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Monitoring the media since 1993

How the media can make Women's Day The Media Monitoring Project's National Women's Day Media Challenge 2004

What is the challenge?

The Media Monitoring Project's (MMP) challenge is for the media to mainstream women on National Women's Day. Instead of media merely concentrating on so called "women's issues" and only on the celebrations that are set to take place on the 9th of August MMP is challenging the media to fill their papers, radio broadcasts, television schedules and news with women.

Clearly many of the media support gender equality, efforts to raise awareness and the celebration of women. As a demonstration of their commitment, MMP urges the media to take up the challenge and actively show their support for women this Women's Day.

Given their previous notable performance, some media can be challenged directly: the *Sunday Times*, the *Beeld*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *ThisDay*, *Kaya FM*, *RSG*, and *SAFM*, to name a few.

The *Sunday Times*, with its infamous back page and the *Sowetan Sunday World* with its "page 3 babes" are sections of the newspaper that are - albeit controversially - dominated by women. The real challenge would be to see whether the remaining pages of these newspapers can be similarly dominated, not only by images, but by women: sources, journalists, editors, so that women's opinions and views on the entire range of news stories and issues are raised in the edition.

The *Mail & Guardian*, headed by one of the award-winning Women of the Year, Ferial Haffajee, has now even greater incentive to rise to the challenge of filling its pages with women.

ThisDay, the most recent addition to South Africa's print media, and the only national daily that advertises itself as "news with attitude," can now take on all the attitudes of South Africa's women.

News 24 and the Independent Group both have incredible women (as journalists, sub-editors and columnists) already working for them; the challenge is for all their media to give those women free reign, just for one day.

For the broadcast media, it is hoped that progressive radio stations like *Kaya FM*, with its own gender policies, *SAFM*, who is consistently at the forefront of change and debate, their competition *702*, who thrive on “walking the talk”, and *RSG*, who performed so well earlier this year in MMP’s election gender ratings, will take up the challenge with enthusiasm and vigour.

SABC, the public service broadcaster, and its newly founded editorial policies, which highlight the *SABC*’s commitment to promoting gender equality, has a clear opportunity to rise to the challenge across its broad spectrum of stations.

E-TV, fiercely independent and always keen on emphasising this fact, can use National Women’s Day to highlight this independence by greater commitment.

How can media rise to the challenge? Some possible solutions:

- Fill entire news bulletins and newspaper editions with contributions from women
- Make women editors for the day, (it worked with Madiba why not Graca?)
- Use women as sources in every story
- Use the same news agenda, but apply a female’s perspective to each item
- Women can be found in all sectors of society; from business to sport. Why not find and include businesswomen, commentators, experts, workers, entertainers, nurses, leaders, teachers, doctors, academics, lawyers, and sports women?
- Invite advertisers to participate. Advertisers can use this opportunity to be creative and come up with different, positive portrayals of women.
- Diversify images and photographs of women.
- Use women photographers, designers, producers, talk show hosts, DJs and directors.
- Why not approach famous and “ordinary” women to be guest writers for National Women’s Day. One of the notable omissions in the democracy special editions, released by some print media at the end of April, was the visible lack of women writers and contributors; Nobel Prize laureate Nadine Gordimer was one of the few female authors who wrote for the democracy coverage.

Why the challenge?

Over the past five years, the MMP has conducted an annual monitoring exercise of media coverage during the period in and around National Women’s Day. Consistently, the results have been characterised by a marked increase in the coverage of women and ‘women’s issues’ for the short period preceding the commemoration of the day. While such coverage does tend to give women some of the credit they deserve, much of it still fails to celebrate and represent the diversity of women in South Africa.

Coverage monitored in the past often focused on the role that women have played – and continue to play - in the democratic transformation of South Africa, in sharp contrast to coverage of women during the rest of the year, where the role of women is often trivialised and marginalised. While such coverage may be considered positive, unfortunately, the attention on women and women's issues is short-lived. MMP's research shows that the focus on women in the media declines almost immediately after the 9th of August.

MMP's 2003 research on National Women's Day found that there was an increase in the diversity of representation of women in the media, such as business and politics, this has failed to significantly alter the prevailing reporting trends. (This, in spite of the widely reported increase in the representation of women politicians and premiers.) Previous research has highlighted the limited roles in which women are represented in the media. The challenge therefore presents the media with an opportunity to mainstream women and highlight their diversity.

The MMP looks forward to the South African media's response to this challenge. While the challenge is only for one day – the potential impact and positive spin-offs may be far reaching – including the creation of greater awareness, more readers, more listeners and more viewers.

Questions, suggestions or comments:

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