

MEDIA COVERAGE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S 2024 ELECTIONS

Setting Standards for a Media Performance Review

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the World Association of News Publishers (2024), the South African 2024 national and provincial elections took place in an era when news media are struggling to survive. South Africa's public broadcaster, the SABC, was facing a financial crisis (Ensor 2024) and decisions that appeared to encroach on its editorial independence during the elections. The economic climate meant that several media outlets, particularly smaller and independent commercial media, struggled to allocate adequate resources towards their election coverage. Despite this situation, news media made concerted efforts to help their audiences prepare and be aware of the various parties and news events ahead of the elections. For example, changes to the Electoral Amendment Act (2023) meant that independent candidates could stand for the national and provincial elections. This implied that there would be a third ballot, a change that highlighted the need for voter education during this period.

Furthermore, the threat of mis- and disinformation meant the media had to devote considerable effort to challenge, explain, and fact-check the various claims people were making. For example, the integrity and credibility of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) were questioned. All these factors combined to ensure that in addition to the regular anxieties, tensions, errors, and hiccups that accompany any election process, the news media environment was more constricted than ever. The media needed to cover, with limited resources, one of the most uncertain and complex elections in South Africa's three-decade democratic history.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) developed a framework¹ to assist by providing indicators to measure the performance of the media. The findings in this paper focus on the South African election period in 2024. The criteria in the framework are summarised below, along with the ratings and findings.

1 The Media Performance Review Framework was developed in consultation with Avani Singh.

Equitability of Coverage

RATING: *Exceeded*

Most media houses demonstrated a conscious effort to provide equitable coverage of political parties. However, smaller parties and new parties, particularly under-resourced ones, may feel justly aggrieved by the lack of coverage afforded to them.

Diversity of Coverage and Plurality

RATING: *Achieved*

Trends in coverage were very similar to those of previous elections, despite the context and political parties being very different. The top three issues that were covered accounted for a combined share of 56% of all election media coverage during this period.

Inclusion of Women

RATING: *Partially achieved*

The dominance of selected male politicians from the biggest parties was largely responsible for the very low number of women sources in media coverage. That said, the level of female representation was significantly below South Africa's usual average in an election period and undermined efforts towards greater gender equality.

Credibility of Information and Critical Analysis

RATING: *Exceeded*

It is a unique strength of South African media that despite differences in region, format, and ownership, there is an overarching level of fairness in coverage.

Reasonableness and Compliance

RATING: *Achieved*

Overall, it is clear that the established complaints mechanisms for the Press Council and the Complaints Compliance Committee (CCC) are fully functional and reliable. The Press Council put in place an expedited mechanism to deal with cases directly related to the elections, highlighting its commitment to credibility. Unfortunately, the slow timeframes of the CCC process meant that the impact of the outcome for urgent complaints was limited.

INTRODUCTION

A credible and pluralistic media landscape is critical to any democracy. This point has been consistently affirmed by our courts and other constitutional bodies in South Africa. In exchange for the constitutional protection afforded to the media, media houses bear constitutional obligations to act with integrity and responsibility. This requirement is heightened in the context of elections, where the news media, as primary disseminators of information, are at the frontline. They must provide credible information, create platforms for different opinions and opposing views, counter the proliferation of false information, and ensure an engaged and informed electorate.

According to McCombs (2002), mass media play a critical role in shaping public opinion. Because of this power in shaping public narratives, there is little doubt that media play a crucial role in the overall election process. Unlike social media, which has no standards for accurate and balanced reporting, news media need to ensure that they offer balanced, accurate, and fair coverage. Such information means that voters can make informed decisions about who to vote for.

As highlighted in the 'Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa' (African Commission on Human and People's Rights 2017), the media is recognised as having a central role in various human rights frameworks. These frameworks include the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa as well as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) election observer guidelines. What is not always clear is which criteria should be considered when determining the role of media in the runup to elections.

MMA developed the Media Performance Review (MPR) to create a standardised method for assessing the role the media play in the credibility and impartiality of elections, both positively and negatively. The term 'media' refers specifically to news media outlets in South Africa that comply with the codes of either the Press Council or the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA). Against this backdrop, the MPR is underpinned by two key facets:

- (i) to safeguard the media's ability to perform their duties in an enabling environment, without undue hindrance; and
- (ii) to reflect on the way these duties are conducted in accordance with legal and professional ethical standards.

Any assessment of the media landscape must be responsive and multi-faceted, given the wide range of elements that factor into this landscape. The situation also calls for different methods of data gathering, analysis, and reporting. Accordingly, the MPR is structured in two parts:

PART 1: ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE. The first part of the report is essentially geared towards a consideration of the media's performance in the elections, based on journalistic obligations to ensure fair and balanced coverage. This assessment is guided by pre-identified indicators. The data collection that informs the indicators is quantitative in nature, relying on the data collection tools referred to below. In simple terms, this is a comparative analysis that can be graphically represented in terms of the conduct of various media organisations.

PART 2: ASSESSMENT OF THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE. The second part differs from the first in that it is geared towards the broader enabling environment in which the media operate during the elections. This part of the report is qualitative in nature, providing a narrative description and reflections on what has been experienced. Aspects that either foster or hamper the media in their work are examined. Although there are specific indicators reflecting different types of conduct, there is currently no benchmark data to allow for a comparative analysis. This aspect may be developed in future reports, once additional data has been collected.

The MPR is underpinned by certain key factors, including for instance the following:

- (i) a data-driven approach through a public interest lens;
- (ii) openness, fairness, and transparency;
- (iii) reliance on credible information and resources;
- (iv) a commitment to diversity and plurality; and
- (v) a resource that is useful for electoral stakeholders, not only for the 2024 election but also for future elections.

PART I INDICATORS AND ASSESSMENT OF MEDIA COVERAGE

An assessment of media coverage essentially analyses the conduct of media organisations and the fairness of election coverage, in line with relevant South African regulatory standards and journalism practices. The purpose of this section is to offer comprehensive data analysis and findings on the performance of South African news media during the election period (29 February to 24 June 2024). A total of 10 483 articles were monitored across print, online, and broadcast media. For this purpose, a combination of dedicated human media monitors – especially for small community media outlets and African-language content – and semi-automated monitoring was employed. The semi-automated tool, Dexter, had been developed by MMA for media monitoring.

Equitability of Coverage

RATING: *Exceeded*

Media have a responsibility to provide equitable coverage during an election period. Equitable coverage ensures diverse coverage is given to all political parties and politicians. As a result, media contribute towards potential voters' ability to make an informed decision on voting day. Given that many new political parties were participating in the national and provincial elections, the media faced the challenge of balancing equitable coverage with public interest news. Figure 1 illustrates which of the top ten political parties were given the most media coverage during this period.

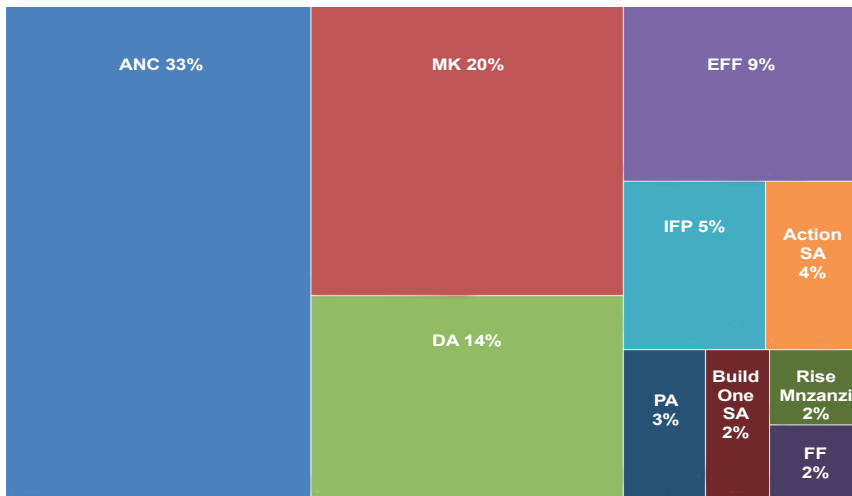


Figure 1: Coverage of top ten political parties

Note: Data included 16 199 news items, representing 93% of the analysed articles

The data indicates that the African National Congress (ANC) received the majority share, at 33%. Although media houses should follow equitable coverage guidelines, uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party) received the second highest coverage, at about 20%. This is a significant share of the coverage, especially for a new political party not represented in parliament. Given the controversy and public interest issues around the MK Party, and the legal challenges between MK Party and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), it is not surprising that the party garnered significant media coverage. Other political parties that received a large portion of media coverage included the Democratic Alliance (DA) at 14%, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) at 9%, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) at 5%, Action SA at 4%, and Rise Mzansi at 2%.

Overall, while the coverage was generally equitable, there is little doubt that smaller, new parties and independent candidates would have felt legitimately aggrieved by the minimal coverage they received across the media. Even the SABC, which tends to offer great diversity of party coverage, struggled to give sufficient coverage to smaller parties and independent candidates. The reality is that limited resources in the media will mean that some parties do miss out.

Figure 2 shows the media’s coverage of all political parties mentioned in election-related coverage during the monitoring period. Generally, all parties represented in parliament received coverage that was relatively in line with party representation. However, the new parties, including Rise Mzansi, Build One SA, and MK Party, dominated the coverage beyond what would be expected given their short track records.

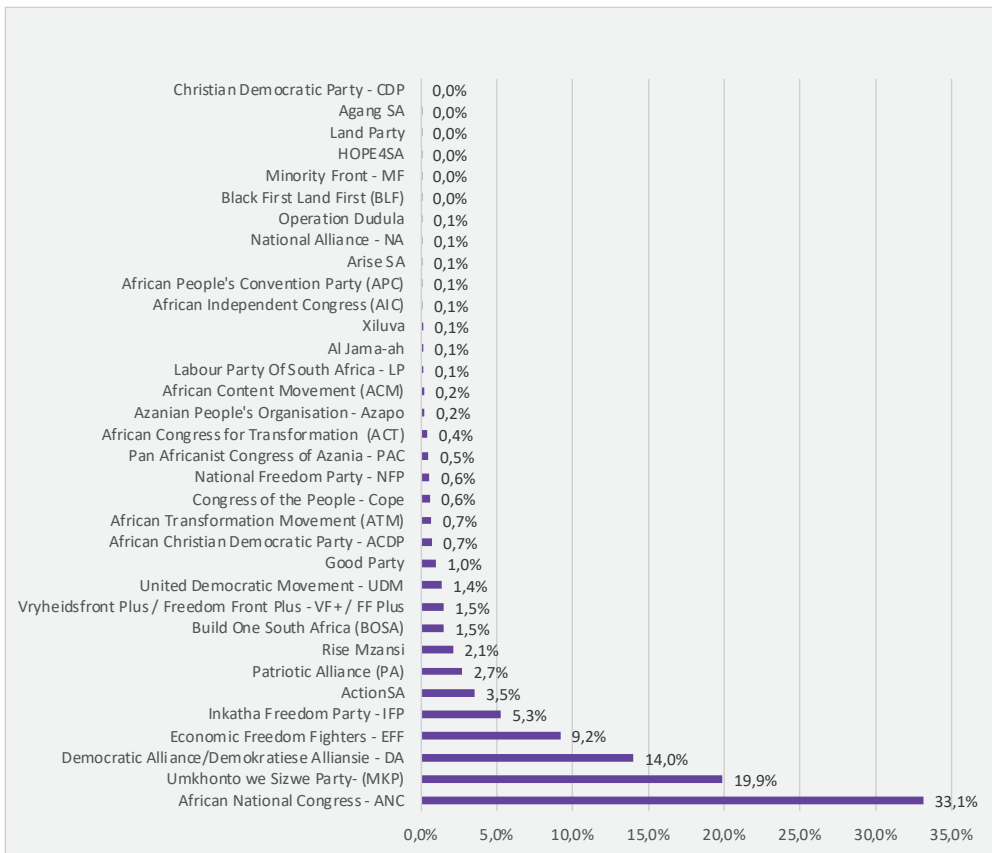


Figure 2: Political party coverage: All parties

Diversity of Coverage and Plurality

RATING: *Achieved*

During an election period, an important aspect of the media is the amount of coverage given to election-related issues. One of the critical roles of the media is to hold political parties and politicians accountable. One way to do this is to unpack issues that are important to people and assess whether these issues are given enough attention by political parties.

Figure 3 indicates the number of election-related stories that the media produced during the period. There were three clear peaks in coverage, with the first occurring on 20 May, followed by 29 and 30 May. On 20 May, international voting commenced and the first ballot of the 2024 national elections was cast. Media coverage was focused on election logistics and reported on voting around the globe. Coverage on 20 May also focused on the Constitutional Court ruling on the eligibility of former president Jacob Zuma to stand for office, representing the MK Party. Voting day was 29 May, so it was expected that news media would focus almost all their coverage on voter turnout, election logistics, and the voting process.

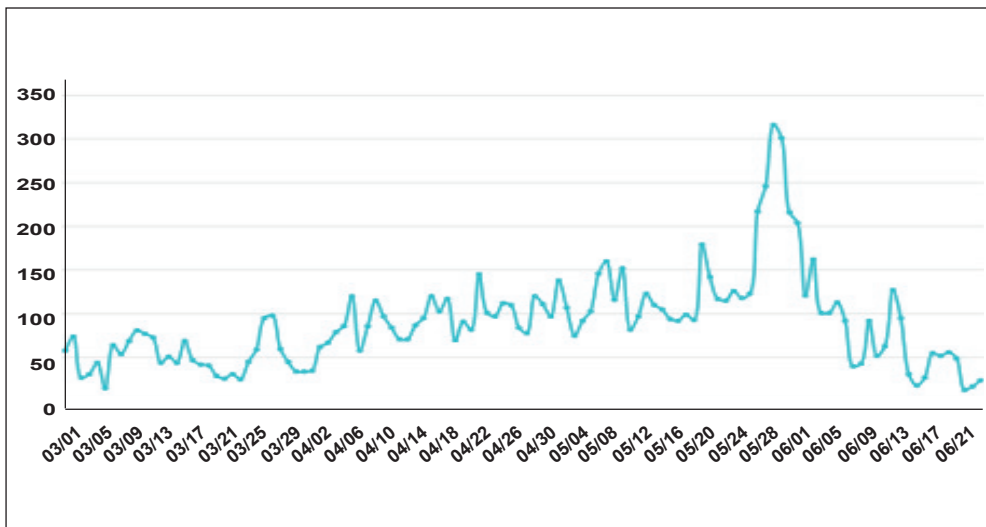


Figure 3: Count of election-related articles per day

Overall, the average number of election-related stories gradually increased over the reviewed period, as would be expected. There was a significant drop in election-related coverage within two weeks after voting day.

It is important to consider the different topics that media cover, as these issues shape the narratives of the election period. The top three topics covered were election logistics, political party politics, and political party campaigning (see Figure 4). These three topics alone accounted for 52% of all coverage. It is interesting to note that party politics was ultimately covered more extensively (18%) than political party campaigning (14%). In an earlier interim monitoring research report by MMA analysing the media's coverage of elections, party politics had received 18%, but party campaigning received slightly more coverage at 19%. These trends could be attributed to the internal conflict within the MK Party and the large amount of media coverage given to the leadership battles leading up to voting day and after it.

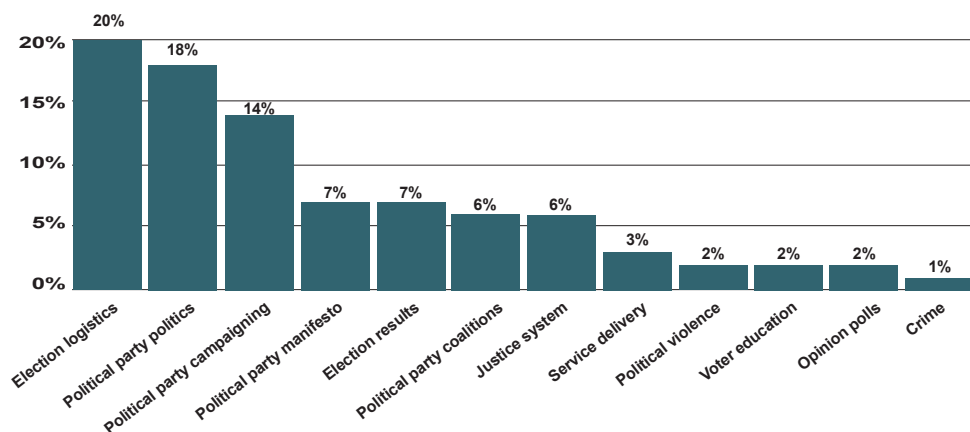


Figure 4: What was the coverage about? Breakdown of top topics (in %)

Note: N = 9258, representing 88% of all articles analysed

It is not surprising that these topics dominated the coverage; however, it is disappointing that the media did not offer more analyses on issues of concern to the public. The data shows that media outlets often allowed political parties to set the agenda, focusing on the narratives driven by politicians. Political party internal politics was a dominating topic, and this overshadowed key human rights-based issues as well as service delivery concerns. It is worth noting that service delivery issues still featured in the top ten most covered topics, in eighth place (with 3% of coverage).

Figure 5 below indicates the topics that were generally left out of the media's coverage of the elections. The result was an obvious gap in reporting on critically important issues. Topics such as children, climate change, and housing were afforded less than 1% of the coverage, even though the climate crisis is one of

the biggest global risks currently. Gender, education, and development were also largely ignored as key issues during the election period.

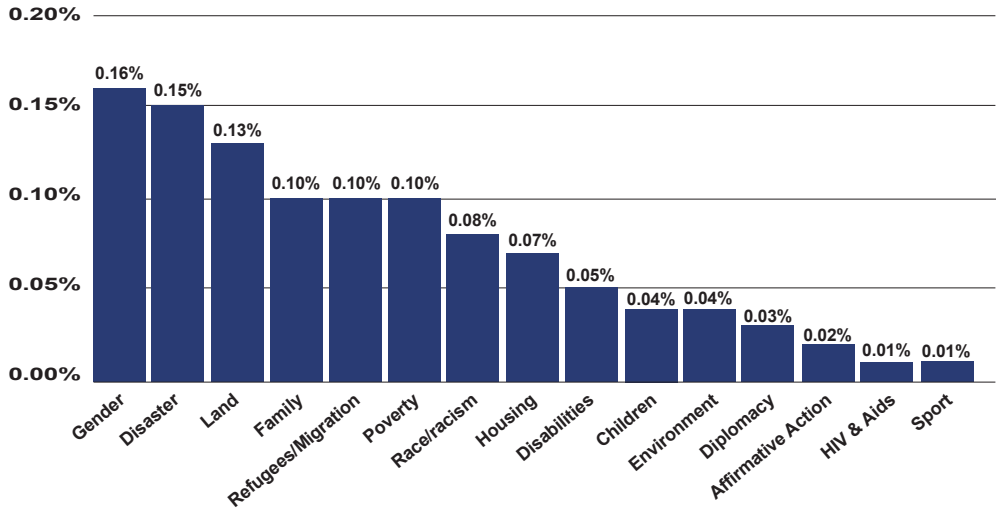


Figure 5: What was the coverage not about?

Note: N = 115, representing 1.1% of all articles analysed

The regional spread of coverage during national and provincial elections should enable the public to understand the key issues and ensure that some regions are not marginalised or left out. However, although the spread of coverage should largely represent the demographics of the country, coverage is often predictably focused mostly on the national level during national and provincial elections. The data shows that the 2024 elections coverage focused strongly on two provinces, Gauteng (23%) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (14%), as shown in Figure 6.

The Western Cape is usually the second or third most covered province. For the first time in our elections monitoring, the Western Cape received less coverage (5%) than the Eastern Cape (6%). This finding represents an important change in media coverage. The reason for the increased focus on Eastern Cape could be the protests around voting stations on voting day in that province and protests that prevented voting stations from opening.

While in line with trends observed historically, these findings indicate the need for stronger effort to provide diverse local news coverage of marginalised regions. The remaining six provinces shared only 14% of the total coverage.

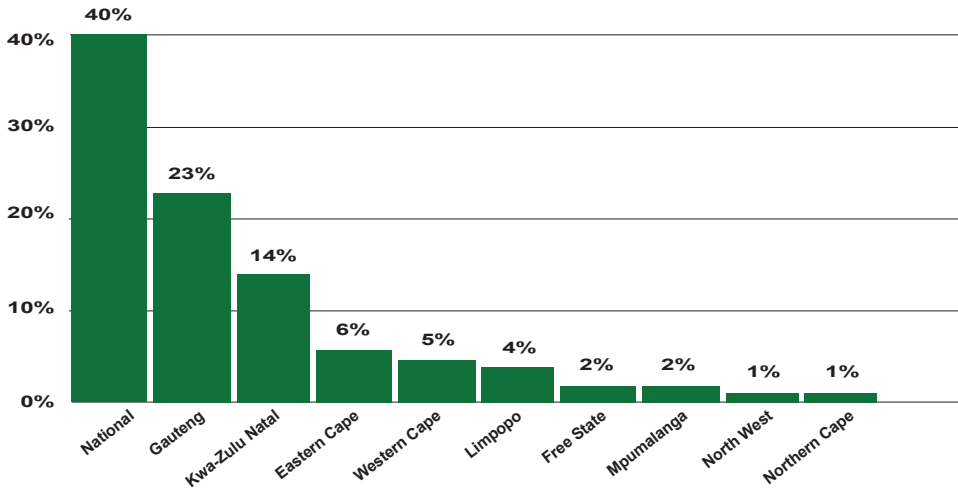


Figure 6: Breakdown of coverage for national and provincial levels

Note: N = 9522, representing 98% of all articles analysed

Inclusion of Women

RATING: *Partially achieved*

The ‘voice share’ in the media refers to who is sourced and quoted the most. To determine this aspect, MMA collected data on the spread of male versus female sources. Women’s voices were grossly underrepresented in the media during the election period, with only 18% of voice share, and male voices dominated at 82% (see Figure 7).

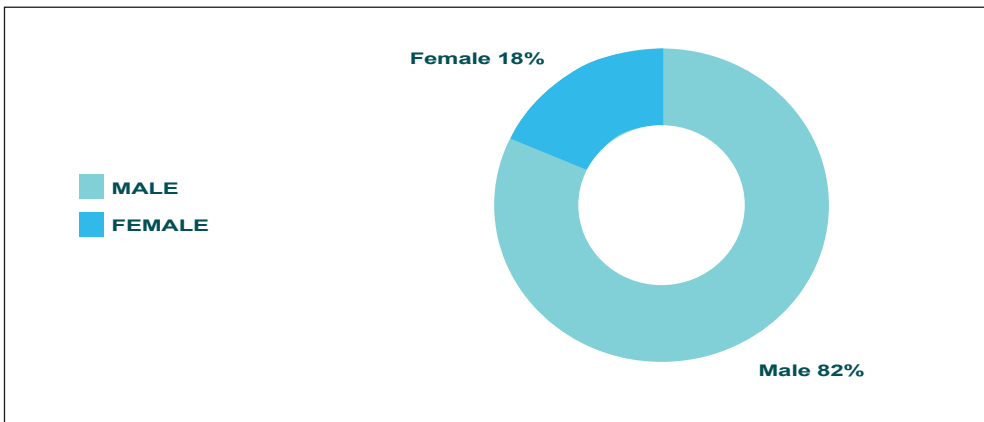


Figure 7: Share of voices: Who had the loudest voice?

It should be noted that the percentage of women's voices had increased since our interim report, the findings of which indicated a 16% share for female voices. This increase may be attributed to the engagement with journalists and editors around MMA's interim findings on voice representation. Although the underrepresentation is still highly problematic, the slight increase is a positive finding.

Given that the political landscape is predominantly male, with few parties being headed by women, the underrepresentation of women's voices might confirm the notion that the media may have allowed political parties and politicians to set the agenda. Generally, MMA's monitoring has found that women's voices are heard approximately 19–22% in the media. News media in South Africa are usually in line with the global average, currently at 24%, for women's voices in the media. However, the result for the 2024 elections was below that average. In a society where women outnumber men, more women than men vote,² and there are near-pandemic levels of gender-based violence, inequality, and patriarchy, it is essential that deliberate and consistent efforts are made to ensure that more women's voices are heard.

Media houses may to some degree argue that if the parties mainly offer male voices, that is who will be interviewed. However, we know that gender equality is not just good for women but generally leads to better and more balanced coverage. Media outlets therefore need to be assertive about requesting interviews with women. If the parties do not proactively offer these voices, media representatives can ensure they make every effort to give prominence to women experts and candidates to try and achieve gender equality in their coverage.

Credibility of Information and Critical Analysis

RATING: *Exceeded*

A critical element in determining media performance during elections is assessing whether the media's coverage was biased or generally fair. Each election-related article was analysed according to the following criteria:

- (i) Language
 - language bias by exaggeration;
 - language bias by generalisation; and
 - language bias by trivialisation.
- (ii) Presentation
 - Bias occurs when one or more parties are clearly favoured by virtue of how they are reported on.

2 See <https://elections.sabc.co.za/elections2024/news/sa-women-participation-in-the-2024-election/>

(iii) Omission

- Bias occurs where a party is not given the opportunity to respond to substantial allegations or to an issue of critical importance to that party.

The data clearly indicates that the overall media coverage of the elections was fair. Indeed, one of the strongest findings was that all media outlets, from small community organisations to large commercial houses and the public broadcaster, covered the elections in an extremely fair manner (see Figure 8). That thirty years after the start of democracy we should be in a space where media are overwhelmingly fair is a credit to South African journalism.

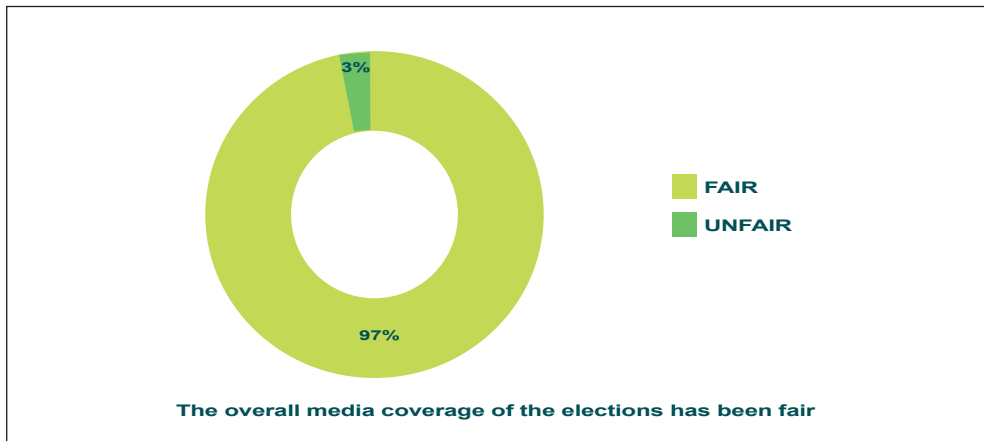


Figure 8: Fairness of media coverage

That said, it is worth noting that there were some stories, including several published in *The Star* newspaper, that actively gave credence to mis- and dis-information about whether the IEC could be trusted. Such stories undermine the integrity of all news media and should be condemned.

Another core concern that undermined the media's overall fairness and accuracy was related to journalists not challenging the people they interviewed. It was concerning how seldom journalists, interviewers, and presenters challenged certain controversial statements made by politicians. Although it is difficult to fact-check in a live role, media representatives must hold politicians accountable when they make claims that are unverified, unsupported, or patently false. Other examples occur when people challenge the legitimacy of the South African constitution, perpetuate negative stereotypes – including making xenophobic utterances – or seek to discredit key public bodies like the IEC without evidence. It is important for the media to be able to hold politicians accountable when

the latter make claims that are broadly anti-democratic and patently false or unsubstantiated. Allowing parties to get away with such statements undermines the critical role that journalism plays.

Reasonableness and Compliance

One of the elements of media performance during elections is linked directly to compliance with codes and ethical conduct, as set out in the Press Code for Print and Online Media as well as the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) election regulations and BCCSA Code³ for broadcasters. During the election period, the Press Council and ICASA's Complaints and Compliance Committee (CCC) dealt with several cases, as discussed below.

Press Council

RATING: *Exceeded*

The Press Code has a specific clause dealing with elections. All of the complaints listed here were either resolved amicably through mediation by the Press Council's Public Advocate or adjudicated by the Press Ombud, in record time, taking into consideration section 1.5 of the Press Council's Complaints Procedures:

1.5. Recognising the importance of democratic elections at national, provincial, and local levels of government, the Press Council will give top priority to finding speedy resolutions to complaints related to those elections when they are being held to secure free and fair elections.

Press Council complaints during the election period were as follows:

30735 Action SA v Rapport

The complaint was that the authors of an election poll were not identified in the article. The respondent stood by their story, as they had received the poll from a confidential source, with the request that the authors should not be identified. The Deputy Press Ombud upheld the complaint and directed the respondent to at least give some clarification about the authors of the poll, without naming them. *Outcome: The respondent's application for leave to appeal was declined by the Chair of Appeals.*

³ During election periods, the ICASA Complaints and Compliance Committee has jurisdiction to deal with election-related complaints against broadcasters, rather than the BCCSA doing so.

30738 PAC v Daily Sun

Daily Sun reported that the Pan-Africanist Congress's 'President', Narius Moloto, had claimed that the PAC had failed to meet the IEC's requirements to stand for the upcoming elections. The PAC stated in its subsequent complaint, lodged with the Press Council, that in fact the PAC president was Mr Mzwanele Nyhontso and that the PAC was indeed registered with the IEC to participate in the elections. *Outcome: The PAC accepted Daily Sun's offer to publish a retraction and an apology.*

30750 Eugene Mthethwa (EFF) v Sunday World

Sunday World published an article based on a leaked EFF 'candidates list' for the upcoming elections, stating that the complainant was not in the party's top 100. When the complainant lodged a complaint with the Press Council, the publication had already published a retraction and apology. After publishing the article, Sunday World had discovered that the published list was not the party's final list.

30751 Referendum Party v Daily Maverick

The complaint was about the publication's 'Fact Check' article, which stated that the Referendum Party's call for a referendum on Cape independence was 'selling voters pipe dreams'. The party complained inter alia that their views had not been sought. The Press Ombud dismissed the complaint as the article was an opinion piece.

Outcome: The Chair of Appeals declined the application for leave to appeal.

31811 Helen Zille (DA) v Sunday World

The complainant stated that Ms Helen Zille had been misquoted with regard to the DA's view on a possible coalition with the ANC.

Outcome: Ms Zille accepted the publication's offer to publish a retraction and an apology.

In summary, the Press Council dealt with five cases in the reviewed period, indicating that the process functioned efficiently and that redress was provided. In addition, there were several broadcast complaints during the reviewed period, which were dealt with by ICASA's committee, as discussed below.

ICASA Complaints and Compliance Committee

RATING: *Achieved*

Outside of an election period, complaints about broadcasters are heard by the BCCSA. During an election period, according to the ICASA Act 2000, such complaints are directed to the ICASA and its CCC. As a Chapter Nine body, ICASA

is mandated to address election-related complaints against broadcasters (see ICASA website). During the reviewed period, the CCC dealt with three matters, all related to the same issue. They focused on a political advert produced by the DA which contained a moving image of the South African flag being burned. The three CCC cases were as follows:

Democratic Alliance (DA) Complainant v South African Broadcasting Corporation Soc Ltd (SABC)

In this case, the DA argued that the SABC should not have banned their advert from running.

Outcome: the CCC ruled in favour of the DA, and the SABC was instructed to run the advertisement and was fined.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition (SOS); and Campaign for Free Expression (CFE) v South African Broadcasting Corporation Soc Ltd (SABC)

In this case, civil society sought to raise freedom-of-expression issues regarding the decision by the SABC to ban the DA advert. The CCC ruled against the civil society bodies on the basis that civil society had no locus standi to bring a complaint. The civil society bodies are currently seeking to take the decision on review.

Bertha Kgokong v SABC SAfm

This complaint was in relation to a listener of a show on SAfm. The complaint was about the DA advert, with the complainant being of the view that SAfm afforded too much coverage of the controversial issue and as a result gave the DA unfair election-related coverage.

Outcome: The complaint was dismissed.

While only three cases were dealt with by the CCC, the outcomes highlight that the system is functioning. However, several deep concerns remain. In the case of the DA advert, the DA had lodged their complaint some two weeks before the case was heard. In the end, the delay by the CCC meant that although the finding was in favour of the DA, the SABC could no longer broadcast the advertisement. There is a clear need for the processes of the CCC to be accelerated to avoid any future incidents that would result in similar hollow victories.

PART II
ASSESSMENT OF MEDIA-ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

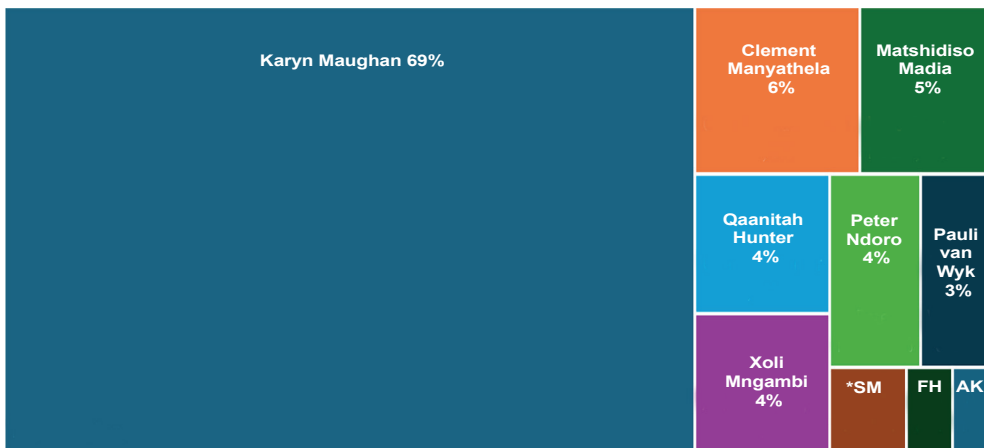
The purpose of this section is to assess whether the environment enabled the media to operate during the election period and its conduciveness to the conduct of free, fair, and credible elections. A key element for a conducive environment is whether journalists can do their jobs. Outside of that, it has become common practice for journalists to be attacked and harassed simply for being online, and this harassment can be particularly egregious for women journalists.

Reid et al. (2024) investigated case studies on the nature of attacks against journalists and highlighted potential solutions for tracking, analysing, and combating these attacks. MMA has also been working on a tool called Media Attack Reporting System (MARS) which can track attacks against journalists online. Two MMA monitors were asked to upload the records of attacks against journalists online.

Number of Recorded Incidents

A total of 1 025 online attacks against journalists were recorded on MARS during the reviewed period. This number marks an increase from the 793 attacks recorded in the interim report results. Hence, even after the initial results had been declared, attacks against journalists continued unabated.

What is clear from the chart in Figure 9 is that Karyn Maughan was consistently one of the focal points for online attacks. However, several male journalists were also subjected to attacks, particularly Clement Manyathela, Peter Ndoro, and Xoli Mngambi.



* SM = Sihle Mavuso, 1%; FH = Ferial Haffajee, 1%; AK = Amanda Khoza, 1%.

Figure 9: Top ten journalists who were attacked online in 2024

The attacks against women journalists are frequently based on the journalist’s sex; they often include sexualised terms and misogynistic tropes and seek to demean. The word cloud in Figure 10 depicts the type of language used in attacks against Karyn Maughan. Almost anything Maughan posts has been subjected to abuse and ridicule. Common words and phrases included calling Maughan a racist, insulting her appearance, instructing her to ‘voetsek’, and undermining her ability to do journalism.



Figure 10: Word cloud of attacks against Karyn Maughan

While the list of journalists who are subjected to attacks is relatively small, the list of attackers amounts to almost ‘one insult, one user’, which means that in most attacks, each comment tends to come from a unique user. Thus, instead of there being a clear pattern of abuser accounts, there is a list of over 500 different accounts from which attacks emanate. The diversity of attacker identities makes it relatively hard to track and block them. While there may well be a small group responsible, they make sure to cover their tracks by using an almost unending list of attacker accounts.

Nature of Threats, Platforms Used, and Responsiveness

A trend that continued over the reviewed period is that most of the reported attacks originated from Twitter/X. This is a similar finding to the trends that were evident in Real411, where many of the complaints in the same period originated from Twitter/X. Real411 is an initiative developed by MMA. It is an online public complaints platform where users can submit harmful digital content for assessment, such as disinformation, hate speech, incitement to violence, and

harassment. Given X's withdrawal of their Trust and Safety team from South Africa and indeed the continent, it is unsurprising that Twitter/X was the dominant platform for mis- and disinformation and attacks against journalists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Attacks on Journalists

As the online attacks against journalists demonstrate, there is a clear need for greater and more meaningful commitment to protecting journalists. The MMA's recommendations are as follows:

- (i) The IEC could consider adopting the draft code developed by South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), namely the Electoral Code of Conduct on Media-Related Matters (SANEF 2024), for the next local government elections.
- (ii) Additional focus and commitment should be implemented to protect journalists when political parties pledge their adherence to the legislated Electoral Code of Conduct mentioned above.

Role of News Media

People's access to accurate, verifiable, and fair coverage is an essential component of free and fair elections. All stakeholders have a positive responsibility to demonstrate what actions, processes, and concrete steps are being taken to develop, protect, and promote the role of news media in elections. The MMA recommends as follows:

- (i) In addition to including the draft code developed by SANEF, the Framework of Cooperation signed by IEC, MMA, TikTok, Google, and Meta (MMA 2023) needs to be expanded. The aim should be to encourage greater commitment among social media platforms to protect, promote, and develop the news media.

Innovation

The innovative efforts demonstrated by a range of media showed what could be done with limited resources. Examples included the SABC coverage, where they hosted social media live streaming events as well as an Elections Pop Up channel and the SABC's own election results dashboard. Other innovations were the various fact-checking initiatives and manifesto analyses, including a quiz style option through News24. Many media outlets also sought to offer summaries of party manifestos. Other bodies, such as SANEF, set up an elections portal with extensive resources. The MMA recommendation is as follows:

- (i) The IEC should recognise and commend all such efforts, in order to ensure that they can be repeated and where possible replicated and expanded.

Journalist Training

It is important that voter education covers more than just the voting process. It should also include 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. While such programmes have been conducted in the leadup to elections, longer term approaches are necessary to ensure broader take-up, retention, and application of the content and key issues. There were important training and briefing series that ran during the entire election period, from preparation to vote counting and the declaration of results. In this regard, the IEC, SANEF and partners should be commended for running such training leading up to the 2024 elections. Our recommendation is as follows:

- (i) As journalist resources continue to dwindle, and early career entrants join the industry, the IEC and its partners should conduct in-depth and consistent election-related and voter education, together with media organisations.

Development of Masterclasses

In addition to voter education, there is a need to ensure that journalists are trained in covering elections from the perspective of voters. Such training could improve the issue-based coverage. There is also a need to ensure that the concept of equitable coverage is unpacked and understood. The MMA recommendation is as follows:

- (i) A masterclass or course should be developed on reporting in elections and the leadup to local elections, with the target audience being producers, journalists, and editors.

Online Harms: Literacy and Skills Development

In another 'first' for 2024, MMA with the IEC and the Mandela Institute ran a masterclass on online harms. The class offered an exciting opportunity to ensure greater understanding of online harms. Our recommendation is that –

- (i) The course should be run on an ongoing basis, not just around election times, as the issues will continue to impact and undermine democratic institutions.

Supporting Media Regulators

Although the ICASA CCC is well established, there is an urgent need for issues to be dealt with more quickly. There needs to be a significant reduction in the time required to hear and adjudicate matters. Given the escalated tensions, it is essential for urgent issues to be addressed as speedily as possible, not only to ensure respect for due process but also to build public confidence in the system. It is important that the role of the CCC is highlighted, commended, and supported by all stakeholders. The Press Council system demonstrated its efficacy in the leadup to elections. The MMA recommends as follows:

- (i) The CCC's role should be acknowledged and commended and should be supported by stakeholders.

Countering Threats to Democratic Institutions

An emerging threat to democratic elections are certain efforts to undermine the credibility of critical public institutions. It is essential to distinguish legitimate, evidence-based critiques of public bodies versus attacks that seek to undermine public trust but with no evidence. Attacks against the IEC, news media, journalists, and the judiciary undermine free and fair elections. All stakeholders in elections have an essential responsibility to challenge such attacks. Stakeholders also need to explain and unpack their own roles in ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. Our recommendations in this area are as follows:

- (i) Educational material setting out the role and purpose of core democratic institutions needs to be developed and should be disseminated in the leadup to elections.
- (ii) Where institutions are subjected to unwarranted attacks, such attacks must be condemned by all stakeholders.

Mainstreaming Gender Equality

Gender equality is central to democracy. As highlighted in the MPR assessment, media contribute to perpetuating gender inequality through the patently inequitable representation of women's voices. The MMA recommendation is as follows:

- (i) The media masterclasses mentioned above, as well as initiatives that provide voter education, must address issues relating to gender. The aims are to ensure that journalists include more women's voices and to strongly encourage political parties to promote women's voices in public discourse.

The MPR is an attempt to achieve two goals. The first is to establish repeatable and scalable criteria that can be used across elections and nations to establish how the media performed. The second goal is to provide an evidence-based set of data to assess the degree to which media contributed to and /or failed to support free, fair, and credible elections. At a time when there is increasing uncertainty as to what is or is not credible, and there are claims and counterclaims about how 'mainstream media' can support or undermine democracy, the MPR can provide an informed perspective that is based in human rights and is sufficiently nuanced.

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