

SAME VOICES, DIFFERENT CONTESTANTS

Media and the 2024 Elections in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

On 27 April 2024, South Africa celebrated 30 years since the dawn of its democracy. This momentous milestone coincided with the seventh national and provincial elections which took place on 29 May 2024. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data sourced and analysed by Media Monitoring Africa, this article investigates the ways in which the South African news media covered the May 2024 elections. It assesses the extent to which the news media provided fair coverage for all the political parties, independent political candidates and electoral management body. It assesses the extent to which people living with disabilities and women were factored into electoral coverage agenda. It argues that the big four political parties dominated the electoral news coverage cycle while smaller parties received less attention. Compared to their male counterparts, women's voices were grossly underrepresented throughout the electoral cycle. The coverage tended to lack depth and concentrated on personalities rather than policies. Besides elite news sources, the coverage was biased towards urban areas and urban-based news sources. In the end, the South African mainstream media failed to articulate the citizen's agenda, choosing rather to focus on politicians and political parties' agendas. This meant that the coverage paid only lip service to pressing issues like unemployment, electricity, housing, poverty, education, migration and health. The article ends with practical and policy recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the media in electoral processes has been researched for 70 years (Duncan 2014; Lloyd 2009; Kelley 1962). Extant research shows that the mainstream

media can have a crucial influence on how citizens relate to and engage with electoral politics (Altheide & Snow 1979). In order to make effective and informed electoral decisions, Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) observe that citizens need to know at least a little about politics, parties, and candidates. In contemporary electoral politics, citizens rely on traditional and digital media for information, education and entertainment. In short, the media constitutes citizens' main source of political information (Norris 2000). As a way of living up to this expectation, the media is duty-bound to supply voters with balanced and objective information on relevant political issues and actors (Strömbäck 2008). In the context of elections, the news media act as primary disseminators of information, frontline providers of credible information, and creators of platforms for different opinions and opposing views, thereby countering the proliferation of false information, and ensuring an engaged and informed electorate.

Because of its critical importance in the constitution of modern public spheres, media platforms are expected to actualise the right to freedom of expression (Kupe 2022). Freedom of expression and political debate are recognised as being fundamental to free, fair and genuine elections (Lloyd 2009). For instance, an election can be declared free but not deemed fair when there is unequal access by political parties to public media. As vehicles of public communication, the media in diverse forms is the oxygen and lifeblood of contemporary democratic processes.

In a healthy democracy, the media is expected to perform the following critical roles: information, analysis, watchdog, open forum for debate and discussion, social representation and entertainment. As far as creating an open forum for debate and discussion, the media is expected to ensure that ordinary people are able to express themselves, relate what issues are most important to their country, region, community, or family, and why these issues matter to them. By giving people the opportunity to speak out during elections, the media brings to life the much-coveted notion of public sphere or *lekgotla*.

In their various iterations, traditional media are 'now the modern platforms from which party candidates disseminate information to voters and solicit their support to win elections' (Oboh 2016, p. 3). This dovetails with Kurfi's (2010, p. 295) assertion that '... without access to the full range of information about their world, citizens cannot fulfil their roles, and democracy will wither'. In order to play a successful role in society, the media needs to be free from all powerful forces and vested interests (Kupe 2022). These interests include ownership, government and party control, policy and regulatory constraints and the influence of funding and financing. In order to play a watchdog role, the media should enjoy editorial and programming independence from vested interests. Furthermore, the [public, commercial and community] media should always be ethical, professional and serve the public interest. The media is expected to maintain a high level of

professionalism, accuracy, and impartiality in their coverage during the elections, and different regulatory frameworks exist to guide the media's conduct in this regard (SANEF 2024). While these responsibilities are non-negotiable, there is a realisation that the performance of the media cannot be measured simply by how extensively, accurately and fairly political parties and contestants are covered, but by whether the media exposes voters to the kind of information voters need to know, and also whether the media prioritises and reflects voters and citizen concerns.

On 29 May 2024, millions of South Africans cast their votes for their chosen national, provincial, and regional representatives. These elections were held when the South African media industry was going through seismic changes occasioned by the adoption of three interrelated processes: platformisation,¹ digitisation,² and datafication.³ The environment was also clouded by financial sustainability challenges, mis- and disinformation, gendered disinformation campaigns targeting female journalists, decline in media trust, disconnection concerns between media and audiences as well as the rise of podcasting and social media influencers. Furthermore, it was the first election in which TikTok and AI-generated deep fakes took the centre stage in South African electoral politics. 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. However, it also exposed journalists to cases of gendered disinformation campaigns, cyberbullying, hate speech, harassment and digital surveillance. Besides these digital insecurities, the safety and security of journalists also took the form of offline threats and violence. The media has become broader and more complex. Whereas in the past the focus was on the role of public, community and commercial media, platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp are reframing democracy and the way citizens engage and participate in electoral processes. Hence, focusing on the mainstream media alone can inadvertently lead to the promotion of an 'incomplete narrative' or what Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi (2009) calls the 'danger of a single story'. In this regard, traditional media is no longer the only source of information during electoral campaigns. It is increasingly being supplanted and complemented by social media, which provides faster access to various types of content. Social media has enabled politicians to express themselves, without necessarily being

1 This refers to the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms.

2 This refers to acts of process automation, process optimisation and information processing for the purpose of business performance improvement and to generate a competitive advantage.

3 This refers to the process of transforming various aspects of our lives into data that can be quantified and analysed.

journalists' gate keepers (Mare 2018). Social media acts as an early warning indicator, source of breaking news, fact-checker and rumour-monger, and functions as a public agora, a meeting place for the expression of ideas.

The study looks at the media's coverage of the election campaigns of various parties, as well as the parties' use of media during their campaigns. It attempts to answer the following questions: How did the South African media report on the May 2024 elections? To what extent did the media assist South Africans to make informed decisions about how to relate to the general elections and the plethora of parties contesting it? Which voices were given prominence throughout the electoral cycle? Which voices were sidelined and marginalised throughout the lifecycle? Whose agenda did the media promote/demote? How did hate speech narratives manifest through mediated coverage of elections? How did the media report on emotive subjects like immigration and race relations during the electoral cycle? How did the media include/exclude people living with disabilities in their electoral coverage? The answer to these complex questions is based in part on information provided by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) and primary data collected by the author.

This article focuses on how the South African media, broadly defined, covered the May 2024 national and provincial elections, and on media coverage of issues which were foregrounded and under-reported. It examines how different politicians and political parties were accorded media space to articulate their policies, visions and promises. It is argued that the South African media was generally fair to all the contestants in their coverage of the fiercely contested plebiscite. However, the coverage tended to lack depth and concentrated on personalities rather than policies. Mainstream media failed to articulate the citizen's agenda, choosing rather to focus on politicians and political parties' agendas. It also paid lip service to pressing issues such as unemployment, electricity, housing, poverty, education, migration and health. Similar to 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. Data in the article reveals that women's voices were seriously underrepresented compared to those of their male counterparts in the South African media during the election period.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, a short literature on the nexus between media and elections is discussed, followed by an overview of the current media landscape in South Africa highlighting the decline in traditional media appeal, the rise of social media influencers and podcasters, and the shift towards

online media consumption amongst voters. This is followed by a discussion on the methodological and theoretical concerns of the article. Findings and analysis are followed by a brief forward-looking conclusion that includes recommendations on how media coverage of electoral processes can be strengthened.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature (Duncan 2014; Mathebula 2019; Dhawraj 2019; Kalyango 2011) on the nexus between media and elections tends to foreground both strong and weak effects on the formation of public opinion. On the one hand, some scholars view the media as a very powerful opinion-formation institution, whereas other scholars are not convinced of this. They see media as a weak contributor to opinion formation. The media may reinforce the choice of voters who have already decided which party to support; for the undecided, a candidate's image – including his or her media image – may influence voter behaviour in highly mediated elections (Duncan 2014). Be that as it may, the media serves as an integral link between political parties, politicians and ordinary voters. During elections, the media has the onerous role of providing information on registered parties, their programmes and candidates, that would enable the citizens to decide which party and candidates that they may wish to vote for (Oboh 2016). In one of her groundbreaking studies, Norris (1997, pp. 223-224) observed:

the primary functions of the media's coverage of the campaign is to increase information about the choices on offer, stimulating interest in public involvement in the process, . . . watching politicians debate, the major issues during the campaign may stimulate viewers to feel better informed, more aware of the choices on offer, and therefore better equipped to exercise their choice at the ballot box.

Depending on the balance of forces in a particular socio-political context, the media can be hugely influential in the shaping of perceptions and final voter decision-making (Duncan 2014). The mainstream media is expected to play an educative political role, thereby enlightening 'the masses on the appropriate electoral procedures that would enable them to shun the evils of the "money bag" politicians, and to avoid the disadvantages of voting along the lines of ethnicity and religion' (Okpoko 2003, p. 76).

Writing about Nigeria, Oboh (2016) argues that although the media gave adequate publicity to the elections, the public and the private media disagreed about the credibility of the election results. Muriungi (2006) looked at how *The Standard* and *Nation* newspapers covered Kenya's 2002 elections. She posits that the

two main newspapers tried to maintain unbiased covering although editorials had a slight angling towards some preferred candidates. Using Zimbabwe's elections as default setting, Santos and Ndhlovu (2023, p. 363) argue that polarisation can induce news media

into assuming an active partisan posture in their reportage of political issues and events by using rhetorical discursive strategies not only to persuade the audience to accept their standpoint, but subsequently, to influence their political action in the future, with consequential implications for their functional performance of received normative roles.

Behnke (2019), in analysing how international media organisations covered African elections, found that negative representations of election processes and a lack of deep analysis also frame the continent as 'the other'. The study also reveals that the continent is portrayed as hopeless and incapable of democratic elections. This is not unique. In an earlier study, Schiffrin (2009) concluded that the portrayal of elections in Africa by mainstream Western media concentrated mainly on crisis, disaster, war, famine and its oversimplification of social organisation and ethnicity.

Focusing on the SABC, Zulu (2021) argues that the public broadcaster did not represent the real image of the political parties, and that this may be regarded as unprofessional and may taint the quality of their work. The research shows that there are deep-rooted social and cultural issues in the media that need transformation. Krüger (2019) observes that South African media coverage is dominated by the speeches and activities of the national party leaders, analysts' commentaries, and opinion polls. During the 2009 elections, Media Monitoring Africa found that the South African mainstream media's coverage lacked depth and largely failed to cover issues of concern to the electorate. This is not the first time that the mainstream media has been found wanting. In her study, Duncan (2014) also observed that this coverage has tended to be event-focused and lacking in analysis. She concluded that most of the coverage is concerned with the personalisation of candidates and political parties, with very little space afforded to party policies and citizens' concerns.

Several scholars (Duncan & Seleokane 1998; Jones 2019; Duncan 2014; Jacobs 1999) have demonstrated that the mainstream media has a blind spot when it comes to the citizens' agenda. The heavy focus on the 4 Ps: political parties, politicians, policies, and promises often dominates the gaze of elite news makers in South African media. Focusing on what she calls 'competition without diversity', Duncan (2014) observes that the media is well placed to inform voters about the policies and practices of political parties so that they can make informed decisions.

Building on what Garman and Malila (2017) call a ‘lack of listening’, Jones (2019) finds that news sources during the South African elections (1994–2014) consisted increasingly of pundits and decreasingly of political leaders and citizens. For Wasserman (2013), the media should embrace an ‘ethics of listening’. These studies underscore the fact that the South African media ignored the voices of ordinary people. Because ordinary South Africans are often not given the platform to articulate their own concerns, they frequently resort to social media platforms as invented spaces of political communication (Mare 2016). This dovetails with Garman & Wasserman’s (2017) observation that listening has a transformative and even radical potential for both emerging and established democracies. The study seeks to analyse the extent to which South African media listened to voters through its media reportage.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Unlike most countries on the continent, South Africa has an advanced, well-resourced, three-tiered media system consisting of public, community and commercial media, which has been criticised for publishing what Friedman (2011) calls ‘the views of the suburbs’. Instead of serving ‘a broad, diverse and socio-economically highly unequal population’ (Wasserman 2020, p. 453), South African media is still run by whites in their top management structures (Radebe 2022). Despite the transformation rhetoric in high sounding policies like BBEE, and although a handful of media houses are now controlled by black players, the allocative control of this media still rests with the powerful corporations interlinked with global capital (Radebe 2022). This means that the post-apartheid media system remains configured along a liberal ‘consensus which emphasised the independence of the media from government and a free-market environment in which the media should conduct its business’ (Wasserman & De Beer 2005, p. 37).

Ideally, the public and community media is expected to provide important counterbalances to the commercial media. However, in practice the commercial media – both print and broadcast – plays a disproportionate role in shaping public opinion and agenda setting. In many ways, the media system mirrors post-apartheid racial and class cleavages. For instance, the commercial print media [like *Business Day*, *Daily Maverick*, *News24*, *Sunday Times*, *Mail & Guardian*, *The Star*, *The Sowetan*, *Die Burger*, *The Citizen*, *Rapport*, *The Independent on Saturday*, *Cape Times*, *Beeld*, *The Continent*, *City Press*, *Sunday World*, *Sunday Tribune*, *Cape Argus*, *The Witness*, *The Mercury*, *TimesLIVE*, *Pretoria News*, *Volksblad*, *The Sunday Independent* and *Daily News*] caters for elite audiences often stratified along racial and geographical lines. The same can be said of commercial radio and television stations (such as *eNCA* and *Newzroom Afrika*).

Satellite broadcasting is controlled by DSTV trading as MultiChoice Private Limited. However, recent data shows that MultiChoice has been grappling with a steady loss of subscribers in South Africa (Madubela 2024). Their annual report published in March 2024 showed that the subscriber base of the satellite broadcaster has declined by 5%, from 8 million to 7.6 million. Most of this audience is located in urban areas and tends to be predominantly white and a few black middle-class families. These socio-demographic groups are often seen as more lucrative for advertisers, who buy advertising space on commercial media platforms. Unlike commercial media, relatively poor and rural audiences are served largely by the community media and most of this audience live in small towns and rural areas. Because of their limited disposable income, this socio-demographic group is often ignored by commercial media.

Five major companies dominate the commercial media landscape in South Africa. These are Naspers (which owns Media24), Multichoice, Independent Media, Caxton Publishers, and Arena Holdings. These companies offer media products and services ranging from print, broadcast and digital offerings. The magazine sector has experienced massive decimation in recent years, a situation that escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which saw many titles folding. In 2020, the Associated Media Publishing group, which used to publish iconic consumer magazine titles, announced that it was closing its doors. This was followed by Caxton Publishers announcing that it would stop publishing at least ten magazines in its stable.

In the post-pandemic context, the print media sector remains saddled with sustainability challenges, depleting advertising revenue, juniorisation of newsrooms and stiff competition from platform companies for limited online advertising revenue. This crisis, coupled with disconnection from audiences, declining media trust and the misinformation pandemic, has left the media sector teetering on the brink of collapse. With the exception of the *Daily Maverick* which managed to launch a print version at the height of pandemic, smaller newspapers are struggling to keep the lights on and pay their staff decent salaries. In the print commercial media sector, newspapers like *Isolezwe*, *Ziwaphi*, and the *South African Jewish Report* serve very specific linguistic, geographic and ethnic communities. These are complemented by daily tabloids like the *Daily Sun* and *Die Son*, which are geared towards working class audiences across the racial divide.

South Africa has a print and broadcast community media that serves a particular geographic community or community of interest, including religious groups, students, ethnic communities and political constituencies. Despite statistics showing that internationally, most people no longer listen to the radio, evidence from South Africa suggests that it remains the most popular and pervasive medium (Bosch 2022). More people have access to radio receivers and broadcasts

than they do television sets (Bosch 2022). According to recent statistics, there are 40 commercial and public broadcast stations and 284 community stations in South Africa (Bosch 2022). These include music stations, religious stations, talk radio stations and vernacular radio stations. As far as English talk radio is concerned, *Radio 702*, *SAFM*, *Cape Talk*, *Cape Talk Radio*, *Metro FM*, *Hot 1027*, and *KFM* dominate the public talk agenda. One of the most impactful vernacular radio stations is *Ukhozi FM* which broadcasts in *isiZulu* language. Boasting approximately eight million listeners, *Ukhozi FM* has been credited with connecting with urban and rural listeners to navigate post-apartheid Zulu identity (Gunner 2019). There are also vernacular stations such as *UMhlobo Wenene FM*, *Lesedi FM*, *Phalaphala FM*, *Thobela FM*, *Motswedding FM* and many others with a significant listenership base.

In recent years, podcasts and vodcasts have entered the media landscape. Podcasting refers to the production and distribution of digital audio files to the computers of subscribed users using Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. Vodcasts (video podcasts) have emerged as the latest trend, transforming our perception of the medium. Spurred by the widespread availability of smartphones and internet access, combined with a rise in on-demand audio content, podcasts have become a mainstream form of entertainment, information, and education for many South Africans (Manjoro 2024). According to KLA's YouGov tool, the top five podcast apps used in South Africa are YouTube at 65.83%, Spotify at 50.91%, Google Podcast at 16.27%, Deezer at 15.62%, and Amazon Music at 14.96%, with Apple Podcast ranking sixth at 12.91%. Podcasts provide an immersive experience, with listeners tuning in for specific purposes. Two types of podcasts can be distinguished: traditional and on-demand. Traditional podcasts have a focused content where listeners are there to learn or be entertained. On-demand podcasts constitute a genre where listeners catch up on missed radio content such as news, sports, or key moments. In South Africa, radio-based podcasts and solo-run podcasts (started by individuals or former DJs) dominate the sector. Some of the most popular podcasts in South Africa include *Podcast & Chill*, *Podcast South-Africa*, *Ideas that Matter Podcast*, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, *Global News Podcast*, *The Money Show*, and *On Purpose with Jay Shetty*. *Podcast & Chill* hosted by MacGyver (also known as Mac-Gee) and co-hosts Sol Phenduka and Ghost Lady is the most popular podcast with over one million subscribers on YouTube.

In order to address the historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, the South African government established the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) in 2003 in collaboration with the commercial media sector. The rationale was to fund community print and broadcast media aimed at historically disadvantaged communities, historically diminished language and cultural groups, and inadequately served communities (MDDA 2020; Wasserman 2020). The agency was envisioned as a vehicle 'to create more plurality in the highly

concentrated and conglomerated South African media market' (Wasserman 2020, p. 454). Funded through a levy on licensed broadcast and print media, the government of South Africa has spent over R600 million on the community sector between 2002 and 2021 (Nene 2024). However, the agency has been dogged by relentless criticism over financial mismanagement throughout its existence.

Notwithstanding the challenges facing the community media sector, South Africa has a resilient public media system. This sector is anchored by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which has transformed from being a state broadcaster under apartheid to a public entity which reports to Parliament (Wasserman 2020). The SABC has four television stations and an international broadcast channel, SABC 404 on DSTV's satellite broadcasting service. Despite rumours of editorial interference and financial maladministration, the SABC is constitutionally expected to serve the broad public interest. This means it must transform from being a propaganda mouthpiece as it was during the apartheid era and instead produce quality broadcast content for everyone. South Africans who cannot afford subscription-based satellite broadcasting (DSTV) and streaming services (such as Netflix, BritBox, eVOD, Viu, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Apple TV+, YouTube, and Showmax) rely on free-to-air terrestrial broadcasting by SABC television stations. The broadcasting market has changed over time with the arrival of livestreaming services. Although there is no disaggregated data, it is not far-fetched to argue that platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV and Showmax have disrupted the television consumption market in South Africa. In this emerging cut-throat competition for the eyes and ears of South Africans, Netflix has the lion's share of the market. Since its launch in 2016, it has broken MultiChoice's monopoly on high-end international content. Data from JustWatch (2024) shows that Netflix has 31% of the market share, followed by Amazon Prime Video with 26%, Showmax is third with 25%, Mubi is fifth with a 7% and Apple TV Plus has 3%.

Despite the massive growth of the internet and social media platforms, radio and television are still the most widely accessed forms of media in South Africa. As discussed earlier, the SABC is the most popular channel for radio and television content despite stiff competition from *eNCA* and *Newzroom Afrika* in urban and affluent areas. Indigenous radio stations such as *Ukhozi FM*, *UMhlobo Wenene FM*, *Lesedi FM*, *Phalaphala FM*, *Thobela FM*, and *Motsweding FM* dominate the radio news market. Compared to other broadcasters, the SABC dominates the news and current affairs programming and entertainment content (Wasserman 2020). Because of its market share, it has the potential to shape political discourse and nation-building in many ways. The public broadcaster continues to face increased commercial competition from other television channels available on terrestrial and digital platforms to South African viewers.

In response to digitisation and media convergence headwinds, the South African media has made great strides in embracing digital publishing (Wasserman 2022). Cognisant of the shifts from analogue to digital publishing, South African news media has launched digital and mobile first strategies. These strategies have brought mixed results. Some publications have registered significant online subscriptions while others are still struggling with digital migration. Born digital start-ups like *Daily Maverick*, *Vrye Weekblad*, and *GroundUp* have shaken the news market in many ways. Buoyed by huge internet and social media penetration figures, platforms such as *News24*, *Moneyweb*, *Bizcommunity*, and *The South African* have dominated the online news market. *News24* is arguably the leading online newspaper in South Africa. The company launched its subscription strategy in August 2020 and is estimated to have at least 100 000 subscribers who pay to access their news. This success has been attributed to the quality of its investigative, business, political, sport and lifestyle journalism, and the world-class team and technology powering acquisition and retention of subscribers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by the framing theory as originally propounded by Goffman (1958) and later revised by Entman (1993). It starts from the premise that coverage or representation of a particular issue is based on (Entman 1993, p. 52):

select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item prescribed.

Framing involves selecting a few aspects of a perceived reality and connecting them together in a narrative that promotes a particular interpretation. It works to shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through *priming* (Scheufele 2000). It has the potential to introduce or enhance the availability and apparent importance of certain ideas for evaluating a political object. In this case, media frames provide boundaries around a news story, determining what is newsworthy and what is not. According to Entman (1993), news media frames have four functions. These are to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies. News frames can also function as moral references through making judgements about people, events and issues (Entman 1993). Frames, then, *define problems* – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes* – identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments* –

evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies* – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (Entman 1993, p. 52). Thus, news media offers interpretations and evaluations of events, actors (such as political parties, politicians, electoral management bodies) linked to these events (for instance, elections) and issues intrinsic to such events. In the context of elections, news frames determine what people should think about, prioritise and ignore in their voting decisions. The article, thus, examines the polysemic ways in which the South African news media framed the national and provincial elections (NPE).

Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness (Entman 1993, pp. 51–2). It allows us to make sense of how the news media sought to ‘...guide the receiver’s thinking...’ (Entman 1993, pp. 52–3). In other words, the news media sets the election agenda. Frames highlight some pieces of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience. In the same vein, it also de-emphasises certain information, thereby pushing it into oblivion. This chimes with Edelman’s (1993, p. 232) view that frames exert their power through selective description and omission of the features of a situation. As a result, the frame determines whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it. Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions. In this article, the focus is on what issues the South African news media amplified and obscured through its reportage.

METHODOLOGY

As far as methodology is concerned, the article is based on Media Monitoring Africa’s (MMA) monitoring tools. This methodology considers qualitative and quantitative data. Positivism is a paradigm that relies on measurement and reason, that knowledge is revealed from a neutral and measurable (quantifiable) observation of activity, action or reaction (Park et al. 2020). It puts a premium on quantitative research methods such as questionnaire and quantitative content analysis. Interpretivism assumes that reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed. Drawing on interpretivist philosophy, this study views ‘news media not as passive chroniclers of events and issues as they play out in society, but also as generative actors whose actions are based on their interpretations of what is going on around them, and who in turn, prompt other social actors to act in specific ways’ (Santos & Ndhlovu 2023, p. 369). By privileging the social construction

of reality, interpretivists view news media 'as generative social agents, which proffer interpretations of the social world and based on these interpretations, persuade audiences to accept their interpretations and act in particular ways' (Santos & Ndhlovu 2023, p. 370). Interpretive approaches rely on questioning and observation in order to discover or generate a rich and deep understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. This study pivots on media monitoring work conducted by MMA before, during and after the elections. During this monitoring period, MMA published three separate reports analysing how the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), other news media and selected community media reported on the 2024 NPE. The interim and final reports foregrounded who and what dominated media coverage. Monitoring was conducted between 29 February and 24 June 2024. A total of 10 483 items were monitored across print, online, and broadcast media using a combination of dedicated human media monitors, especially for small community media and in an African language content, and semi-automated monitoring using MMA's media monitoring tool, Dexter (MMA 2024). Data was thematically analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion on how to code data, to search for and refine themes, and to report findings.

FINDINGS

Despite the high number of new political parties which participated in the national and provincial elections, the South African media was generally fair to all the contestants in its coverage of the fiercely contested plebiscite. However, the coverage tended to lack depth and concentrated on personalities rather than policies. In the end, the mainstream media failed to articulate the citizen's agenda, choosing rather to focus on politicians and political parties' agendas. It also paid lip service to pressing issues like unemployment, electricity, housing, poverty, education, migration and health. Overall, the South African news media provided a platform through which political parties and politicians could articulate their policies and promises to the electorate. As pointed out earlier, the media was also accused of partisanship and biased reporting, especially television broadcasting stations such as *eNCA* and *Newzroom Afrika*. *eNCA* was evidently biased towards the Democratic Alliance while *Newzroom Afrika* rooted for the MK Party. The SABC was more sympathetic to the ANC. This means that their news coverage lacked balance because they tended to favour some political positions and political actors over others. This '*ideological bias*' (Hackett 1984) meant that political parties, issues, events, and politicians were presented and discussed in an unbalanced and slanted way. Bias in political news coverage may have a profound influence on voter opinions and preferences.

The South African news media was generally fair and relatively balanced in its coverage. Data from MMA shows that community, public and commercial media covered the elections in an overwhelmingly fair manner (see Figure 1). Despite this positive turn in news coverage, the findings suggest that some newspapers like *The Star* sought to give credence to mis- and disinformation on whether the IEC could be trusted. Thus, instead of fact checking and debunking false and misleading information, newspapers like these were implicated in the conveyor belt spreading mis-and disinformation.

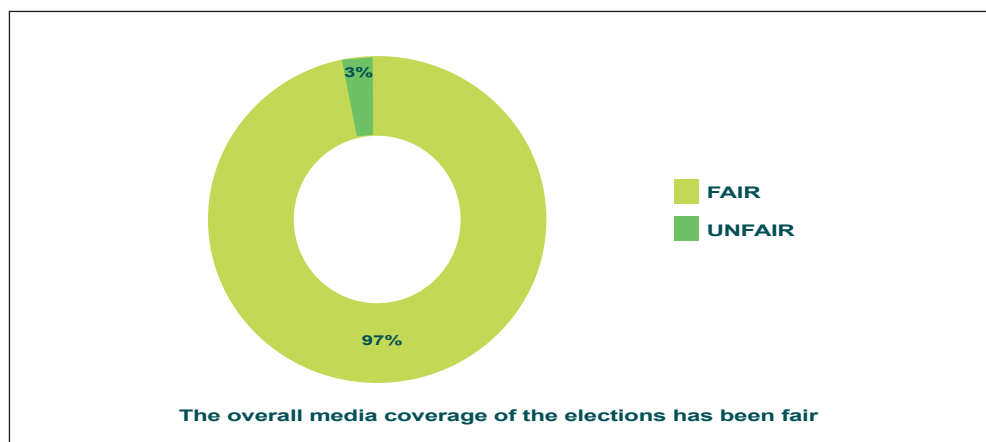


Figure 1: Fairness of coverage

Source: Media Monitoring Africa

Notwithstanding the fairness in news coverage, it was observed that journalists, interviewers and presenters seldom challenged controversial statements made by politicians and political parties. For the reputation of the profession, it is important for journalists to hold politicians accountable when they make claims that are unverified, unsupported, or patently false. Cases abound where political parties challenged the legitimacy of the constitution, and perpetuated negative stereotypes including xenophobic utterances. Some of the political parties and politicians sought to discredit the Independent Election Commission without any evidence of malfeasance.

Which Voices were Amplified During the NPE?

In their interim and final reports, the MMA examined the performance of the South African news media based on its journalistic obligations to ensure fair and balanced coverage. Despite the high number of new political parties which participated in the national and provincial elections, the South African news media was generally fair to all parties in their coverage of the elections. However,

the coverage tended to lack depth and concentrated on personalities rather than policies. Besides elite news sources, the coverage was biased towards urban areas and urban-based political analysts. In the end, the South African mainstream media failed to articulate the citizen's agenda, choosing rather to focus on politicians and political parties' agendas. This meant that the coverage paid lip service to pressing issues like unemployment, electricity, housing, poverty, education, migration and health. Four parties dominated the electoral news coverage cycle: the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK party) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Smaller parties like the Patriotic Alliance (PA), Rise Mzansi, Build One South Africa (BOSA), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), Freedom Front Plus, and United Independent Movement (UIM) were not afforded the same level of coverage. The mainstream media tended to take an agenda-setting approach to elections, with the focus on the coalition government which would be constituted between the ANC and DA.

Diversity of Coverage and Plurality

As far as diversity of coverage and plurality is concerned, the MMA found that between February and June 2024 most of the coverage was generally fair and balanced, maintaining a trend that was set in previous elections (Duncan 2014). The media performance analysis sought to establish the amount of coverage given to election-related issues. This was important because it has the potential to shed light on how the South African news media held political parties and politicians accountable.

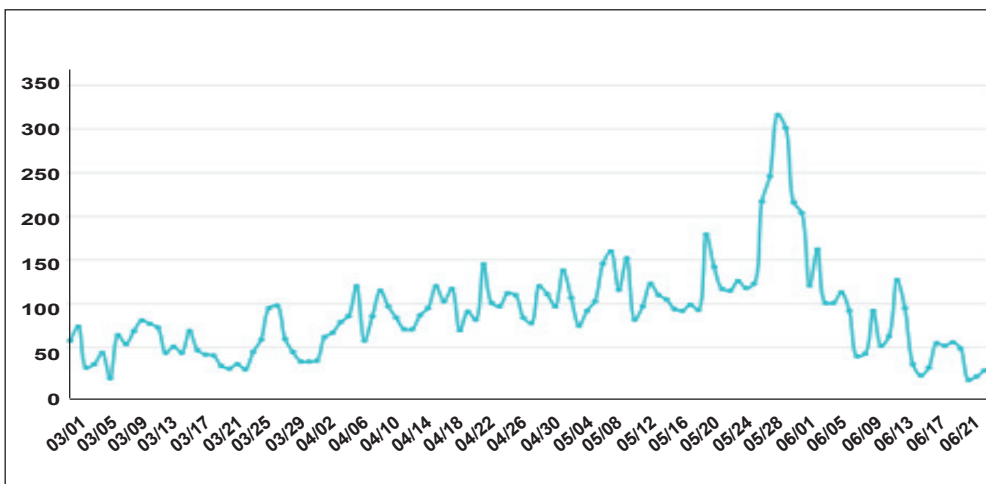


Figure 2: Number of election-related stories published by the media between February and June 2024

Source: Media Monitoring Africa (2024)

Figure 2 has three discernible peaks in election-related news coverage which were recorded on 20 May, and again on 29 and 30 May. The first peak coincided with the commencement of international voting. On that date the first ballot of the 2024 national and provincial elections was cast. Most of the coverage during the first peak focused on election logistics and reports on voting around the globe. The length of the queues, smooth voting processes and press conferences from the electoral management body dominated the news cycle. Coverage also zeroed in on the Constitutional Court ruling regarding the eligibility of former president Jacob Zuma to stand for office representing the MK Party.

The second peak happened on the official voting day in South Africa. This was on 29 May when the news media went all out to report on the biggest story of the year. Most of the news reports were about voter turnout, election logistics and the voting process. Some of the reports focused on preliminary reports by observer missions, statements by political parties and the possibility of a coalition government. The final peak period was recorded on 30 May when the media focused on what was happening at the Results Operating Centre (ROC), the results dashboard and early results from the provinces. As soon as the results started trickling in, the news focus shifted towards coverage of reports by observer missions, the functionality of the results dashboard after it briefly crashed, and the implications of the results on the consolidation of democracy in the country. This period was followed by a gradual decrease in the coverage of election-related stories.

Media Monitoring Africa also managed to assess the kinds of topics/themes on which the South African news media focused during the election period. Mapping these topics was crucial for understanding the issues that shaped the election narratives. According to MMA's interim and final reports, the top three topics covered included election logistics, political party politics and political party campaigning. Overall, they took up 52% of all coverage (see Figure 3 below). Political party campaigning focused on how both large and small parties canvassed for votes at provincial and national levels. Party politics revolved around internal wrangles within the MK party. The party battles pitting Jacob Zuma against Jabulani Khumalo in the MK party spilled into the courts. The founder of the party, Jabulani Khumalo, even went as far as requesting that the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) should remove former President Jacob Zuma as the face of the party and from its list of potential members of parliament.

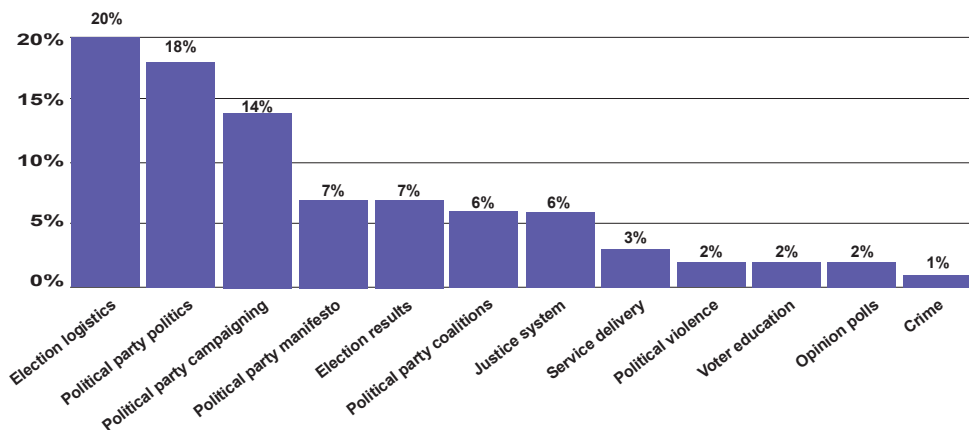


Figure 3: Topics that dominated the election media coverage

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

Source: Media Monitoring Africa (2024)

While there is nothing amiss about overemphasising electoral logistics and party mobilisation strategies, it is concerning that, as in previous elections, the news media focused on the elite agenda at the expense of issues of concern to the wider public. This elite-centric agenda during elections has been reported in the past (see Duncan 2014). The net effect of this elite bias is that South African news media paid lip service to pressing issues like unemployment, crime, land redistribution, electricity, housing, climate change, drought, poverty, education, migration and health. The media arguably allowed political parties to set the agenda, focusing on narratives driven by politicians. Issues affecting ordinary people rarely featured. Where these did feature, it was about service delivery protests, crime, illegal mining activities, drugs and illegal substance abuse and electricity cable thefts. Overall, service delivery-related issues featured in the top twelve most covered topics (at eighth place) with a 3% coverage.

As already mentioned, several pressing issues were unjustifiably left out of the news cycle throughout the electoral coverage. The topics that were ignored in the news cycle include children, climate change, gender, education, social development, and housing. These topics received less than 1% of coverage (see Figure 4). This is very concerning considering that climate change has been described by the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 as one of the three critical challenges facing humanity. The country has experienced floods in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. Children were completely invisible as an election issue despite the fact that most of them are growing up

in a society riddled with digital threats such as hate speech, cyberbullying, disinformation and sexual grooming. Even though children do not vote, the decisions which are made by elected officials affect them in a myriad of ways. This was unfortunately ignored in the framing of the election story.

Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal were disproportionately overrepresented in news coverage. Whilst these are among the most economically productive provinces in the country, areas like the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Limpopo, Free State, Mpumalanga, Northwest and the Northern Cape were not given enough media attention. Data shows that Gauteng received 23% while Kwa-Zulu Natal garnered 14% of the news coverage. This is in contrast to past elections where the Western Cape tended to come second or third after Gauteng. The change in media coverage is attributable to the unexpected rise of the MK party in KwaZulu-Natal on the eve of the national and provincial elections. Although the Western Cape is the base of the Democratic Alliance, the changing political geography of opposition politics in South Africa suggests that KwaZulu-Natal can no longer be ignored. Data indicates that the Western Cape (5%) received less coverage than the Eastern Cape (6%). The reason for the increase in focus on the Eastern Cape could be the protests around voting stations on voting day in the Eastern Cape, and protests preventing voting stations from opening. News media should strive to diversify their coverage of priority and marginalised areas during future electoral seasons.

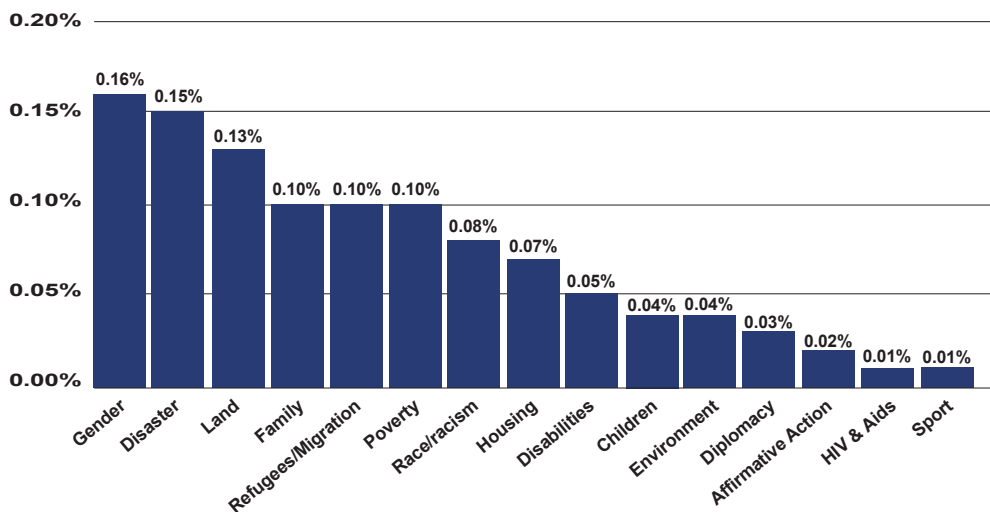


Figure 4: Stories that were ignored by the news media

Note: N = 115, representing 1.1% of all articles analysed
 Source: Media Monitoring Africa (2024)

The Gendered Nature of Election Coverage

Overall, the South African news media did not do well in terms of including women as a news source. Although gender binaries have been disrupted in mainstream sexuality studies, the MMA focused on the spread of male versus female sources. This is not new. Previous election cycles have also shown that women's voices tend to be underrepresented. Data at hand suggest that women enjoyed only 18% of voice share, while male voices dominated at 82% (see Figure 6). While this was an increase compared to the interim report published by the MMA, there is still much that needs doing by newsrooms to ensure women's voices are not neglected during elections. Given that the political landscape is predominantly male, with few parties being headed by women, the underrepresentation of women's voices endorses the point that in a patriarchal context, male-centric voices are generally privileged. Furthermore, news sources tend to be male, which further marginalises women's voices in the public sphere. In a country where women constitute the bulk of the population, where women are the 'kingmakers' in terms of voting population, it is unfortunate that the media is still privileging the minority as the spokespersons of the rest of society. This is even more damning in a country where gender-based violence has reached pandemic levels. Gender mainstreaming should be a deliberate exercise by newsrooms and editors if this unequal distribution of voice in the news media is to be undone.

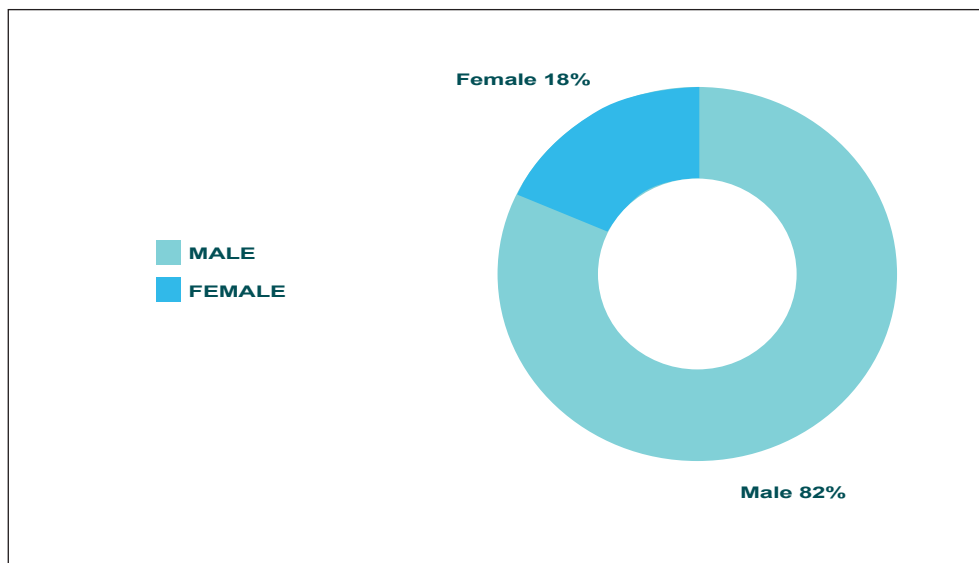


Figure 5: Loudest voices in the media

Source: Media Monitoring Africa (2024)

Media may to some degree argue that if the parties offer mainly male voices, those are the people who will be interviewed. However, gender equality is not good only for women, but generally leads to better and more balanced coverage. Media needs to be more assertive in requesting interviews with women, and if the parties fail to offer them, media could then ensure it makes every effort to give prominence to women experts and candidates in an attempt to achieve gender equality in their coverage.

Media Bias towards Large Parties and Celebrity Politicians

The four large political parties dominated the electoral news coverage cycle while smaller parties received less attention. Data collected by MMA shows that the African National Congress (ANC) received the majority share (33%) of the media coverage, followed by the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK Party) with 20%, the Democratic Alliance (DA) garnered 14%, and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) registered around 9%. The other smaller parties such as 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 indicates that the ANC received the majority share of media coverage, at 33%. The assumption is that media follow equitable coverage guidelines; however, the data shows that the MK Party received the second highest amount of 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 and the IEC, it is not surprising that the party garnered significant media coverage. Other political parties that received a large portion of media coverage include the Democratic Alliance (DA) (14%), Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (9%), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (5%), Action SA (4%) and Rise Mzansi (2%). While the coverage can be said to be equitable, there is also little doubt that smaller, new parties and independent candidates would feel legitimately aggrieved by the minimal coverage they received across the media. Even the SABC, which tends to offer greater diversity of party coverage, struggled to give sufficient coverage to smaller parties and independent candidates. The reality is that with fewer resources in the media, some parties will miss out.

Research also suggests that party and candidate visibility is important and influential because it is a necessary condition for voters to read about candidate characteristics and party policy positions. The visibility of political actors in media coverage has the potential to increase their accessibility to audiences, influencing subsequent political judgments (Kiouisis & McCombs 2004), especially because voters tend to infer a party's political importance from its media salience (Miller & Krosnick 2000).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Although normative democratic theory expects the news media to play an educative and informative role during elections, it is worth highlighting that 'political information is not necessarily unbiased and neutral' (Saez-Trumper, Castillo & Lalmas 2013). This is even worse in media systems characterised by concentration, fragmentation and ideological homogeneity such as South Africa. In mainstream literature, bias is often juxtaposed with objectivity (McQuail 1992). It presupposes news that is highly opinionated and slanted towards a particular worldview. It is predominantly theorised on the basis of both issues (see Takens et al. 2010) and actors (cf. Eberl, Boomgaarden & Wagner 2017). Media bias is defined as slanted news coverage or internal bias, reflected in news articles. Although the findings highlight a high degree of fairness, it is important to note that there is deep-seated ideological bias towards neo-liberal ideas.

Different scholars have theorised about the existence of various types of bias (Entman 2007; Saez-Trumper et al. 2013). For Saez-Trumper et al. (2013) there are three typologies of bias: coverage bias, gatekeeping bias, and statement bias. Coverage bias refers to the (quantitative and qualitative) visibility of topics or entities in media coverage (Saez-Trumper et al. 2013). It is related to the tendency of the media to cover some stories and not others. Gatekeeping bias, also called *selection bias* or *agenda bias*, relates to the stories that the media select or reject to report (Saez-Trumper et al. 2013). This can lead to a biased portrayal of events, as some stories may be deemed more important than others, regardless of their actual importance. This study has shown that big parties, males and urban areas in South Africa enjoy selection bias. Statement bias, also called *presentation bias*, refers to how articles choose to inform about certain entities / concepts (Saez-Trumper et al. 2013). This can be done through the use of loaded language or by presenting one side of an issue as the only side. During the recent South African elections, coverage and gatekeeping biases were more evident than *statement bias*. As framers of electoral discourse and narratives, the South African news media offered interpretations and evaluations of events, actors (such as political

parties, politicians, electoral management bodies) linked to these events (for instance, elections) and issues intrinsic to such events. These interpretations and evaluations provided voters with neural lenses that has the potential to determine how they see the world.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the empirical data presented in this article, it should come as no surprise that the South African news media is biased towards big parties, celebrity politicians, male-centric and urban-based voices at the expense of smaller parties, ordinary politicians, females and rural-based voices. It is evident that news media in South Africa promotes what scholars have categorised as three types of media bias: visibility bias, tonality bias and agenda bias. Although it was outside the remit of this study, these actor-based biases might have affected voters' party preferences during the national and provincial elections. These structural biases in media coverage '...results from the interaction of real-world developments, cultural norms, and journalistic decision rules with the sometimes proficient and other times maladroit efforts of competing elites to manage the news' (Entman 2010, p. 389). This study has shown continuities and discontinuities in the framing of the 2024 South African national and provincial elections. Although some new media organisations were explicitly pro-opposition, the public media tended to report about the ruling party in a more favourable manner. This is not unique to South Africa. In the Zimbabwean context, Chibuwe (2019) showed that the state-controlled media were pro-ruling party while private press were pro-opposition during the 2018 elections.

In order to address the issues raised above, I propose the following policy and practical steps:

- There is an urgent need for the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA) to 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.
- The mainstream media must ensure that the needs of the voters instead of politicians and political parties are the main focus of 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.

- There is also a need to ensure that journalists are 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.
- A masterclass on elections and gender should be rolled out in order to ensure that journalists include more women's voices and that political parties are also strongly encouraged to promote women's voices in public discourse.

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