and the death penalty create a tension within the parameters of these rights.

Clause 11 in our Bill of Rights guarantees the right to life whilst clause 12(2a,b) gives everyone the right to “make decisions concerning reproduction” and “security in and control over their body.” Both those for and against abortion employ these clauses respectively to support their arguments, yet it is important that abortion is recognised as a human rights issue. Furthermore, the way in which issues such as that of abortion are handled reflect on the development of a free and open society in South Africa, in which a diversity of opinion and belief can be articulated and tolerated.

The media as an independent and critically operating force holds the responsibility to inform the public as to all aspects of an issue, to ask questions and investigate in order to allow for a fair, balanced and informative representation. The abortion debate is an emotive one, and the media need to be sensitive to the complexities involved without allowing the controversial nature of the subject matter to sensationalise reporting. Based or sensational reporting of such an issue would hinder the development of a critical and democratic mind-set within the media on the issue and restrict the public’s understanding of it.

The importance of such a mind-set fits into the discursive shift in South Africa towards the incorporating of democratic ideals and practices. The "new" democracy, aims to be as open as possible to allow diversity of ideas and beliefs. It is in this context that freedom of expression and information exist and in which the basic tenets of human rights come into play.
The importance of an awareness of human rights in communication empowers audiences to make choices based on the information they receive. It allows people the freedom to choose the meanings they wish to attach to events or issues without limiting the possible choices available. Ultimately, it allows people to make their own decisions. A responsible media needs to ensure that, within its critical, independent and commercial framework, it allows the widest possible range of ideas and sources to be accessed in its representation of an issue. In South Africa, there is still a need for this to be integral to all media who claim the discourse of objectivity in news, particularly because of the disempowering nature of our past.

The representation of the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Bill!Act (1996/97) and the abortion issue provided a 'test' for the South African media in fair, informative and unbiased reporting within a human rights perspective.

What were some of the issues which needed to be examined in reporting?
1. What the Bill was about?
2. What it meant for South African women?
3. An examination of the moral and emotive issues which relate to it or have related to it in other countries around the world.
4. Ways in which it has been handled in other countries
5. An investigation into the human rights arguments from all who contribute to the debate
6. The significance of it in South Africa and in relation to the constitution
7. What ordinary South Africans would want to know about it, and why it was being tabled in Parliament

Many more questions can be raised which needed to be addressed by the media in order to provide information to the public, and it was with these questions in mind that the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) analysed the media's coverage of the issue.

Britain and America could be cited as two examples where the abortion issue has raised confrontation between women's and human rights groups, and religious anti-abortion groups. The language which characterises these confrontations are 'pro-life' vs. 'pro-choice' (advocates of the pro-choice viewpoint claim the accommodation of both within their discourse) or pro-legal abortion vs. anti-abortion. The discourse of the former characterisation places it within the human rights context, setting up two fundamental rights against each other; the human right to life and the human right of free choice. Within these discourses the logic often follows thus: to be pro-life is to be anti-choice and to be pro-choice is to be anti-life. It is this which forms the basis of the 'moral' agonism of the 'debate' with religious and other groupings urging the sanctity of the human life as defined from conception, and women's and human rights groups advocating the right of women to choose how to control their own biological and social future. The centrality of life and choice become the root of the often emotionally charged nature of confrontations between the various groupings.

MMP's assessment wanted to determine whether the media was able to represent these issues within the context of the deliberation of the Bill and not become biased towards either of the 'sides' involved, maintaining instead a fair, balanced and investigative approach. Whether the media were able to do this would indicate their progression to a democratic human rights culture in reporting which would allow the public information to make their own choices.

Methodology

The media is often assessed in two main ways, firstly as a body of ideology which brainwashes the unwitting and unconsidering public into submission. And secondly within the context of free expression and human rights. The first view concentrates on the media's power to persuade and control people; the media as manipulating minds. Those who subscribe to this view therefore frequently look to control the media. The assumption within this view is that the media is capable of controlling people's minds, hence for example the censoring of anti-apartheid media by the National Party government.

The other way in which the media is constructed owes much to the human right of free expression. In this view the media is free to produce whatever it wishes without censorship and the public is free to accept or reject it.

Both these ways of understanding the media have value and importance. However neither on
their own an adequate account. Although the public may be free to choose, their choices are influenced and limited by economic and social pressures, hidden ideologies and advertising, amongst other things. Thus free choice is complicated by the economic, social and ideological context in which the media operates.

On the other hand the public are not the brain washed dupes that the first framework suggests. This view assumes that people are unable to critically absorb information from the media. But often the experiences of people directly contradict the messages in the media which they are given. For example for most South Africans, the news reports on political protest by the SABC during the apartheid era were inaccurate and false, because their experiences of institutionalised racism and police brutality directly contradicted what the SABC was saying. To reconcile these two ways of understanding the media it is best to focus on where and how meaning is made.

The media's role in a democratic society is to provide the public with the widest range of information so that the public can exercise their basic right to decide for themselves, to form their own opinion and make their own meaning. However contemporary cultural and media theory has argued, the meaning which is made in relation to media communication, is made not by the producer of the information but by the reader, viewer or listener, according to their own background, experience and identity: “readers are not passive, but active processors of information. They do not simply register conveyed meanings, but construct them.” (van Dijk 1991: 42)

Our understanding of the media needs to take cognisance of the reader's active role in the process of 'reading' the media. We need therefore to reconceptualise how we understand the role of the media, and especially the news and information media, to provide information for active readers and not passive recipients. At the same time we know that the media encodes ideologies, attitudes and values which influence and guide the response of the reader.

Stuart Hall, a prominent British media academic, gives us a way of understanding this. For Hall, the encoder of the message (the producer of the message) constructs the message in a way which gives preference, consciously or unconsciously to his or her own power position within the society. This Hall terms the "preferred" meaning, the interpretation the encoder hopes the decoder (reader) will make. However the decoder in drawing from their own experience and identity negotiates a meaning for themselves, which can be the same as the preferred meaning or one that is a total rejection of the preferred meaning (an oppositional meaning) or a negotiated meaning which accepts and rejects different parts of those meanings (Hall 1980: 128-138).

Van Dijk in his research found that:

"... the media, as a whole define the internal structures, the points of relevance, and especially the ideological boundaries of social representations. They provide the ready-made models, that is, the facts and opinions, that people use partly in what to think, but more important which they also use in devising how to think" (van Dijk 1991: 244)

While van Dijk's assessment is obviously specific to his research and study, the essence of his conclusion pertains to the point that the media defines the boundaries within which the reader is able to actively produce their own meaning.

But if the media's achievement is to limit or expand the possible meanings which the reader can make, then our understanding of the role of the media's role changes - defining the boundaries of what people think about, rather than what people think. One answer to this as proposed by cultural theorists (Fiske 1992: 298) was to focus not on the meanings which a text may produce, but the 'openness' of the text, the extent to which it allows for a variety of meanings and opinions to be made from it. These theorists termed the range of meanings a media message or text could allow, the polysemy of the text or message. Thus if we are to have a media which gives the public room to decide for themselves then the 'open' or polysemic nature of the text needs to be recognised and asserted. The relevance for news and information media is clear: only news items which attempt to give all sides of a story and which provide further...
information for the reader can claim to be polysemic. Polysemy in news reporting is essentially an analysis of the balance and information which a news item does or does not provide.

What analytical tools should we use then to assess the polysemy of the media reporting of the abortion issue and *Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act*? Contemporary discourse analysis provides one approach. Discourse analysis understands the communication of meaning as being done within a system which both the news producer and news audience can understand. A discourse is a:

"socially produced way of talking or thinking about a topic. It is defined by reference to the area of social experience that it makes sense of, to the social location from which that sense is made, and to the linguistic or signifying system by which that sense is both made and circulated." (Fiske 1992: 301)

Each discourse then is characterised by its own style, ideology and content. TV News discourse for instance has its own visual style: documentary photography, a news reader in the studio, a reporter at the news event etc. News is thus placed within a discourse which classifies it (as news, international news, sports news etc.) values it (as headline news, pack page news etc.) or even omits it. The aim of discourse analysis is thus to show how the news item as part of the discourse of news, limits or opens up the news to allow the audience to decide for themselves.

It has other advantages too. As Kress, Garcia and van Leeuwen (1997: 258) point out, modern communication is multi-modal, it is no longer about language but about other forms of communication, visual, aural and written. TV news for example uses sound, images and written text to communicate. Because of discourse analysis' flexibility, it is capable of providing a multi-modal analysis of the media which incorporates all the communication modes of that discourse.

But contemporary discourse theory provides even more than this. Fairclough and Wodak argue that discourse is dialectical: "discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people." (1997: 258)

The discourse of the news media is thus not simply a reaction to the happenings of the day, to the 'news breaks' as they occur (the news media would have us believe they are objective reporters of events beyond their control), but the discourse also constructs the news, through selection and omission, exaggeration, bias and representation. This is not simply cause for greater scepticism of the media but an opportunity to intervene in the construction of the news discourse. The news media, to protect their supposed 'objectivity', have always resisted the idea that they can intervene in the representation of the events, that they can reconceptualise it. This needs to be challenged. If the news media are in control over how the discourse of news is defined (through selection, omission, representation etc.) then they can alter it to allow for greater polysemy, rather than for the limiting of possible meanings.

The MMP believes that the news media have a responsibility to provide fair, balanced and polysemic reporting and the right and the freedom to report without fear of censorship. The MMP also believes that the media not only have the right to freedom of speech but also the responsibility to advance all human rights. This includes the right to information, to allow the public to choose for themselves.

In view of this, the study selected a representative sample of media to examine over two two-month periods which coincided with the passing of the *Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act* (15 October - 15 December 1996) and its enactment (15 January - 15 March 1997). The sample of media included national daily and weekly newspapers, three regional African language newspapers, two SABC radio stations, a commercial radio station and SABC 3 TV news. Our monitoring of radio beyond two news bulletins per day was unfortunately limited by budgetary constraints.

The morning news bulletins on radio were monitored because they usually achieve the highest audience ratings. Only SABC 3 TV bulletins were monitored. Letters to the editor in most of the papers although prolific during the period under review, were not included because these should not be reflective of editorial policy.

The monitoring also captured quantitative data: the number,
Amount of Coverage Across the Media

Graph I

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<td>Business Day</td>
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In the weekly newspapers the Mail & Guardian stood out with the highest average of sources accessed per story, supporting the notion of higher levels of analytical reporting in weeklies such as this.

On comparison with Graph IV this may reveal that these sources were often taken from the same opinion base which would necessarily limit the range of opinion. With the Beeld, Business Day, Sowetan and Citizen this was the case, with most viewpoints being taken from the anti-abortion/anti-choice lobby. Increased source numbers were found predominantly in items which included information on abortion and its availability, with hospital/clinic sources being quoted or mentioned. Press releases from the national and provincial health departments also included greater numbers of varied sources. The fewer number of sources accessed in the Star is interesting as this newspaper revealed the most balanced coverage afforded to the issue, according to Graph IV. The Citizen appeared to have the most sources on average yet most of the articles were Sapa articles, as can be seen on Graph III, which suggests that they accessed fewer opinions in coverage by their own reporters.

The New Nation also did relatively well in this regard. The remaining weeklies were limited in the average accessing of sources per story. Even though the Sunday Times had more coverage of abortion than the New Nation (Graph I), the latter made greater use of varied sources. The Sunday Times also had more coverage than Ilanga and Umafrika, as illustrated on Graph I. Yet on this graph we see that both Ilanga and Umafrika scored higher averages than the Sunday Times, pointing to a deficiency in the coverage by this newspaper.

On radio, SAfm fared well, providing the best radio coverage of the abortion issue in this regard. Based on the fact that SAfm and Lesedi's news source is basically the same, it is surprising that the number of sources accessed on Lesedi were so markedly less. Our monitor suggested that this could be attributed to the less frequent use of sound bites by Lesedi as opposed to SAfm and the centrality of the

Average number of sources per story by medium

The importance of assessing the sources used in an item is that it determines the range of sources of information made available to the audience. The greater the possible number of diverse sources accessed, the broader the possible range of opinions and ideas are opened to the listener, viewer or reader. This also leads to fair reporting as more voices on a particular subject can be heard.

Graph II shows the average number of sources used by each medium per story. If each story averages only one source, this would provide the least range of opinion available to audiences. It is important for sources to be taken from more than one side of the spectrum of views available within a subject. Using this as a mean we can determine that on average the dailies accessed at least two sources, with the Star a notable exception.
The problem with this defence by the SABC is two-fold, first it refutes virtually any complaint on TV coverage based on the need for the news to be assessed over a longer period and not only for three items. What was ignored was that the SABC failed to represent another viewpoint, aside from the one mentioned over the period over which the complaint was lodged. The MMP has monitored every SABC 3 20h00 news bulletin for over a year, and we have found that the SABC’s coverage of the abortion issue was biased towards the anti-choice/pro-life lobby, through its uncritical reporting of it and its lack of representation of a wider range of viewpoints.

The second problem is that this defence is based on the assumption that the media has no responsibility to report issues as informatively, analytically or accurately as possible, to show all sides of a story; within a human rights framework (the rights to information and access to information). This goes against the tenets of public broadcasting and must therefore be noted with great concern. It is also deceptive, incorrectly suggesting that the media, here the public broadcaster, has a purely reactive role towards the selection of news and not a proactive role in the construction of a national news agenda. Rhoda Kadalie of the Human Rights Commission said that the media, particularly the public broadcaster, needed to be careful of allowing religious fundamentalism to dominate in media representation of issues such as the abortion issue. Often religious viewpoints are only represented as fundamentalist, closing the range of religious beliefs available. But religious groups of this nature are often, and especially in this case, used to argue against women’s rights, which within the context of the public broadcaster’s responsibility to human rights is problematic. So although SABC 3 appeared to access a larger range of opinions, its opinions were often limited to one side. This will be addressed in greater detail in the discussion on Graph IV.

**Sapa vs. own copy**

Sapa, as South Africa’s main news agency, has historically been relied on quite extensively by daily newspapers and SABC radio particularly. We have focused only on daily and weekly newspapers in this section however, because unless one has access to the Sapa wire service, it is very difficult to assess which items are drawn from Sapa by radio news. Financial constraints made it impossible for MMP to subscribe to the service for the four month duration of this project, so this comparison unfortunately had to be excluded. The project was completed before the SABC’s alteration with Sapa and their subsequent cancelling of the Sapa contract.

It is commendable that four out of the five dailies monitored made greater use of their own news sources/reporters, according to Graph III, than of Sapa. The importance of this is that greater investigation into a story is made possible, beyond what Sapa makes available. This in no way to underestimate the function of news agencies, however, if they were the only news reports accessed, reporters in other mediums would become virtually redundant, and news would be limited to the perspective of the given agency. The Beeld’s amount of own coverage is positive.

Reporters sometimes use Sapa as their lead into a story which they then further investigate. This is also virtually impossible to determine when monitoring the final copy of an article, but nonetheless leads to more
A list of sources with the average number of sources used by each source:

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<th>Source</th>
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<td>SABC 3</td>
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<td>Umafrika</td>
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The news reader as the main source of information in a news bulletin. She said that perception of abortion as a taboo in the black community could also have influenced the depth of reporting into the issue. Franz Kruger, National Editor of News and Current Affairs for SABC Radio, said that the lower number of sources per story could be attributed to the difficulty in obtaining original sound in African languages. Many politicians and public figures are more willing and inclined to make statements in English rather than in African languages resulting in less sound bites being available to African language stations. Radio 702's sources were surprisingly lower than the other two, suggesting that this station's reputation for quality news needs closer scrutiny.

SABC 3 appeared to have a high average per story, however, often the sources were from the same or a similar part of the spectrum of viewpoints. Interestingly, the Reproductive Rights Alliance (RRA) took a complaint against the SABC to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa in which they claimed the SABC was only representing one side of the issue and consistently led items on the abortion issue with visuals such as the 'floating foetus' (discussed later) which promoted the idea that those who are pro-choice are murderers. They used three examples from news bulletins from the 3rd, 5th and 8th of October 1996.

An item in the bulletin from Saturday 5 October, covered a march by pro-life/anti-choice groups to the Union Buildings where, according to the reporter, "people planted crosses for the unborn children". The reporter did not attribute this comment to the anti-abortion lobby resulting in it seeming to be the view of SABC news rather than the lobby. So whilst this news item was necessary and informative with regard to the anti-abortion lobby, at no point was there an alternative viewpoint offered and the choice of language could have been avoided or represented in a less partisan way. For example, the above comment could have been prefixed with the words, "what this group termed the 'unborn child'". The RRA's complaint was ruled out on the basis that TV news coverage needed to be assessed over a longer period of time as varying viewpoints could have been represented on other bulletins and that the pro-life/anti-choice group received more coverage as their campaign was more vociferous.
thoroughness in reporting, and good interactive use of the news agency. The Citizen stands out as having more Sapa articles in this instance than their own. In MMP's research for the Government Task Group on Communications (Comtask) in 1996, we found that a large proportion of the Citizen's stories are taken directly from Sapa. This research suggests that this has not altered.

Looking at Graph IV (a) which represents the proportions of what we categorised as Pro, Anti and Fair coverage for the Citizen and Sapa within the Citizen's total coverage, we see that a larger proportion of Sapa coverage was Anti-abortion than the newspaper's own coverage, suggesting that the Anti-abortion bias emerged from Sapa.

Nonetheless, Anti-abortion coverage was still high in the newspaper's own copy which points to a general bias in this area.

If we see the Citizen within the context of having been started by the National Party, and still editorially supporting this party, this coverage makes sense. The NP opposed the Bill on a moral basis and because it claimed the ANC majority was acting against the wishes of the majority of South Africans.

Weekly newspapers, except for the Sunday Times had virtually no Sapa coverage, supporting the idea of greater investigative reporting by own reporters, and that Sapa provides a daily news update, whereas weekly newspapers report more analytically on subjects. Items in Ilanga, Invo and Umbafika were not sourced to Sapa, though Sapa articles might have been translated into the relevant languages.

### Bias across media

As discussed in the Methodology, 'Fair' coverage refers to balanced, informative and unbiased reporting. Our monitoring found that items which could be classified as Fair were balanced, informative and unbiased to any particular viewpoint. However, few examples emerged which focused on abortion as a human rights issue, beyond the contestation between pro-life and pro-choice. Journalist Ramotena Mabote also commented that the media failed even to contextualise the issue legally; looking at past law and international law. MMP found three discourses which dominated media coverage of the Bill/Act-abortion issue.

1. **Anti-abortion**
   The first exists within the anti-abortion arena in which abortion is seen as morally indefensible and contrary to the human right to life. Those opposing abortion therefore emerge as morally respectable, and are usually conservative, religious males (men in this instance appear to stand out in the media over women who oppose abortion). Those advocating abortion are seen within this discourse as militant, feminist and amoral (if opposing abortion is morally 'wrong'). Abortion is criminalised, where the women who are actually affected by the legislation and who chose abortion become baby killers and moral murderers. This discourse characterises coverage with an Anti-abortion bias.

2. **Pro-choice**
   The second discourse is that of pro-choice of freedom of choice where the right of choice for women in the face of unwanted pregnancies (for social, economic, cultural and health reasons), backstreet abortions, incest and rape within marriage/partnerships is emphasised. The woman's right to control her body is strongly tied to this viewpoint. Those anti-abortion are therefore seen as conservative
and oppressive towards women and their rights within society. Whilst the pro-choice standpoint may incorporate the right of a woman to choose against abortion, and these groups emphasise that they are not ‘pro-abortion’ but are pro-the freedom for women to choose to have abortions or not, the media representation did not accommodate this possibility. Representation of this discourse was not that different to the anti-abortion discourse, it often portrayed the advocates of this discourse as militant and feminist. Affected women were predominantly seen as historically disadvantaged ‘victims’ who are poverty-stricken and denied rights within existing traditional and social roles.

3. Administrative/ Government incompetence

The third discourse, which intersects with the first, revealed the government, after passing the legislation, as incapable of properly carrying out abortions in hospitals and clinics. The message being that the ANC un-democratically pushed the Bill through Parliament, denying its members a conscience vote and using its majority accordingly, and yet was incapable of delivering on its promises. Affected women here became victims of queues, unpassed medication (an important drug for early terminations had not been passed before the Act came into operation), misinformation (a large number of women were turned away as their pregnancies were too far advanced) and inefficiency. This discourse thus fed into the general anti-abortion sentiment.

Ultimately, the women actually affected by the legislation were consistently represented as victims in all three discourses. There was virtually no direct accessing of women’s opinions on the issue as only the established groupings were sourced for information. At no juncture were women seen as being empowered to take control of their own lives and bodies. The point, within the human rights context, is that women were being offered the opportunity to decide for themselves, within their social, political, historical, traditional, cultural and economic contexts, the ways in which they wanted to control their sexuality and health choices. Whether women chose to have abortions or not is not what is at stake, it is the choices which are made available to women, and how this empowers them.

By closing the range of opinions and ideas, the media limited the possible ways in which women and other readers could view abortion. Women’s sexuality continued to be viewed negatively as women who needed to consider abortion were seen as being morally irresponsible or victims of poverty. The abortion issue centralises the existence of women as sexual beings, and it appears that based on the media coverage, South African society continues to be too challenged and threatened by women’s sexuality to attempt accommodating it. Hence abortion coverage remained basically negative towards abortion and women’s rights.

Graph IV shows the bias found across the media monitored. The Beeld and Citizen (discussed earlier) stand out with the highest levels of Anti-abortion bias. Both newspapers emerge from a Christian National background and continue to advocate this perspective on issues such as abortion. The Beeld did, to its credit, have a reasonable proportion of Fair coverage which indicates some responsibility (in terms of fair, balanced and representative reporting) in its reporting.

The Business Day also had more Anti-abortion coverage which was not balanced with Pro-choice or Fair coverage. This coverage fitted mainly into the government incompetence discourses outlined above, which are a common theme in the Business Day articles. The Sowetan’s coverage had a slightly greater amount of Anti-coverage, with lower Pro-coverage. The level of Anti-coverage unfortunately undermined the positive effects of the more Fair coverage, which was limited in its analytical extent.

The Star displayed the highest level amongst the dailies of Fair coverage. This is clearly good in terms of its reporting, though it must be noted that a number of these items focused on the medical and informative aspects of the issue/Act. The level of analysis in the Star, represented substantially by guest or feature writers is positive for a daily newspaper.

The New Nation’s coverage, though little, was exclusively Fair. The Mail & Guardian and Sunday Times were matched in Anti- and Fair coverage which points to the increased critical reporting in weekly newspapers, with equal Fair coverage balancing these
Bias Across the Media

Graph IV

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<th>Media</th>
<th>Fair</th>
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<tr>
<td>Star</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Citizen</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Day</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beeld</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
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newspapers' overall coverage to some extent, though still within a greater anti-discourse. 
Ilunga and Imvo's coverage was also Fair though limited. According to the 
Umfrika items monitored, the one article on the abortion issue was 
Anti-abortion (Catholic Bishops objecting to abortion), resulting in 
this representation.

SAFe and Lesedi's coverage was 
good, representing Fair coverage 
which was informative and 
balanced, within these bulletins, 
though they did not address the 
issue within the framework of 
human rights. Radio 702's 
coverage, like the Mail & 
Guardian and Sunday Times had 
similar levels of Anti- and Fair 
coverage, with this coverage, 
whilst providing information, still 
operating within the anti-abortion, 
government incompetence discourses.

SABC 3, as previously discussed 
was predominantly negative in its 
representation of abortion. Tiffany 
Devitt in an article titled, 
"Abortion Coverage Leaves Women out of the Picture" 
analyses the 'floating foetus' logo 
(Devitt 1997: 1) which is used by 
various news media in America, 
and in this case by SABC 3 as a 
visual behind the news reader. The 
logo is often used in reporting of 
abortion, separating the foetus from 
the pregnant woman, pushing the 
woman, her integral connection 
with the foetus and her rights, out 
of the representation of abortion 
(Devitt 1997: 1). This kind of 
representation supported an Anti-
abortion bias. The Beeld made 
similar use of a foetus logo in their 
coverage which contributed to their 
anti-abortion stance.

The Sapa Bias pie-chart is also 
interesting to consider here as the 
percentage of Anti- Sapa items 
accessed by news mediums was 
particularly large, standing at 59%. 
This was surprising as Sapa 
coverage has often promoted itself 
as being more 'neutral' politically 
and strongly information based,
and we would expect a similar level of coverage from them in this instance. However, the strong anti-abortion bias which emerged in the newspapers' selection, clearly adversely affected this media's representation of abortion. *Sapa* editor Russell Norton said that *Sapa*'s objective is to present as much information as possible to subscribers and ultimately the public. They aim to be as fair and balanced as possible with particular focus on the information quotient of the stories they produce. He felt that media coverage was predominantly emotive with a strong bias to the anti-abortion lobby. Commenting on the high level of anti-coverage, he said that the anti-abortion lobby carried out a vociferous and consistent media campaign, sending regular statements and releases to *Sapa*, and he attributed the 59% to this campaign. The amount of information being released from Parliament and the Health ministry was substantial yet even this was 'overshadowed' by the amount of information being generated by the anti-abortion lobby. *Sapa* coverage therefore represented, not necessarily society's beliefs, but those who accessed news sources proactively. He expressed surprise at the amount of information from the anti-abortion lobby which reached the papers through the *Sapa* service. It must be noted that the *Citizen* carried the most *Sapa* articles and their selection of the *Sapa* items they wished to print also influenced the extent to which *Sapa* coverage emerged as biased. The selection, by newspapers, of *Sapa* stories therefore plays a part in the representation of issues such as that of abortion, which points to editorial bias.

![Amount per Value Across Media](image)

The pie-chart displaying the amount of coverage per value across all media, shows that Pro-choice coverage made up 10% of all coverage, with Anti-making 44% and Fair also making up 46% of coverage. The high percentage of Fair coverage indicates that certain media are moving towards more informative, balanced and representative reporting of the parties or groups involved in an issue. However, the high percentage of Anti-abortion coverage points to a difficulty on the part of the media monitored to break out of historically established attitudes towards emotive subjects. The limited examination of the human rights framework and its implications for South Africa as a democratic society, as well as South African's ability to address this shifting mind-set, reveals a generally disappointing performance by the media monitored.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the coverage by selected media of the passing of the *Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act*. Using a methodology drawn from contemporary discourse theory and including a quantitative analysis of the coverage the research revealed that the media under-performed in its coverage of the passing of the Act.

Overall we found that while the amount of coverage afforded to the issue was sizeable, it was deficient in a number of aspects. The coverage was in the first instance frequently unbalanced, supporting a pro-life/anti-choice perspective, most notably so in the case of the more conservative print media. Furthermore, the coverage of the passing of the Act, focused on the moral and emotional aspects of the issue, especially of the foetus, without including an examination the human rights and more specifically women's rights framework in which the Act could have been placed. The research argued that in a society committed to the development and maintenance of human rights, it was necessary to assert the responsibility of the media to provide the public with an informative and balanced account of the passing of the Act which would allow the public to determine their own understanding and viewpoint.

Unfortunately the discourses in which the coverage was placed represented women seeking abortion as either amoral, victims of poverty and society or as victims of administrative incompetence. These discourses all failed to represent the passing of the Act as important in empowering women to control and choose for themselves.
Furthermore the discourses frequently limited the issue to an ‘equal’ debate between pro-life and pro-choice, reducing the significance of the Act and failing to adequately inform the society as to all aspects of the issue. The media demonstrated a marked reluctance to become more active in the reporting of the issue. It frequently simply reacted to the media campaign of the pro-life/anti-choice lobby, failing to provide alternate viewpoints and information.

Within a democratic society every individual is entitled to the opinions s/he has chosen to formulate. What is important, is that the information which is required for these opinions to be made, be disseminated in such a way as to accommodate the multiplicity of meanings and identities which need to be able to exist within a democracy.


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References


The coding reliability factor was calculated at 90% for this project.

Interviews

Franz Kruger, National Editor of News and Current Affairs for SABC Radio.

Rhoda Kadalie, Human Rights Commissioner.

Ramatena Mabote, Journalist.

Russell Norten, Saga Editor.
**Verifiable Indicators**

The MMP does not assume that it would be solely responsible for the achievement of these results. However, through our general monitoring and research and our special projects, the MMP would aim to apply pressure and convince those media stakeholders as to the importance of achieving the aforementioned results. Indicators of MMP’s success would include:

- Analysis being discussed by media owners and leaders in public and private meetings
- Participating in media policy debates
- Participating in conferences on media issues
- Conducting important media research for public institutions
- Research accessed and reported within the media
- Expertise accessed for comment within the media

**Means of Verification**

Certain of the mentioned indicators of MMP achieving its stated aims are self-evident. References to MMP in the media, MMP research released in the media and letters to the MMP commenting on MMP research would all be clear means of verifying the MMP’s effectiveness. However, certain indicators would be harder to acknowledge and the MMP intends undertaking an annual assessment of its work.

**Projects**

- **Radio Diversity Study**
  To examine the diversity of news reporting across newly licensed and community radio stations.

- **Pilot Mandate Study**
  To discover whether SABC is fulfilling its licence mandate in terms of language, diversity etc. And investigate the IRA’s role in this.

- **Crime Reporting**
  To reveal the racism and bias in the ways in which crime is reported.

- **TRC Submission**
  The MMP has made a submission to the TRC on the ways in which the media ideologically supported the system of apartheid.

- **TRC, Gender, Racism, Human Rights & Media issues**
  To keep track of important issues relating to the media, to improve information around them and to educate and inform the public, as with all other research, through weekly updates and Media Mark.