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South Africa Post-Election Review Policy Series POLICY BRIEF NUMBER 7

Same Voices, Different Contestants: Media and Elections in South Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the high number of new political parties that participated in the national and provincial elections, the South African media were generally fair to all the contestants in their coverage of the fiercely contested elections. However, the coverage tended to lack depth and concentrated on personalities rather than policies. In the end, the mainstream media failed to articulate the citizens' agenda choosing rather to focus on politicians and political parties' agenda. They also paid lip service to pressing issues like unemployment, electricity, housing, poverty, education, migration and health.

The big four political parties dominated the electoral news coverage cycle while smaller parties received less attention. Data collected by Media Monitoring Africa shows that the African National Congress (ANC) received the majority share (33%) of the media coverage, followed by the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party) with 20%. The Democratic Alliance (DA) garnered 14% and the Economic Freedom Fighters

(EFF) registered around 9%. Smaller parties like the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) had 5%, Action SA received 4% and Rise Mzansi managed a mere 2%. Like other mainstream media platforms, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) struggled to give sufficient coverage to smaller parties and independent candidates.

Overall, the media tended to promote 'peace journalism' narratives as opposed to 'war journalism', although the 'otherisation' of foreign nationals in news reports dealing with emotive subjects like migration and unemployment was also evident. The data also reveals that women's voices were grossly underrepresented in the South African media during the election period with only 18% of voice share, while male voices dominated at 82%. As far as the safety and security of journalists are concerned, cases of hate speech and gendered disinformation campaigns were recorded online.

BACKGROUND

The 29 May 2024 elections in South Africa were held at a time when the South African media industry was going through seismic changes occasioned by three interrelated processes: platformisation, digitisation and datafication. The environment was also characterised by financial sustainability challenges (evidenced by the closure of media houses, retrenchments and juniorisation of newsrooms), mis- and disinformation, gendered disinformation campaigns targeting (mostly female) journalists, the decline in media trust, disconnection between the media and audiences as well as the rise of podcasting (such as *Podcast & Chill with MacG*) and social media

influencers (like Chad Jones and Musa Mthombeni). Furthermore, it was the first election in which the use of TikTok and artificial intelligence-generated deep fakes took centre stage in South African electoral politics. While the advent of digital and social media platforms broadened the public sphere, thereby enabling voters to access up-to-date information, engage on critical issues and educate themselves on policies and processes, it also exposed journalists to cases of gendered disinformation campaigns, cyberbullying, hate speech, harassment and digital surveillance.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Although the South African media is going through deep-seated financial challenges which adversely affected its performance during the recent electoral contest, there is a need for the mainstream media to adhere to the regulations on party election broadcasts, political advertisements, the equitable treatment of political parties by broadcasting licensees and related matters during national and provincial elections, as stipulated by existing legislation. In the broadcasting sector, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) is mandated to ensure that all contesting political parties are allocated political elections broadcast (PEB) slots during prime time.

While the amendment to the National and Provincial Party Elections Broadcasts and Political Advertisements Regulations (2024) is highly commendable, there is a need to ensure that print

and digital media platforms also have political election coverage quotas for political parties and independent candidates. The allocation of airtime should also take into consideration gender, ethnic, racial and sexual orientation factors. It should also try to balance the scales between smaller and bigger political parties. With regard to the safety and security of journalists, the media must be enabled to perform its constitutionally mandated duties and functions in the public interest without fear, threat or undue restriction. Platform companies should conduct human rights impact assessments and invest in early warning reporting mechanisms for journalists. Key stakeholders are encouraged to sign an elections media code of conduct pledge, which seeks to promote the safety, professionalism and integrity of journalists throughout the electoral cycle.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are made to specific role players within the South African electoral ecosystem:

Recommendation for the government

- The government, through the Ministry of Communications and Digital Technologies, should adequately fund the SABC so that it can meet its public service mandate. This will ensure that the public broadcaster can provide all South

Africans with the news and information needed to make informed decisions during elections.

Recommendations for the regulatory bodies

1. ICASA should urgently enforce regulations on party election broadcasts, political advertisements, the equitable treatment of political parties by broadcasting licensees and related matters during national and provincial elections.

2. The mainstream media must ensure that the needs of the voters rather than the politicians and political parties are mainstreamed in their electoral coverage. This is particularly important in ensuring that the country lives up to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights 2017 Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa which seeks to promote the proactive disclosure of information.
3. Issues raised through the ICASA Complaints Compliance Committee (CCC) should be dealt with quickly and with a significant reduction in the time taken to hear and adjudicate matters. The role of the CCC must be highlighted, commended and supported by all stakeholders.

Recommendations for political parties and the IEC

1. Political parties and the IEC should uphold the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa.
2. Political parties should pledge their adherence to the legislated Electoral Code of Conduct.
3. Political parties should conscientise their supporters on the need to protect journalists offline and online when they are carrying out their constitutionally enshrined duties. Supporters should desist from cyberbullying, hate speech and conducting gendered disinformation campaigns against journalists.
4. Political parties and independent candidates are also strongly encouraged to promote women's voices in public discourse. Women should be afforded platforms to articulate their party's manifesto and electoral promises to the general public.
5. Political parties should support and adopt improved policies to address the issue of the safety and security of journalists within their own structures.

Recommendations for SANEF

1. Safety and security mechanisms must be put in place to protect journalists from online and offline attacks. The South African National Editors' Forum

(SANEF), the South African Press Council and the Independent Publishers Association have roles to play in ensuring the mental and physical wellbeing of journalists.

2. SANEF should commend and support innovative election coverage exhibited throughout the cycle. These include live-streaming events, an elections pop-up channel, an election results dashboard, fact-checking initiatives, manifesto analysis, summaries of party manifestos and an elections portal.
3. SANEF and other media development partners should invest in long-term voter education workshops, seminars and masterclasses focusing on the voting process and how the IEC functions, mechanisms to ensure and protect free and fair elections, how vote counting works, and how votes are translated into representation in parliament.

Recommendations for Big Tech companies and social media platforms

1. Social media platforms like Meta, Google, Microsoft and Byte Dance, as part of the Framework of Cooperation which was signed with the IEC, SANEF and Media Monitoring Africa, should ensure mechanisms are put in place to protect journalists from hate speech, disinformation campaigns and harassment.
2. There is a need to expand the Framework of Cooperation to encourage greater commitment from platform companies to protect, promote and fund media development in South Africa.
3. These companies should invest in proactive reporting mechanisms, thereby enabling journalists to assemble rapid response teams of trusted allies and to delegate account access so that those allies can assist in providing targeted assistance. It could entail providing an SOS button that journalists can instantly activate to trigger additional in-platform protections and an emergency hotline.
4. Big Tech companies should develop base standards for the prevention of and response to online harms and cyber-attacks against journalists.

5. They should provide support for digital and media and information literacy training to push back against electoral mis- and disinformation.
6. Big Techs should integrate safety-by-design principles into platform design to help mitigate online harms and gendered disinformation campaigns. This could include building shields that enable journalists to proactively filter abusive content and quarantine it in a dashboard, where they can review and address it with the help of trusted allies.
3. Journalism schools should introduce modules on the safety and security of journalists that address mental, physical and digital wellbeing-related issues.

Recommendations for the mainstream media

1. News organisations should establish formal gender-sensitive procedures and systems for identifying, reporting and monitoring online violence against their staff.
2. Gendering mainstreaming in electoral news coverage cannot be ignored. There is a need for South African mainstream media to be deliberate in their equitable distribution of airtime, voice, news sources and coverage of males, females and non-gender-conforming people.
3. The media should strive to provide equitable media coverage for all political parties and independent candidates irrespective of their financial status and ideological standpoint.

Recommendations for the media and journalism training institutions

1. Journalists must be trained in covering elections from the perspective of voters so that there can be more issue-based coverage. There is also a need to ensure that the concept of equitable coverage is unpacked and understood. Media and training institutions need to roll out a masterclass on online harms and gendered disinformation campaigns. Such a course can be run on an ongoing basis, not just around elections, as the issues will continue to impact and undermine democratic institutions.
2. A masterclass on elections and gender-targeting for practising journalists can be rolled out to ensure that they include more women's voices and news sources in their election stories.

Recommendations for academia and research think tanks

1. Academia and research think tanks can support the collection of data and evidence to expand the evidence base of media coverage of elections, online harms and gendered disinformation and their impacts on journalism.

SOURCES

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