From Protest Ban to Biased Reporting?

SABC Coverage of the 2016 Municipal Elections
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Abbreviations

ANC: African National Congress
CCC: Complaints Compliance Committee
COPE: Congress of the People
DA: Democratic Alliance
EFF: Economic Freedom Fighters
EWN: Eyewitness News
ICASA: Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
PEBs: Party Election Broadcasts
SABC: South African Broadcasting Corporation
1. Introduction

Elections are a critical part of democracy as people, through voting, have the opportunity to express their views on current issues as well as their frustrations towards leaders who may be failing them. However, in order to vote efficiently and choose a party or leadership that will enable the fulfillment of an equitable society, voters need to know where candidates and parties stand on public policy issues. For the electorate to know this, media (among other sources of information) has to play its role of not only informing but educating and entertaining voters - more so for the public broadcaster (SABC), which has a role to represent society in all its diversity. Throughout the campaign, the public broadcaster has the duty to report accurately on what parties stand for and to cover political rallies, speeches, and events organised by political parties. The large political landscape in terms of political parties in the country can be a challenge not only for the public broadcaster but other media as well. Nevertheless, unlike other media, the public broadcaster has a mandate to perform at the highest ethical standards in order to meet this challenge. This is more so because over 22 million people rely on the SABC alone for their news. Thus it is imperative to analyse how the public broadcaster covered the 2016 Local Government (also known as Municipal) elections that were held on 3 August 2016.

The lead up to the 2016 municipal elections was an interesting period as various scholars, media professionals, political analysts and social commentators analysed and even offered to predict the outcome of what most termed “the most contested local government elections since 1994”. In this regard, it was argued that the African National Congress (ANC) was facing its most difficult time because of the many scandals involving its leadership – the Nkandla case being one of them. It was argued that these elections were mainly being contested by three parties (namely, ANC, DA & EFF) and the outcome would be very tight particularly in the big metropolitan areas where the ANC was to lose more votes.

What we looked at:
Given the highly contested nature of these elections, it was important and necessary to not only look at SABC coverage in terms of the space that was given to political parties but also the messages the parties churned through their campaign adverts. Such adverts, in theory, would provide the electorate with a good understanding of political parties’ priorities so they could make an informed choice. To this end, we also looked at the number of adverts that were carried by the SABC from the various political parties during prime-time news as well as the contents of those adverts and identified what was missing and linked it to the bigger picture. We also looked at the issues that the SABC covered and by extension what was neglected. With the SABC having earlier banned footage of burning property during protests, we also analysed how the public broadcaster covered the Tshwane protests that took place in the lead up to the elections. We also unpacked whether the SABC was biased in its overall coverage and where necessary provided examples and compared the public broadcaster’s performance to its competitors.

The findings presented in this report are based on information we gathered in the two months leading up to the elections until 7 days after the elections, that is, from
1 June 2016 to 10 August 2016. During that period, we did not only monitor the SABC’s coverage of the elections but also analysed other media’s coverage for comparative purposes. In total we analysed coverage of over 70 media (broadcast, print and online) including the SABC and its competitors. However, in this report we present the findings from the SABC radio and television channels we monitored as well as selected competitors.

**Structure of the report:**

The report starts with the role of the public broadcaster in an elections period and then moves on to discuss how the analysis was done. It then provides findings beginning with how the SABC covered the contesting parties and the political party adverts that were aired during the electioneering period. The report moves to examine the issues that the SABC focused on with particular emphasis on how it covered the Tshwane protests and ends with an analysis of biased coverage, if any.

**Key findings:**

The report reveals that by focusing on bigger political parties and broader national issues, the SABC covered these local government elections as if they were national elections. Further, the report shows the disjuncture between what political parties considered important for the electorate and what the public broadcaster focused on as important election issues. Another interesting finding is that although the SABC framed the Tshwane protests as marred by public and political violence, it seldom showed footage of violence particularly in the news headlines. Overall, only 10% of the stories on SABC overall were considered as clearly biased. However, individual programmes fared differently with SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News having 34% biased stories while SABC 2 Morning Live had 22% biased stories and SABC 3 English News had 15% biased stories. We hope this report presents some keys lessons which may be instructive to different stakeholders, including the SABC, political parties and the other media.
In an ideal world a public broadcaster’s activities align with the democratic values of the country and seek to fulfill, enhance and protect the fundamental rights of all citizens. Among these democratic values are freedom of the media and most importantly the freedom to receive or impart information. This becomes even more important during an election period where the public broadcaster ought to contribute to free, fair, transparent and credible elections. Since elections afford citizens the opportunity to vote for the leadership they want it can be argued that such important decisions can be better enhanced if people have all the information about contesting parties at their disposal. The public broadcaster therefore has the duty to report fairly on all political parties and so that the electorate is better informed. This is precisely because the public broadcaster is owned by the people and should therefore serve society.

In different jurisdictions there are policies that regulate how the public broadcaster should cover elections. In the South African context, the Broadcasting Act stipulates that the SABC should “provide in its public broadcasting services, radio and television programming that informs, educates and entertains, and also be responsive to audience needs”, including the needs of the deaf and the blind and account on how to meet those needs.

Further, in relation to elections coverage, the SABC works on the concept of equitable coverage, which seeks to cover parties equitably and not necessarily equally. The equitable approach traces its history to the first democratic elections where it was recognised that as the country was moving from apartheid where the public broadcaster was a state broadcaster there needed to be equitable coverage in order to help undo the injustices of the past. That said, the SABC has two important roles to perform particularly during an election period. The one is to inform the electorate about all the political parties as well as their policies and what they stand for. The second is to report fairly, which requires the public broadcaster to employ the highest ethical standards.

The duty to inform the electorate stems from the people’s right to know what is happening around them. In this context people have a right to know who wants to lead them and how they propose to carry out those leadership duties. In that regard, the public broadcaster has to inform the electorate to enable them to cast an informed vote. This means that the public broadcaster has to give the electorate as much information as possible. This requires the public broadcaster to push the envelope and cover as much ground as possible. For example, in these local government elections, there were more than 200 registered political parties and over 60,000 candidates. Aside from other media, it is the duty of the public broadcaster to go out there and get the information about the various candidates, put them on the spotlight and help citizens make the right choice according to their needs. This requires that the public broadcaster has an elections coverage plan that takes into account the political landscape of the country and ensure that the cover areas that are often not covered by

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1 See the Broadcasting Act here:
other private media. However, over the last few years, the SABC has been facing several crises ranging from financial to managerial and editorial challenges, which may have had an impact on how the public broadcaster was going to cover these elections. Linked to this is public broadcaster’s ability to report fairly.

**One of the core** remits of public broadcasting is to report ethically and by extension accurately and fairly. This means that it should cover elections employing the highest standards of quality, which goes beyond just being balanced or presenting two sides of the story to presenting all sides of the story. This tall order is bestowed upon the public broadcaster as the epitome of broadcasting. The challenge with public broadcasters is however that while they ought to serve society, in some countries the state tries or indeed does capture the broadcaster and uses it to push the state agenda. In some cases the state wins at this and uses the public broadcaster as a propaganda machine. In the lead up to these elections we saw the SABC taking editorial decisions that were described by many as going against the tenets of ethical and fair journalism. For instance, prior to the elections, the SABC took an editorial decision to ban footage of burning property during protests. This meant that the public broadcaster was going to decide on the type of images they were going to show society. In all fairness, the SABC decides on what and how to show their audiences what’s going on in society but by choosing not to show images of burning property it meant that people were not getting the full picture of what is going on. Consequently, Media Monitoring Africa together with the SOS Coalition and the Freedom of Expression Institute took the SABC to ICASA and the regulator ruled in our favour.

If the SABC could do this just before the electioneering period began, what else would it do during the elections period? This brought attention to the SABC and made us look at how the public broadcaster covered the various political parties.

**FIGURE 1: Timeline of events from SABC protest ban to elections**

2.2 The duty to report fairly

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2 For more information about the ruling see: http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/index.php/news/entry/media_monitoring_africa_welcomes_icasa_ruling/
3. How we assessed the SABC coverage of these elections

As highlighted earlier, we did not only analyse the SABC coverage of these elections alone but looked at over 70 media (including the SABC and its competitors. However, this section provides information relevant to how to the SABC and some selected competitors. It is worth noting at the outset that our analysis wanted to provide answers to the following questions:

- How did the SABC cover contesting parties?
- How did the SABC cover political party adverts that were aired during the electioneering period?
- Which issues did the SABC prioritise as election issues and why?
- How did the SABC cover protests in relation to these elections?
- Was the SABC coverage biased in any way?

In order to answer these questions we analysed a total of 3000 election stories/items across the following SABC platforms and competitors.

**FIGURE 2:** List of SABC platforms and selected competitors whose content was analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SABC Radio</th>
<th>SABC Radio Competitors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ikwekwezi fm</td>
<td>Talk Radio 702</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesedi fm</td>
<td>Power fm</td>
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<td>Motsweding fm</td>
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<td>Munghana Lonene fm</td>
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<td>Phalaphala fm</td>
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<td>SAfm</td>
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<td>Thobela fm</td>
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<td>Ukhozi fm</td>
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<td>Umhlobo Wenene fm</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SABC TV Programmes</th>
<th>SABC TV Programmes Competitors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SABC 1 Election Debates</td>
<td>e.tv News</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC 1 Isizulu/Isixhosa News</td>
<td>e.tv Sunrise</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele News</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC 2 Afrikaans News</td>
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<td>SABC 2 Elections 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC 2 Morning Live</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC 2 Sesotho/Setswana News</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News</td>
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<td>SABC 3 English News</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>SABC Online</th>
<th>SABC Online Competitors</th>
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<td>SABC Online News</td>
<td>ANN7 online</td>
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<td></td>
<td>eNCA online</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Eyewitness News online</td>
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For radio we analysed three news bulletins per day, one in the morning another one at mid day and the last one in the evening. For television programmes and online platforms, we analysed all election stories using the following criteria.

3.1
How we analysed political party coverage

3.1.1
How we examined political party adverts

For the first time in the history of our elections monitoring since 1994, we analysed political party adverts that were aired just before, during and just after the news on SABC 1, SABC 2, SABC 3, e.tv, S Afrim, Talk Radio 702 and Power fm over a period of one month, from 1 to 31 July 2016. The purpose was to look at which adverts these platforms aired during prime time programming, what the adverts were about, what issues they raised and what was missing? In total we analysed 145 political party adverts from various political parties. What is not clear is whether these adverts formed part of the PEBs or whether they were paid for by political parties as they refused to share with us their schedules with the selected SABC platforms and competitors. Be that as it may, for each advert we looked at which political party was advertising, what issues did they raise in the advert and what was missing in terms of the issues raised? We also looked at whether the adverts were conflating issues, particularly the ANC and DA adverts in relation to the areas they govern. In other words, we wanted to find out whether there was a clear distinction between party delivery and state delivery. Lastly we examined whether political parties attacked each other in their messaging, taking into account issues of language including incitement of violence and hate speech. What was useful about this analysis was that it enabled us to compare what political parties thought was useful for the electorate against what media focused on as election issues.

3.2
How we analysed topical issues covered

For all the election stories/items we analysed, the topic or central subject of each story was identified. We allocated one topic to each story and in very rare cases where the story could not fit the topics we chose a topic that closely captured the major thrust of the story. In addition to the topic, we identified all the issues raised in the story again through a set list of issues we have developed in our long history of elections monitoring. The purpose of analysing the issues raised in the stories was primarily to flag important elections concerns. This enabled us to gain a better sense of the trends exhibited in the SABC coverage than was provided solely by the topics. Identifying both the topics and issues raised allowed us to see which issues media amplified and silenced as relevant and irrelevant to these elections.
3.2.1 How we explored protests coverage

Linked to topical issues covered during these elections are the protests that took place between the last two weeks of June 2016 and the first week of July 2016 when the ANC announced Thoko Didiza as their preferred mayoral candidate for Tshwane. This angered some ANC members who took to the streets to protest against Didiza’s nomination. Most media covered these protests but what was of particular importance to us was how the SABC television programmes were going to cover these potentially explosive protests given that earlier in the year the SABC had banned showing footage of burning property during protests. So for this section we looked at all the election stories that covered the protests between 21 June 2016 and 4 July 2016 across selected SABC television programmes and competitors identified above. For each story/item we looked at what issues were covered about the protests in order to determine the frame that was used to cover the protests. We also looked at who spoke about the protests or who was asked for comment. By looking at the people who spoke we were able to determine the perspective that was used to cover the protests. Lastly we looked at whether the SABC and/or its competitors showed violent images.

3.3 How we determined bias

One of the most important and challenging elements of media coverage in an election period is ensuring that elections coverage is fair. In our view democracy threatening bias occurs as a pattern over time. Secondly bias is a clear and deliberate attempt to favour or disfavour a particular party or group. So to determine bias we looked at three levels – language, presentation and omission. Language bias was detected where the language used in the story clearly and distinctly favoured one party over another, or substantially disfavoured or damaged the image of a party or parties. Presentation bias was captured when it was clear that one or more parties were favoured by virtue of how they were reported on in the overall news bulletin or the entire elections programme. Bias by omission was spotted where a party was not given the opportunity to respond to substantial allegations or to an issue of substantial importance to that party. Using these criteria allowed us to measure how fair the SABC’s coverage of these elections was.

3.4 What we may have missed

Given that the SABC and its competitors broadcast 24/7 we could have analysed all content. However, this would not have been possible taking into account the limited resources. However, the purposely selected programmes allowed us to get a sense of how the public broadcaster covered these elections. By and large, analysing the media’s coverage of any particular issue is a subjective exercise. This means that the results presented in this report could be interpreted differently by different people depending on their background, ideological orientation, etc. However, significant effort was made to ensure that the analysis was undertaken in a uniform fashion. This was done through standardised user guides, training, regular communication and rigorous checking and data cleaning. In addition, the analysis framework was case-tested before being widely applied.
4. How did the SABC cover these elections?

4.1 Which political parties were covered by the public broadcaster?

This section focuses on political party coverage. It looks at the political parties that were covered by the public broadcaster as well as how the SABC treated the political party adverts it aired during the elections period.

Arguably, politics cannot be played without media coverage because it is through the media that political parties create awareness about themselves. As highlighted earlier, the media has the duty to cover as much as possible political parties’ activities in the country so that people are informed of what is at stake. Given that these were local government elections, it would have been expected that media would cover a plethora of parties including independent candidates. Sadly this was not the case as revealed by the Figures below. In order to determine which parties were covered we counted the number of times people representing and/or supporting these parties were directly or indirectly quoted on SABC platforms as well as its competitors.
FIGURE 3: Party coverage on SABC TV and its competitors

All media

ANC: 44%
DA: 24%
EFF: 12%
NFP: 5%
IFP: 4%
Other: 12%

SABC 1 Election Debates

ANC: 24%
DA: 24%
EFF: 17%
NFP: 0%
IFP: 3%
Other: 31%

SABC 1 IsiZulu/IsiXhosa News

ANC: 39%
DA: 20%
EFF: 13%
NFP: 3%
IFP: 20%
Other: 5%

SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele News

ANC: 36%
DA: 24%
EFF: 13%
NFP: 2%
IFP: 7%
Other: 18%

SABC 2 Afrikaans News

ANC: 35%
DA: 22%
EFF: 14%
NFP: 1%
IFP: 4%
Other: 22%

SABC 2 Elections 2016

ANC: 35%
DA: 22%
EFF: 14%
NFP: 2%
IFP: 0%
Other: 28%

SABC 2 Morning Live

ANC: 55%
DA: 18%
EFF: 9%
NFP: 5%
IFP: 5%
Other: 9%

SABC 2 Sesotho/Setswana News

ANC: 44%
DA: 34%
EFF: 14%
NFP: 6%
IFP: 2%
Other: 19%
FIGURE 4: Party coverage on SABC radio and its competitors

All media

Ikwekwezi fm

Lesedi fm

Motsweding fm

Munghana Lonene fm

Phalaphala fm

SAfm

Thobela fm
If we consider the figures above, we can see that although various SABC platforms covered various political parties differently, by and large, the 2016 South African local government elections were about the ANC, DA, EFF, NFP and IFP. Everything in between and outside of these protagonists was virtually nowhere to be found, particularly on SABC 2 Morning Live. However, when compared to its equivalent e.tv Sunrise, it could be argued that SABC 2 Morning Live performed in line with its competitor especially when it comes to not covering other smaller parties. What is worth noting is that both SABC 1 Election Debates and SABC 2 Elections 2016 gave more coverage to smaller parties at 31% and 28% respectively. However, this is not surprising given that these programmes were dedicated to the elections hence it would have been problematic if these programmes had just focused on the “big five”.

That the ANC, DA, EFF, NFP and IFP received most of the coverage on SABC platforms is hardly surprising for two reasons. The one is that South African media has always focused on the “big five” political parties in every election, be it national or municipal elections. The only difference is that in some years it may be different parties making it into the “top five”. For example, in 2011 it was COPE making it into the “big five” and in 2014 it was EFF and Agang making it into the pack. So there is generally a tendency to focus on the top five and ignore the rest. The second reason this is not necessarily surprising is that the top five are generally the biggest political parties at the time in terms of one of the following three things: numbers,
representation in parliament or newsworthiness. For example, despite this being the EFF’s first local government elections, the party attracted a large number of supporters and filled up Orlando Stadium during their manifesto launch. This is testament to their newsworthiness, of course aside from pulling several stunts like knocking on former president Thabo Mbeki’s house and meeting with him during their campaign trail. However, these were municipal elections meaning that some smaller parties, which may have a large following in a small area may not have received coverage from the public broadcaster.

That said, the top 3 parties, ANC, DA and EFF all fielded candidates across the entire country, which perhaps helped pull media attention to them. Interestingly, the EFF received as little as 5% coverage on SAfm, 6% on Thobela fm, 7% on Umhlobo Wenene fm, and 9% on SABC 2 Morning Live despite the party having a very vocal leader and having orchestrated a number of humiliating moments for President Jacob Zuma in Parliament. The low coverage of EFF was also recorded on ANN7 Online, which is owned by the Gupta family that is linked the president and is at the centre of the “state capture” debate that has captured the nation at this juncture. It could also be argued that the EFF received little coverage on the SABC platforms identified above because of the revelations made by the former Head of News, Jimi Matthews that during his time there was a decision made by some within the SABC and the ANC that EFF was going to receive very little coverage on the public broadcaster. In that regard, it would have been expected that the EFF would receive more coverage from independent broadcasters. However, that the EFF received above average coverage on Motsweding fm, Munghana Lonene fm and SABC 1 Election Debates at 19%, 16% and 17%, respectively may reveal that the SABC is not a monolith when it comes to implementation of decisions as some stations and/or channels could determine their own coverage.

Another interesting finding is that the ANC did not only receive coverage above average from SABC platforms such as SABC 2 Morning Live (55%) and Thobela fm (52%) alone but also from other players such as ANN7 Online (53%) and SABC competitors like e.tv News (56%), Eyewitness News (51%) and Talk Radio 702 (59%). That the ANC received substantial coverage relative to other parties on SABC 2 Morning Live and Thobela fm could be attributed to one of two things. Either these SABC platforms made a deliberate effort to cover the ANC more than other parties or the ANC made itself so newsworthy that it would have been inconceivable not to cover them. The former explanation makes sense if one takes into account the decisions taken by the SABC Chief Operating Officer at the time that seemed to support the ruling party. The latter however makes sense if we consider that the ANC made itself newsworthy when it had internal leadership squabbles that led to protests against the nomination of Thoko Didiza as its preferred mayoral candidate for Tshwane. This explains why even private broadcasters like e.tv News, Eyewitness News and Talk Radio702 also focused on the ANC. The problem with this however is that it feeds into the notion of events driven coverage where media tend to cover events around political parties and not issues that help inform the electorate.
4.2 Which political party adverts were aired by the SABC?

One of the elements of elections coverage is political party adverts. In previous elections both the DA and the EFF complained to ICASA’s Compliance Complaints Committee (CCC) regarding the way the SABC had handled and/or refused to air their adverts. So for the first time in the history of our elections monitoring we dedicated time to looking at how the SABC aired political party adverts. This section therefore provides an analysis of the advertising rolled out by political parties in selected broadcast media 30 days leading up to the 2016 local government elections which were scheduled for 3 August 2016. The section unpacks the key messages that were prevalent in these campaign adverts as well as the issues that were missing and whether the adverts had a bearing how the parties performed and/or contributed to the electorate’s understanding of what the parties stood for. It should be emphasised however, that the adverts that were analysed were the ones aired just before, during and just after selected news bulletins on both radio and television.

Before we venture into what we found about political party advertising particularly on the public broadcaster it is critical to explore the history of political party advertising in South Africa. Political transformation in South Africa began in 1994 when the apartheid system was formally abolished and a new and non-racial democratic South Africa was born. This transformation gave millions of South Africans in particular those who had been previously excluded based on their race the right to cast a vote for the very first time, on 27 April 1994, and to elect a president of their choice. This formal ending of Apartheid, ushered in a slew of changes to laws and amongst others, saw an end to the repressive media laws that had been the status up to that point. Media freedom and freedom of expression were allowed to thrive under the new constitution. This period also introduced the phenomenon of political advertising. The aim of political advertising was to give a platform to political parties to ‘sell’ themselves to voters, inform and educate the public about what they stand for and to explain and articulate their policy positions. Political advertising was therefore permitted on radio, television, newspapers, posters, billboards, etc.

Through political adverts, parties directly frame the content according to the audiences they are targeting. For political parties, political advertising is the most precise means to convey their messages as they not only craft the message but decide on who they are targeting and choose the medium to communicate with their target audience. However, advertising is ridiculously expensive making it difficult for parties with fewer resources to advertise. This is why during an election period, as per regulations, political parties are allocated one-minute slots on the public broadcaster to air their adverts. These free slots are called Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs)\(^3\).

Even then, political parties are not restricted from paying the public broadcaster to air more of their adverts if they so wish to do so. This means aside from PEBs, the public broadcaster is under no obligation to not air other political party adverts outside of the regulated ones. This is why the DA had a big fight with the SABC in the run-up to these elections when the public broadcaster refused to air the DA advert.

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This led to a delay of no less than five days and the DA accused the SABC of succumbing to political pressure to prevent them from enjoying a head start in terms of campaign advertising over the ANC. This certainly tainted the SABC’s credibility when it came to how it was handling political party adverts.

As highlighted above, advertising is very expensive particularly during prime time. While broadcasters (public, community and commercial) provide some reprieve in this regard through PEBs, these are often not enough for political parties to get their messages particularly to the rural majority who mostly access their news via radio and in some cases television. This means that for political parties to get their messages to their constituencies they need bigger budgets as well as utilise other forms of media such as social media to churn their messages out. Nevertheless, our monitoring of the party adverts confirmed what we have always known, which is that bigger political parties will advertise more. It is worth noting that the adverts presented below were aired just before, during or just after the news in the 30 days leading to the elections on 3 August. Therefore this does not reflect all the political adverts that were aired during the election period but rather ones that were placed during prime time news. They do however give us a sense of which political parties spent the most on which platforms. The category “other” is for those adverts that were not from political parties. These were from institutions such as the City of Johannesburg, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, the City of Ekurhuleni and the City of Tshwane. These adverts may have been neutral but it could be argued that their timing may have served a political agenda leading up to the election, as many of them promoted the ANC government by presenting a ‘track record’ of service delivery.

**FIGURE 5: Party adverts on SABC and its competitors**
That the ANC and DA had the highest number of adverts aired during prime time is hardly surprising because they are the biggest political parties and by extension have bigger budgets. Further, the DA targeted audiences in the metros they wanted to win like Nelson Mandela Bay (where Umhlobo Wenene fm broadcasts), Gauteng and Tshwane (where Power fm broadcasts). However, the amount of ANC adverts on Power fm is particularly striking. Either the ANC dedicated a lot of money for advertising on Power fm for reasons we don’t know or they were given a very good deal such that they couldn’t resist but have more of their adverts aired on Power fm. Arguably, Power fm targets black middle to upper class audiences, who given the ANC’s performance in Gauteng needed to be targeted more. Whatever the case, it is very striking that the ANC had such a high volume of their adverts on Power fm in comparison to other commercial broadcasters. The spread of ANC and DA adverts across various broadcasters shows how close the elections were particularly in the big metros where the votes went down to the wire. On the flip side, smaller parties like EFF, IFP and UDM did not really occupy prime time advertising. Of course this may be a finance issue but it also raises questions around the concept of equitable coverage and in turn fair coverage.

4.2.1 Which issues did political parties raise in their adverts?

You may wonder what this has to do with the SABC coverage of these elections. However, according to clause 4(6) of the Amendment of Regulations on Party Election Broadcasts, Political Advertisements, the Equitable Treatment of Political Parties by Broadcasting Licensees and Related Matters in Respect of Municipal Elections Broadcasting gazetted by ICASA on 26 February 2016:

“A broadcasting service licensee to whom a party election broadcast (PEB) has been submitted by a political party for broadcast must not, in any way, edit or alter the content of the PEB”. [However, the PEB must] “not contravene the provisions of the Municipal Electoral Act, the Electoral Code, the Electoral Act, the Constitution, the Act and the Broadcasting Act; and/or contain any material that is calculated, or that in the ordinary course is likely to provoke or incite any unlawful, illegal or criminal act, or that may be perceived as condoning or lending support to any such act”. Clause 4(10).

In previous elections the SABC had refused to air the EFF advert on the basis that the advert encouraged criminal acts to destroy e-tolls. The matter was eventually solved through ICASA’s CCC. In this regard, it was important to examine the content of the party adverts, in particular the messages they pushed in order to understand what they considered as important to their audiences and how the SABC dealt with these messages. Secondly and most importantly, we wanted to know whether what politicians prioritised as key messages is what the SABC also covered and considered as key messages that their audiences deserved to know.

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4 See ICASA’s Regulations on Party Election Broadcasts available here:
Like other countries, South Africa has its own history and many of the issues raised by political adverts reflect the country’s history and the current issues affecting its economy and development at the time. As such, the Figure below shows the specific issues which were raised in the political adverts.

**FIGURE 6: Issues raised in party adverts**

First and foremost, the issues raised in the political party adverts are not in sync with what the SABC focussed on as issues worth covering in these elections. For instance, the SABC focussed on party politics to the detriment of issues like service delivery, poverty, education, etc. (See section 5 on issues covered by the SABC). Such a disjuncture makes one question whether the SABC cared to engage with the content generated by political parties or whether they focused on the sensational, which is often not necessarily useful for the electorate. That being said, most of the party adverts focused on ‘service delivery’, labour, poverty, development, corruption, housing, education and human rights. However, when the term ‘service delivery’ is used it often doesn’t help the audience understand whether the services being inferred to are water, electricity, health or education, among others. While it is commendable that political messaging was around service delivery, it would have been fantastic if they were specific in terms of the services they were referring to.

It is also worth noting that the DA’s campaign messages were mostly around corruption, labour issues and service delivery. Conversely, the ANC mostly focused on service delivery, development, labour issues, poverty, housing, education and human rights. Given that the SABC and other media did not cover these issues that much in their coverage, it is worth exploring the messages political parties spread on these issues. With all its faults, ‘service delivery’ was the biggest point of interest with all parties making promises to offer better services to communities if elected. This is not surprising because in the lead up to the elections the country had experienced high rates of so called ‘service delivery’ protests, mostly in informal settlements and underdeveloped areas where service delivery remains a major challenge. Ironically, the ruling ANC had to respond to this challenge while at the same time arguing that it had already delivered on many of these services and would therefore do more and better once elected.
Labour is another big challenge for South Africa and the global economic climate is not making it any easier. Official stats peg the unemployment rate at 26.7% while unofficial figures put it at over 35%, with the youth being affected most. This situation has even seen the Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan describe South Africa’s youth unemployment rate as a national emergency. It is therefore not surprising that political parties through their political adverts focused exclusively on youth unemployment. Linked to unemployment is the issue of poverty. More than 12 million people in this country live in extreme poverty so reducing poverty is one of the biggest challenge and failure to deal with it would be a huge threat. The ANC itself on several occasions had admitted struggling to eradicate poverty and even asked the private sector to join in the fight. So political adverts from both the ANC and opposition parties strongly engaged the issue of poverty. It was clear that political parties reflected areas of extreme poverty as both rural and urban. Through the adverts, political parties promoted and presented strategies that they consider efficient to fight poverty and these were aligned to their party ideology.

Another issue that political parties focused on was development. These adverts mostly focused on infrastructure development such as road infrastructure and electricity supply to rural areas. However, these were mostly from the ANC, whose support base is mostly in the rural areas. On the contrary the DA mostly focused on corruption. The DA capitalised on the ANC’s ‘leadership crisis’ particularly when it comes to corruption. With the Nkandla matter and the state capture allegations doing the rounds, the DA spent most of its airtime in its political adverts addressing the issue of corruption with the promise to stop it immediately. However, the messaging around corruption was a direct response to the cloud hanging over the ANC and not much about what the DA would do to curb corruption within its ranks. It was clear from the messaging that the DA hoped that the electorate would punish the ANC for being corrupt.

Unlike the DA, the ANC also focused on housing and education in their adverts. With the proliferation of informal settlements countrywide and poor living conditions, the ANC promised “better housing for all South Africans.” With regard to education, the ANC made it very clear that education is a priority because it is only through education that more people can hope to get out of poverty. They connected youth education and employment. Clearly, political parties did not use political adverts to send the same messages. The DA for instance focused on the ANC’s weaknesses which they framed as corruption and their inability to create more jobs for young people. Arguably, the issues raised by the DA were rather opportunistic because they targeted the ANC’s vulnerable position with regards to corruption. Equally, the DA was also on the receiving end of negative advertising, with the ANC accusing it of being a Whites-only, which rents black faces when it suits them. Equally interesting is the fact that neither the ANC nor the DA addressed the issues they accused each other of. Further, on the surface it appears political parties raised issues pertinent to the people but in fact they were opportunistic. Perhaps what is telling is what was missing in the political messaging.
4.2.2 What was missing in the political party messaging?

South Africa suffers from so many social ills ranging from high levels of inequality to domestic violence, racism and xenophobia, to mention a few. Interestingly, whether by design or by default, some of the issues the country is grappling with like domestic violence, racism, health and land were not covered that much in political messaging. The country has high levels of domestic violence yet most political parties remained largely silent about this issue. Linked to domestic violence is the issue of crime, which again did not take centre stage in party advertising. Equally, issues facing the LGBTIAQ communities were neglected as if they don’t exist. We also know that South Africa was rocked with ‘xenophobic’ attacks last year where Blacks from other African countries were targeted yet political party adverts were mum on this. It could be argued that the reason these issues were neglected is because political parties chose the topics for their adverts carefully as they prioritised the issues they judged safe according to their own agenda. Although party adverts may or may not have an impact on which parties voters would finally choose, they serve a purpose to persuade voters to vote for one party and not the other. What remains to be seen is whether political parties managed to sway voters through their adverts.

4.3 Which issues did the SABC cover?

4.3.1 Which topical issues were covered by the SABC?

This section focuses on the issues that were covered by the SABC as well as how the public broadcaster covered the Tshwane protests as one of the topical issues that emerged during the electioneering period.

Topics covered by the public broadcaster are pivotal in bringing issues affecting people to the elections agenda through discussions, dialogues and debates. In other words, the topics the SABC focuses on could either unclasp or simply shun the concerns of ordinary people who are directly affected by the decisions taken by leaders. Because people often remember what is emphasised, the emphasis placed upon some topics over others is important in reflecting whether the elections coverage by the SABC was comprehensive enough to inform the electorate. We therefore looked at the issues the SABC focused on during these elections and observed the following. It is worth noting that the topic “party campaigns” was only allocated to the story if there were no other issues raised in the story aside from hearing that such and such politician was in such and such area campaigning. So this topic is purely political party campaigning without raising any issues and the topic “other” was allocated to those stories that focussed on other issues that are not in the top 10. These issues include housing, environment, racism, land, education, health, gender, children, etc.
FIGURE 7: Issues covered on SABC TV and its competitors

All media

SABC 1 Election Debates

SABC 1 IsiZulu/IsiXhosa News

SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele News

SABC 2 Afrikaans News

SABC 2 Elections 2016

SABC 2 Morning Live

SABC 2 Sesotho/Setswana News
FIGURE 8: Issues covered on SABC radio and its competitors
By and large, the public broadcaster and other private media were mainly concerned with party politics, party campaigning, election logistics as well as political violence and protests at the expense of other equally important issues such as manifesto analyses and voter education among other things, which have the potential to inform the electorate about the viable options. This is however hardly surprising because our media is driven by events and not necessarily issues. In other words, our media tend to cover to cover events and neglect issues, which may require more time and resources in order to unpack all the nuances. The problem with following events is that they are often once off issues that lead media to hop from one event to the other without keeping issues on the elections agenda so that politicians can be held accountable. Perhaps the most striking finding is that if we compare the top 10 topics covered by media and the issues raised by political parties in their adverts we notice a massive difference. For instance, while media focused on party politics, violence and protests, political party adverts raised issues of service delivery, labour issues, poverty, economic development, corruption, housing, education, etc. – none of which made it in the top ten topics covered by media. This means that either the media had their own elections agenda or when politicians appeared before the media, their political messaging changed in order to ensure that they get more media coverage.

It is also interesting to note that there are a number of media that were obsessed with covering politicians who were campaigning around the country. For example, 50% of the topics covered on SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News and 43% of the topics covered on SABC 3 English News were about party campaigns. While party campaigns should be covered, to dedicate 50% of your entire elections topic coverage to just that is detrimental to other topics that may be more helpful to the electorate. That being said, there were other media that focused on some useful topics. For instance, 49% of the topics covered on SABC 1 Election Debates were on manifesto analyses and 54% of the topics on SABC 2 Elections 2016 were about other issues outside of the top 10 topics. Although this is commendable, it was expected since these programmes were dedicated to covering these elections. Further, most of the topics that made up the 54% on SABC 2 Elections 2016 were about ‘service delivery’, which at face value makes sense but as highlighted earlier lumping service delivery together does not help the electorate understand which services are meant to be delivered as different areas may require different services.

Now that we know the topical issues that were covered by the public broadcaster and its competitors, by extension we also know the topical issues that were neglected. These are the very issues that should have been on the elections agenda, namely, service delivery, corruption, housing, environment, racism, land, education, health, gender, children, etc. – the list is endless. By neglecting these issues the public broadcaster and its competitors did not serve society in its entirety. That is to say vulnerable groups like poor people, children, women and people living with disability were not served. How is it that in a society such as South Africa where there a high levels of inequality, gender-based violence, and child abuse, topics about those

4.3.2 Which topical issues were neglected by the public broadcaster?

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who bear the brunt of these and other ills are barely spoken about during a turning point in the country’s history? What is worse particularly for the public broadcaster is that its mandate is to serve society, young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural, yet if followed the mainstream media in terms of covering topics that are relevant to a section of society. By following politicians, the SABC struggled to localise national issues raised by politicians and make them relevant to local people in relation to local elections. It would seem that the public broadcaster provided the electorate limited information, especially because it focused on mainstream topics at the expense of local issues relevant to people on the ground.

It is without doubt that the role of the public broadcaster is to serve society in its diversity. However, perhaps the technological disruptions in newsrooms are changing the way news is gathered, processed and disseminated leading to the public broadcaster following in the footsteps of other private media in terms of prioritising broader national issues (often sensational) and not issues relevant to people at the local level. In this era of technological disruption and media convergence, attention is paid to conversations that trend on social media and gain traction through popularity. These conversations should ideally be weighed against the social reality of South Africans taking into account that only a segment of society has access to data and therefore uses social media for news engagement purposes, among other uses. Rather than follow the echo chambers on social media, the public broadcaster ought to continuously ask whether the topics it’s covering are not only relevant to society as a whole but also help them to make informed decision, particularly during elections. That all media, including the public broadcaster are facing backlash from society when covering protests for example is a reflection that society feels misrepresented. This relationship between media and society can be restored if media listens to the communities they serve and prioritise issues that are relevant to them.

While it is often argued that public broadcaster cannot cover everything all the time owing to relatively limited resources, it can leverage on the advancing technologies and innovate. In any case, the public broadcaster is better resourced and equipped more than any other media in the country. With the advent of citizen journalism, there is no better time to use society to tell their own stories. We have seen this work with new online platform like The Daily Vox, which is often credited for changing the media narrative on the Fees Must Fall movement. Most importantly, when dealing with issues affecting South African, the public broadcaster should reflect the diversity of its people and the complexities of the social issues.

In order to zoom into how the public broadcaster covered topical issues we chose to focus on one issue that emerged during the elections period – protests. We chose this specific issue because earlier in the year, the SABC took a controversial decision to ban broadcasting footage of violent protests on their platforms arguing that it “might encourage other communities to do the same... [hence] the SABC would not assist these individuals to push their agenda that seeks media attention.” This was
after a lot of public property including public schools and libraries were burnt by protesters who were not happy about municipal demarcations in Vuwani, Limpopo. Of course the decision was not only irrational but it went against the ethos of media freedom so we (MMA) challenged it together with other like-minded organisation and ICASA ruled in our favour and the SABC had to rescind the decision. However, it took threats of legal action, and a formal complaint to get the SABC to withdraw the decision. Fast forward to June 2016 when ANC-MP and national assembly chairperson Thoko Didiza was announced as the preferred for mayoral candidate for the ANC should it win the elections in Tshwane. Tshwane was in flames with cinders of burnt busses, tyres and property. Again the SABC was faced with the dilemma to cover these protests under a cloud of having declared at some point not to cover violent protests. It is against this backdrop that we looked at how the SABC covered these protests as an elections issue.

4.3.4 Which frames did the SABC use to cover protests?

Framing is an important aspect of news dissemination. It is what makes media so stunningly successful in telling audiences what to think about. Many media scholars agree that the way news is framed can affect how consumers respond to media and its products. For example, that the South African society currently takes a hostile approach to media is in and of itself a reflection of how society responds to news frames particularly when it comes to reporting on violent protests. Our assumption was that the decision to ban footage of violent protests was going to shift how the SABC was going to frame the protests so we sought to test that assumption. What we found is that while both the SABC and its competitors mainly framed these protests in the conventional sense wherein the focus is on the violence (See Figure below). What is disturbing, however, is that 80% of the protest coverage was framed as public violence and political violence combined. This again shows the media focus on events and not necessarily the issues around those events. The same was also observed in KwaZulu-Natal where media again focused on the political killings and not much on the issues around those activities.

**FIGURE 9: The frames used by the SABC and its competitors to cover protests**
4.3.5
From whose perspective did the SABC cover protests?

The reality is that journalists work under serious time limitations and other resource constraints, and consequently may not always get enough sources to speak about a particular issue. The importance of getting multiple views on an issue is simply an attempt to ensure that various people give their own perspective to the issue. In other words, whoever speaks the most on an issue often gets to direct the narrative about that particular issue. In this case voices of various groups needed to weigh in on the Tshwane issue, which had gripped the nation’s psyche at the time. What is clear, however, is that as is always the case on these issues, official voices often count more than voices of ordinary people. (See Figure below).

**FIGURE 10: Who spoke about protests on SABC platforms and its competitors**

These findings mirror the general breakdown of sources wherein officials are always quoted by media. Similarly, what is clear in this instance is that on both SABC platforms and its competitors the protests were covered from the perspective of official sources like politicians. Ordinary people’s voices were stifled with the exception of e.tv News where voices of ordinary people constituted approximately 35% of all sources accessed about the. This finding makes sense if one considers the following two things. 1) Media often cover protests behind police lines hence they almost always have official sources including the police. 2) It would seem that media consider voices of ordinary people or protesters as less valuable and therefore privilege official voices.

The question of which sources are quoted in news stories speaks to ethical considerations of credibility and reliability of the media, especially when the information being distributed contributes towards a greater social dialogue. The sweeping statement made by the former SABC Chief Operating Officer, Hlaudi Motsoeneng that “when people see the camera they get excited and start burning property” dismally failed to recognise the nuances that exist between politics and media. In an interview on eNCA, political analyst Dr Somadoda Fikeni noted that the violence was symptomatic to the larger problem in society and was

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5 See article here: https://www.enca.com/south-africa/why-are-the-tshwane-protests-so-violent
starting to reflect through political killings and violent protest over candidate selection. It is within the societal context that the public broadcaster and its competitors needed to cover the protests, meaning that voices of ordinary citizens mattered.

Apart from privileging the voices of official sources, both the public broadcaster and its competitors amplified male voices and silenced female voices on this issue. (See Figure below). This is not new considering that for a long time media has been giving men (mostly powerful men) the space to articulate issues on behalf of others. The questions to ask here are: what makes media generally access more men than women on issues that affect both men and women differently? Is it because of the patriarchal nature of the South African society where the majority of women occupy few positions of power and authority? Or is it because media does not try hard enough to mainstream women’s voices? Whatever the case, what we do know from these results is that the protests were covered from the perspective of powerful men in positions of authority.

**FIGURE 11: Sex of the people who talked about protests on SABC and its competitors**

As highlighted earlier, prior to the elections, the SABC took a decision to ban footage of ‘violent protests’ on their platforms. As far as we know, even though we took the SABC to ICASA’s CCC on this decision and they had to rescind it under duress, there is no evidence that SABC communicated to its employees the measures the broadcaster put in place to ensure that ban was lifted. As a result, we looked at whether the SABC showed ‘violent footage’ in their protest coverage. In order to determine this, we analysed prime-time news bulletins on SABC television for a 2 week period (21 June 2016 to 4 July 2016). During this period, there was a wave of protests that gripped the country as reflected by the following stories that were covered by several media, including the SABC:

- 20 June 2016, *IOL*, “Protest over Hlaudi and censorship”  
- 20 June 2016, *eNCA*, “Cosatu to protest Metrorail delays”  
• 21 June 2016, SABC online, “Cape Town nursing college counts cost after protest”
• 22 June 2016, The Citizen, “Primrose road blocked by burning rubbish”
• 24 June 2016, IOL, “Victory for UCT workers, students”
• 27 June 2016, IOL, “Andile Lili held hostage by ANC members”
• 28 June 2016, SABC online, “Service delivery remains problematic as elections approach”
• 28 June 2016, SABC online, “Limpopo residents urged to report water disruptions”
• 29 June 2016, Times Live, “N2 between Cape Town and airport closed because of protests”
• 30 June 2016, IOL, “Irate residents threaten more protest action on N2”
• 30 June 2016, The Citizen, “EFF, Tshwane metro wrangled over outsourced workers”
• 30 June 2016, IOL, ANC suspends ‘ringleader’ of N2 violence"
• 1 July 2016, Time Live, “Beitbridge border post shut down by protest action”
• 1 July 2016, IOL, “#BlackFriday at the SABC”
• 1 July 2016, IOL, “ANC protesters burn party T-shirts, posters”
• 1 July 2016, SABC online, “Villages in Kuruman demand tarred roads”

The highlighted protests were reported to have been violent hence we sought to find out how the SABC dealt with these protests.

14 http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/d531b804d4d3df7a93efb5c15b5/Service-delivery-remains-problematic-as-elections-approach-20162806
16 http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/7de36004d5b84f0b01ce4b5facb1b5/Limpopo-residents-urged-to-report-water-disruptions
18 http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/late-residents-threaten-more-protest-action-on-n2-2040292
19 http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/irate-residents-threaten-more-protest-action-on-n2-2040292
20 http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/irate-residents-threaten-more-protest-action-on-n2-2040292
24 http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/4be18e004d564851959bdf4b5facb1b5/Villages-in-Kuruman-demand-tarred-roads
FIGURE 12: The wave of protests between 20 June 2016 and 4 July 2016

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE WAVE OF PROTESTS

The following timeline highlights the incidents of protest “generally” in the two-week period from 20 June-4 July 2016.

20 JUNE
- Protest erupt in Atteridgeville, Buses set alight in Mamelodi (PTA)
- COSATU protests against Metrorail (CT) peaceful
- Protests at the SABC (JB&C)

21 JUNE
- Protest @ nurse college, tyres burnt (CT)
- Tshwane (PTA) in Flames
- Armed mob attacks JuJu in Thembisa

22 JUNE
- Unhappy residents protest in Germiston (HB)
- Tshwane unstable, protests amock (PTA)

23 JUNE-25 JUNE
- Protest and looting rampant in Tshwane, but calm restored on 24th
- Labour protests at UCT on the 24th

26-27 JUNE
- Violence festers off
- Protesters hold provincial executive committee member Andile Lili hostage (CT)

28 JUNE
- President Jacob Zuma condemns violence, Incidents of violent protests and looting minimal
- Protest over service delivery in Modimolle (Limpopo)

29 JUNE
- Protests at N2, buses set alight (CT)

30 JUNE
- Protesters threaten to continue on N2 for councillor nomination (CT)
- Labour protest in Tshwane (PTA)

1 JULY
- Protest ring leader suspended (CT)
- #BlackFriday pickets at SABC (CT, JHB, KZN)
- Beitbridge protests
- Service delivery (NC)
- Protesters burn ANC t-shirts (NW)

2 JULY-4 JULY
- Incidents of protest almost unheard of.
Given the wave of protests that rocked the country during this period, we analysed 75 news bulletins on SABC platforms combined (SABC 1 IsiZulu/IsiXhosa News, SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele News, SABC 2 Afrikaans News, SABC 2 Morning Live, SABC 2 Sesotho/ Setswana News, SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News and SABC 3 English News) and 15 news bulletins on e.tv English News over the same period. As shown below, of the 75 news bulletins broadcast on SABC over the period, 57 covered protests and 18 did not. Of the 57, only 40% showed the actual incidents of violence. Similarly, of the 15 news bulletins analysed on e.tv over the same period, 12 covered protests compared to three that did not. Of the 12, 50% showed violence. (See Figures below).

**FIGURE 13:** News bulletins that covered protests and showed violence on SABC platforms

**FIGURE 14:** News bulletins that covered protests and showed violence on e.tv
If we disaggregate the news bulletins, we notice that with the exception of SABC 2 Afrikaans News, all SABC television channels did not show actual ‘footage of violence’ in most cases when they covered protests. (See Figure below). In fact, it could be argued that SABC 3 English News and SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele News downplayed the violent nature of some of the protests by showing very little of the violence. In any case, unlike on e.tv English News, when the SABC television channels showed violence, they showed the aftermath of it. In other words, they showed the impact of the violence, that is, burnt property, looted shops, blocked roads, etc. Seldom did they show people committing violent acts whereas e.tv English News mostly showed footage of the events happening. Further, e.tv English News showed the violence mostly in the news headlines while the SABC showed the violence inside the bulletins (mostly in the middle), thereby undermining the importance of the protests and what they represented particularly during an elections period.

**FIGURE 15: News stories that covered protests and showed violence on SABC platforms & e.tv**
When protests take place, the media should not just cover the violence but also cover the issues behind the violence, and critically what is being done to address the issues leading to the protests. That in the 12 times e.tv English News covered protests, half of the time it showed footage of violence is interesting for two reasons. Given that e.tv is a private broadcaster, it had not obligation to balance the coverage but it may be that e.tv wanted to be seen as independent. It may also be that by the time it arrived in the different areas where the protests were taking place, the violence had died down so it could only cover violence in half the protests. Whatever the case may be, the 50/50 split in terms of violent and non-violent images on e.tv English News creates the impression that even the private media were balanced in terms of covering protests than the public broadcaster whose remit is to balance these issues. Unlike private media, the public broadcaster has a far reaching mandate which is to cover issues of public interest. That the SABC was highly and clearly inconsistent in its coverage of protests during this election period is an indictment on the public broadcaster whose role is to provide information that helps citizens make informed decisions about their lives and livelihood.

Uncovering instances of poor leadership, corruption or broken promises as well as highlighting the productive activities and behaviours of leaders who are doing a good job are all part of media’s role in helping the public understand the type of leadership being offered, particularly in election season. Within this, one of the fundamental principles acknowledged by media the world over is that of balanced and fair journalism. Here, reporting must seek to provide a more thorough understanding of events or issues by accessing and analysing as diverse an opinion as possible. By journalists actively seeking out multiple sides of a story, there is a lower possibility of news being tainted by the reporter’s own subjectivity and other forms of bias. In this way, consumers are theoretically provided with news that is more accurate and impartial, and allows them as the electorate to make decisions about political candidates that are not shaped by erroneous, misleading or biased coverage.

With that being said, absolute objectivity in any field of journalism remains a fallacy. Every editor, journalist, photographer and producer have their own experiences, opinions and ideas that shape their decisions and ultimately the way they write, select and construct the news. In that regard, bias presents itself in multiple forms. It can be the inclusion of highly exaggerated language against one specific party, the exclusion of voices from other political parties or simply in the way parties are presented through images, sources or words. With this, it is critical that consumers of elections-based coverage get a glimpse into the type of reporting being offered and whether bias, be it intentional or subconscious, is present. We therefore analysed the SABC’s elections coverage specifically focusing on the extent to which the public broadcaster may have been biased in its coverage. This is particularly important where bias disseminated by the national broadcaster has the potential to undermine the democratic project by not responsibly and accurately reporting on events.
4.4.1 To what extent was the SABC biased in their elections coverage?

With this, it must be remembered that our default assumption is one of fairness and only when set criteria of bias have been breached is it classified as such. The following section details the degree of bias found across all monitored SABC platforms (to provide an overview) and then hones in and unpacks three television stations with the highest level of bias observed. We also offer a more in-depth analysis of the amount of coverage and the type of bias seen as well as to which parties such partisan reporting was directed.

Over the two month period, we monitored 2573 election-related stories put out by the SABC. Of these, 2316 or 90% were identified as “fair”. In these cases, all necessary parties were given an opportunity to respond to allegations (if any), their actions were presented in an impartial manner and the language used was seen as both moderate and balanced to all parties i.e. the actions of political groups were not inflated or downplayed by journalists. Given the high volume of election stories broadcast, this level of “fairness” may seem acceptable or even good, in some respects. However, when we look deeper, the patterns of fairness and bias are uneven across the spectrum (see the figure below) of SABC platforms and present clear dangers in some cases.

**FIGURE 16: Percentage of biased items on SABC platforms**

*SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News* had the highest percentage of biased articles standing at 34%. This means that for every three stories put forward in their 17h30 news bulletin, at least one of them, on average, was identified as biased. In contrast, only two stories from *Umhlobo Wenene fm* were deemed unfair resulting in only 2% of news coverage being biased from 82 stories. These inconsistencies in the degree of unfair coverage may mean one of two things. It could reflect the fact that these instances of bias are unintentional or, on the contrary, that different programmes are at liberty to decide how they choose to cover political parties. These levels of choice may occur even if there is a decision from higher levels of authority to portray certain parties in positive light at the expense of other parties.
Interestingly, radio programmes fared the best over all other platforms where no single radio station had more than 15% of their coverage being identified as biased. While this may stem from more conscious and purposive reporting from those in SABC’s radio departments, this finding is more likely to result from radio newscasts having a much shorter duration (less than five minutes long) than both television news broadcasts or elections-centred shows. The shorter duration also means that often only the bare minimum of information is conveyed in an item. It must also be remembered that our default assumption is one of fairness and we move then on the basis of set criteria to determine if an item is clearly biased or not and if so who does it clearly favour or clearly disfavour. For television, the period analysed here were between 30 and 60 minutes and there would therefore be far more opportunities for partisan stories.

It must also be noted that there were no instances of bias recorded for SABC 1’s Election Debates series. This was a ten-week long programme that was aired in the build-up to 3 August. It saw representatives from a host of different political parties argue and defend their party’s position on a range of issues in front of a studio audience. Owing to the fact that every week, a number of political parties came together and each were given opportunities to voice their opinions and objections during the show, it was difficult to define any session as being clearly biased one way or the other. As a result, this was the only programme and indeed station to have had 100% fair elections coverage. This also serves to highlight the importance of offering and presenting diverse views.

As has already been stated, we acknowledge that a certain level of subjectivity will always filter into newscasts. However, we must still draw attention to those media that frequently offered biased news items in order to hold them to account. The following section therefore presents a more detailed analysis of the top three most biased programmes, that is, SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News, SABC 2 Morning Live, and SABC 3 English News, each with over 15% of biased stories.

4.4.2 What was biased on SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News?

SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News had the highest proportion of biased stories across all platforms with a total of 33 biased items out of a total of 98. While identifying the degree of bias put out by a specific programme is important, what is even more critical is to examine which parties were favoured or disfavoured by the coverage. In the analysis below, we therefore look at: (1) which political parties were most commonly accessed as sources in news items, (2) whether these items were fair or biased and (3) in those biased items, which parties were favoured and which were not. By unpacking the coverage in this way, we can more effectively understand the potential nuances offered in partisan coverage broadcast by the SABC.

The breakdown of elections coverage, as seen in the table below, specifically looks at the stories in which the three main parties (ANC, DA and EFF) were accessed. Overall, these three parties received over 65% of all coverage across SABC plat-
forms, and they are thus the most obvious choice for analysis around bias. On *SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News*, the ANC, DA and EFF were sourced in 38%, 29% and 12% of elections items. Clearly, the ANC were accessed three times more than the EFF. While it may be argued that the ANC deserved the coverage by virtue of it occupying the space, this highlights how skewed the coverage of political parties was especially if we consider how biased *SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News* was when covering these parties.

**FIGURE 17:** Breakdown of biased coverage on SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources in coverage (%)</th>
<th>Fair items of total (%)</th>
<th>Biased items of total (%)</th>
<th>Biased items that favour own party (%)</th>
<th>Biased items that favour other parties (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFF</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may be argued that the ANC, as the current leading party, may have received more coverage as part of the SABC’s mandate of equitable party representation. This means that parties get a level of coverage that is broadly in line with their standing in the existing political landscape. While this may be true, the fact that almost half of the ANC coverage was biased (48%) is incredibly problematic. This issue is compounded by the fact that 84% of those biased stories favoured the ANC. In this case, not only is the ANC receiving more coverage overall, but they are also being accessed in stories in which, much of the time, they are being openly favoured.

Here, we also see that the ANC and the DA had an almost equal percentage of unfair stories where the stories in which the DA was sourced also demonstrated equally high levels of partisanship (52%). While the similarities between instances of bias and fairness are so close between the ANC and the DA that some might say that the numbers essentially “cancel each other out”, we argue that such biased coverage is flawed regardless of which party or source is championed.

In terms of the EFF, the proportion of biased items stood at 40%. The level of fairness was therefore higher than both the ANC and the DA coverage. Interestingly, 90% of these biased articles favoured the EFF. While this coverage might therefore appear to favour the Red Berets outright, when taken in terms of absolute numbers, there were only 9 EFF-favoured items compared to 32 ANC-favoured stories. Once again, this highlights how the ANC received definitively more favourable coverage than its two leading counterparts. The results therefore clearly present a case of biased news coverage on this channel over the period.
4.4.3 What was biased on SABC 2 Morning Live?

*SABC 2 Morning Live* is a news and talk show aired on weekday mornings on SABC 2. In our two-month monitoring period, we collected 93 elections related stories from this show where 119 people were accessed from various political parties, and 22% of the stories were deemed biased.

When we look at the voices accessed across the coverage, we see that the ANC was accessed in more than double the number of stories than that of the DA and five times more frequently than the EFF (see table below). This range of party sources is highly skewed and therefore points to how much more commonly the ANC was offered an opportunity to speak in news items than any other parties or groups. These results replicate those seen on *SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News* where the ANC were accessed in a significantly higher number of stories than the two main opposition parties.

**FIGURE 18: Breakdown of biased coverage on SABC 2 Morning Live**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources in coverage (%)</th>
<th>Fair items of total (%)</th>
<th>Biased items of total (%)</th>
<th>Biased items that favour own party (%)</th>
<th>Biased items that favour other parties (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFF</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we delve deeper into these stories, we see that those in which the ANC was accessed were deemed fair in 71% of cases. On the other hand, the stories in which the DA and the EFF were accessed were fair in only 45% and 42%, respectively. While some might argue that this level of unfair coverage may have advanced the campaigns of the DA and the EFF over the ANC, we actually see that in only 43% of biased stories in which the EFF was accessed actually favoured the EFF. Similarly, only 55% of DA biased stories favoured the DA. This means that despite the DA and the EFF being given a voice in some of the biased news items, many of those stories still favoured other political parties. Interestingly, this contrasts findings from the ANC where, despite there being a considerably lower percentage of biased stories (29%), almost 60% of these items favoured the ANC. These findings tend to indicate not only how bias was used to favour the ANC but how it was also used to sway favour from the DA and the EFF. As with the *SABC 2 Xitsonga/Tshivenda News*, the results therefore clearly present a case of biased news coverage on this channel over the period.
4.4.4 What was biased on SABC 3 English News?

The English News is broadcast during prime-time on SABC 3 and our analysis revealed that it had the third highest proportion of biased stories with 22 of 146 of its elections stories being biased. Of the 470 sources quoted across the coverage, 36% of these were voices that represented the ANC. What is staggering is that the ANC sources is double the number of DA sources (18%) and triple the number of EFF sources (12%). Here, once again it would appear that a clear preference was given to ANC sources in the elections coverage, and one that is clearly at odds with many other media coverage.

**FIGURE 19: Breakdown of biased coverage on SABC 3 English News**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources in coverage (%)</th>
<th>Fair items of total (%)</th>
<th>Biased items of total (%)</th>
<th>Biased items that favour own party (%)</th>
<th>Biased items that favour other parties (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFF</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, the percentage of biased ANC-accessed items was notably lower at 36% compared to the DA (44%) and the EFF (43%). However, and as following the trends of the other case studies seen above, much of this biased ANC coverage (64%) openly favoured the ANC. In contrast, only 32% and 25% of stories in which the DA and the EFF were accessed, respectively, favoured them. This means that even for stories in which opposition parties were given the right of reply, other factors meant that the news items did not necessarily offer positive coverage of them. This follows the trend of the other case studies seen above. As with the other two cases studies above, the results therefore clearly present a case of biased news coverage on this channel over the period.

While by and large the SABC programming analysed across all its platforms offers mostly fair coverage, the three case studies above demonstrate clear bias that favours one party over the others. The in-depth analyses of the three most biased platforms reveal the very real threat of genuine intentional and systemic bias and intentionally unfair coverage, with a particular inclination towards the ANC. This was seen firstly in the consistently higher proportion of sources that were from the ANC over other political parties. We stress that in and of itself this factor alone is not sufficient to determine bias as other channels had higher levels, but combined with an interrogation of the bias itself, it is clearly problematic. The coverage was at times more than five times more than that of other parties. Secondly, when we interrogate the coverage further, we see that the biased items in which opposition parties were accessed were more likely to favour other parties than they did themselves. In contrast, biased stories in which the ANC were sourced were more likely to favour the leading party. This speaks to a consistent preference, however subtle, to the existing ruling party and could indicate intentional programming strategies rather than inadvertent and unplanned biased footage.
Importantly, while one might expect all SABC programmes to demonstrate bias levelled at specific political parties (i.e. all in favour of one group or all opposed to another), the research above demonstrates the differences between stations. This may reflect the semi-autonomy of some station managers in their development of the news.

Overall, the analysis reveals for the first time in our democratic history that the SABC has at least on three programmes not only clearly failed in its basic duty of balanced and fair reporting, but the programmes in question have also served to undermine the mandate of the SABC and its credibility. In our 2014 elections report on the SABC we noted the worrying trends of bias that we saw emerging:

“Critically however, the impact of the banning of advertisements, as well as other stories relating to comments about editorial interference, as well as the clear bias in presentation all served to deeply undermine not only the credibility of the SABC but also gave, in some respects justified support to allegations of unfairness by political parties. While we do not believe the findings serve to undermine the democratic nature of the elections process in South Africa these are issues, which must be addressed constructively in the run up to the local government elections in 2016.” – pp 38

“What is clear is that the culture of self-censorship and the crass actions of those in high levels of authority, (where decisions are taken to not broadcast programmes critical of those in power for example, the Big Debate or Miners Shot Down) are impacting the overall quality and fairness of the news produced by the SABC. To ignore this will be an injustice. These decisions will in some way impact the manner in which news is reported by the SABC…” – pp 33

It would seem that despite the warnings and recommendations, steps were not only not taken but it is clear that the situation has deteriorated to a level that necessitates urgent steps from the board, Parliament Portfolio Committee on Communication and the IEC.

24 Carol Mohlala and Kate Skinner. 2014. “The more things change, the more they stay the same: The SABC’s coverage of the 2014 National Government Elections”. Johannesburg: Media Monitoring Africa. Online access: www.mediamonitoringafrica.org
5. Conclusion

African society in all its diversity, it tended to cover these elections in the same manner as other private media, wherein it represented these local government elections as if they were national elections. In this regard, the public broadcaster failed to distinguish itself as the epitome of quality broadcasting. For example, just like other private media, the SABC only focused on bigger political parties (ANC, DA, EFF, NFP & IFP) to the detriment of smaller parties and independent candidates who contested these elections. (The proof of this can be seen in the very exceptions where the SABC had made clear efforts to ensure more equitable coverage in its dedicated elections programming). By following politicians, the SABC struggled to localise national issues raised by politicians and make them relevant to local people in relation to local elections. Further, following politicians feeds into the notion of events-driven coverage where media tend to cover events around political parties and not issues that help inform the electorate. This had a ripple effect on the electorate who may not have been given the full spectrum of candidates to choose from.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that if we compare the top 10 topics covered by the public broadcaster and the issues raised by political parties in their adverts we notice a massive difference. For instance, while public broadcaster focused on party politics, violence and protests, political party adverts raised issues of service delivery, labour issues, poverty, economic development, corruption, housing, education, etc. – none of which made it in the top 10 topics covered by the public broadcaster. This suggests that either the public broadcaster had its own elections agenda or when politicians appeared before SABC platforms, their political messaging changed in order to ensure that they get more media coverage. While political parties understood that these local government elections were about service delivery and focused on issues like inequality, unemployment, corruption, housing and education in their adverts, that the public broadcaster instead focused on the usual event-based and often sensational stories about party politics, violence and protests leaves one wondering whether the public broadcaster is oblivious to the issues affecting society.

The public protest visuals ban was clearly in force during the elections period and this deeply undermined the SABC’s ability to provide balanced and fair coverage in a critical period. Given the wave of protests that rocked this election period, it is interesting to note that the public broadcaster was not balanced in the way it covered these protests. Although the public broadcaster focused on protests and framed them as violent, it privileged voices of official sources over ordinary citizens thus exacerbating the already strained relationship between media a society particularly when it comes to covering violent protests. Even then, SABC rarely showed violent footage of these protests and further reduced their importance by not including them in the news headlines thereby limiting and undermining people’s access to what was happening in the country at the time, as well as the events’ importance. Unlike the private media like e.tv that created the impression of balance by covering both the violence and non-violence associated with protests, the public broadcaster privileged non-violence over the violence that came with the protests. At the bare minimum, the problem with privileging non-violence is
that it presents one side of the story thereby preventing South Africans from seeing the full extent of the protests. At worst, South African may make misinformed decisions based on the half-backed information peddled by the public broadcaster. That the public broadcaster privileged non-violence in its coverage of protests is hardly surprising given the decision the public broadcaster took back in May 2016 to ban footage of violent protests on it platforms on the basis that this would lead other people to emulate the violence they see on television. Although the SABC was forced to rescind this decision under duress, there is no evidence to suggest that it lifted the ban on violent footage. In fact, these results show that some platforms on the SABC saw the ban through while very few others did not abide by the decision.

While by and large the SABC programming analysed across all its platforms offered mostly fair coverage, **the case studies above demonstrated clear bias that favoured the ANC over other parties**. The in-depth analyses of the three most biased platforms revealed the very real threat of genuine intentional and systemic bias and intentionally unfair coverage, with a particular inclination towards the ANC. This was observed on the basis of two findings: 1) The ANC had a consistently higher proportion of sources than other parties. (While this alone is not sufficient to attribute bias as other broadcasters had higher levels of ANC sources, if combined with an interrogation of the bias itself, it is clearly problematic). 2) The biased stories in which opposition parties were accessed were more likely to favour other parties than they did themselves while biased stories in which the ANC were sourced were more likely to favour the ruling party. This speaks to a consistent preference, however subtle, to the ruling party and could indicate intentional programming strategies rather than inadvertent and unplanned biased footage. However, not all SABC programmes were biased, which may reflect the semi-autonomy of some station managers in their development of the news. Whatever the case is, such disparities need to be interrogated more as the public broadcaster has to abide by the highest levels of ethical journalism. **Over and above, despite the warnings we have been issuing over the years, it is clear that the situation has deteriorated at our public broadcaster to a level that necessitates urgent steps to rescue the broadcaster from the ghosts of its apartheid bias**. These steps can come from the SABC board (if ever it becomes functional), the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communication, the Minister of Communications, ICASA and other interested parties.
MMA’s election project made possible through the support of the Open Society foundation of South Africa and the Millenium trust.