ELECTIONS IN A TIME OF TUMULT

ANALYSING SOUTH AFRICA’S MEDIA COVERAGE OF 2021 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

WRITTEN BY
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2022
February
On 1 November 2021, at the end of a tumultuous year rocked by political unrest and Covid, 12 million South Africans[1] cast their votes in local government elections: less than half of the 26 million plus who had registered[2].

Free and fair elections are the pinnacle of democratic process, so why did 54% of potential voters stay away from the 2021 polls? Were they simply unconvinced by the credentials of the 325 contesting political parties and almost 95 000 candidates[3], or were more complex factors at play? What might be the impact on South Africa’s democracy?

Several journalists and political commentators explored these questions in the aftermath of the election.

For example, in their Daily Maverick article “Dismal voter turnout at South Africa’s municipal polls a blow to democracy” (02/11/2021)[4], Shaun Smillie and Suné Payne cite Professor Amanda Gouws’ concern that low voter turnout inevitably leads to government by coalition: a system, Gouws says, that has previously not proved viable in South Africa.

In the same article, Professor William Gumede, Executive Chairperson of Democracy Works Foundation, exposes the need for more effective voter education in future election processes, so that citizens can learn how to vote strategically and thereby hold government to account. Without this he warns, a culture of “continual impunity and lack of accountability” will prevail, exacerbating the existing lack of service delivery.

It is a pity that media did not do more before polling day to highlight the importance of voting, and emphasise the responsibility of every citizen to participate in the electoral process as a whole. Furthermore, if political parties and candidates neglected to put voter education on their agenda, it was surely the responsibility of media to expose this – and to ask why.

Moreover, while political parties must own their share of responsibility for low voter turnout, it is important to remember that all democratic institutions play crucial roles in delivering a successful election: the IEC, parliament, government, SAPS, civil society and – of course – the media.

Indeed, the critical importance of media in an election period cannot be overstated. It goes without saying that election coverage must be balanced, accurate and fair. But media must also help voters to make informed choices by reflecting their needs, exposing the gaps in their understanding, and ensuring that all political candidates are given equitable space and airtime. The media should also nurture citizen engagement at each stage of the electoral process: notably by facilitating debates on issues affecting voters’ lives, and by including voters’ voices in such dialogues.

So, how successfully did South Africa’s media fulfil such a demanding mandate in the unstable political landscape of 2021?

To find out, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) monitored 29 print, online, and broadcast outlets over a two-month period from 13 September – 13 November. We extended the monitoring process for almost two weeks after voting day, so as to include the coverage of all results as they were compiled and announced.

A separate MMA report focused on the public broadcaster, and covered a selection of South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) channels.
MMA has analysed media coverage of every local and national election since South Africa attained democracy in 1994. For the 2021 local government elections we wanted to offer an independent, data driven perspective on media coverage. In so doing, we aimed to answer these questions:

- On what did the media focus in their coverage?
- Who had the loudest voice?
- Was coverage fair and accurate?
- How were local issues covered?

**We also considered:**

- How much space/time was allotted to election issues, compared to other news;
- What types of election-related topics were covered;
- Which groups of people dominated coverage;
- Whether citizens’ voices were audible;
- How political parties were represented;
- How women were represented: as candidates and voters;
- The racial breakdown of coverage;
- Whether there was evidence of media bias.

It is important to note that we shared our ongoing findings with media on a weekly and monthly basis. In this way, we hoped to support and strengthen media coverage of the election process as it unfolded – and suggest how such coverage could be improved.

Every week before polling day, MMA published analyses[5] which summarised trends from the previous seven days and highlighted gaps/concerns. We communicated these insights through weekly appearances on Newzroom Afrika, and via social media.

An interim report summarised findings from one month’s monitoring, and this was shared with media and other stakeholders at a virtual gathering. Again, we used social media to publicise our interim findings. We were also interviewed by media such as eNCA, Radio Islam, and uMhlobo Wenene FM.

While it is not MMA’s role to address the issue of low voter turnout, this report offers an overall assessment of how successfully the sampled media were able to cover the 2021 local government elections according to the criteria set out earlier.

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This report analyses media coverage of the 2021 local government elections from 13 September – 13 November 2021. As shown below, we monitored 29 South African print, online, and broadcast outlets. Of these, 26 were print/online media[1], and three were broadcast media.

SABC media are not included here, as SABC coverage is addressed in a separate report.

### Media Monitored in 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEDIUM</th>
<th>MEDIA OUTLET</th>
<th>LANGUAGE</th>
<th>PUBLISHED/BROADCAST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>Power Fm</td>
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<td>Daily</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>Television</td>
<td>e.tv</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Daily</td>
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<td>Print and online</td>
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<td>The Star</td>
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*Figure 1: Media monitored in 2021*

[1] This list includes print media with websites, as well as exclusively online media.
MMA collected and analysed a total of 2,732 items in the 62-day monitoring period. Although we were limited by resources, the media samples we selected provide a representative view of general media coverage of the elections. We used our in-house monitoring tool Dexter[7] to trawl websites and collect content, which was stored in a searchable database for analysis. Other content, especially from monitored broadcast media was manually inputted. Seven specially trained, experienced media monitors analysed all election-focused – or related – content from the selected media and captured the results on Dexter. Regular quality checks ensured the entire system ran smoothly.

What were our limitations?

Every study has limitations, and MMA’s monitoring of media coverage of the 2021 local government elections was no exception.

We faced the following challenges:

- **Resource constraints**: Ideally, we would have liked to have monitored more media, but our resources were limited. However, we believe the selected sample offers an accurate representation of the bigger picture.

- **Load-shedding**: Some news bulletins could not be recorded due to power outages. Luckily these instances were few, and did not affect the overall validity of our findings.

- **Poor access to community media**: Most community media outlets are woefully underfunded, and cannot afford websites. We therefore had to exclude them from the analysis, as our online tool Dexter can only source content from websites. This was unfortunate, as MMA has found that small and community media tend to focus more on issues facing communities: as such, they are more likely to report on local government elections.

- **Lack of language diversity**: Although our monitoring team was highly experienced, resource constraints meant that our media sample was not as language-diverse as we would have wished. Thus, with the exception of one Zulu media outlet, we focused on content that was published or broadcast in English. For the SABC analysis however, we were able to include a greater diversity of languages.

[7] Dexter is MMA’s purpose-built online monitoring tool. It harvests all content from selected online media websites and stores this in a database. It also utilises open source and bespoke developed tools to analyse the data retrieved. In practical terms, it allows us to automate core elements of media monitoring analysis; thus deepening our understanding of who speaks and what they say; story focus; where stories are from; and the identity of the authors.
3. WHAT WE FOUND

3.1 Amount of election-related media coverage

In our 2021 monitoring, we probed the extent to which local government elections were given prominence in the sampled media.

We examined this on a weekly basis, and also measured the space/airtime allotted to election stories compared to other stories covered in the monitoring period.

When did the election receive most coverage?

As expected, media coverage increased as the elections approached. Coverage hovered around 10% for the first few weeks of the monitoring period, and a noticeable increase became apparent just two weeks before polling day.

Unsurprisingly, the highest level of election coverage (22%) occurred in the first week of November. Media interest was intense at that point: not only because of election day itself, but also due to the subsequent announcement of preliminary results by the IEC, and related debate about possible coalitions[8].

This dramatic spike in election coverage highlights the event-based nature of media focus. Whilst such a trend is understandable in terms of newsworthiness, it has worrying implications for voters. In the absence of in-depth media coverage in the run-up to the elections, citizens had to access other sources of information in order to make critical choices about political candidates and their engagement with local issues.

Ideally therefore, media coverage should have been more evenly spread throughout the election period – especially during campaigning. This would have enabled voters to cast their ballots in a more strategic, informed way.
Our analysis shows that only 17% of media coverage between 13 September – 13 November was election-related.

Why was overall interest so minimal, and why was the Covid-19 pandemic not framed as an election issue, even though it received significant coverage as a separate topic during the monitoring period?

It would have been helpful if media had probed how political parties and candidates intended to rebuild the economy and address the impact of the pandemic at community level. Instead, Covid-19 was not framed as an election issue until speculation arose that Covid-19 vaccination certificates might become mandatory for voters.

It is, however, important to acknowledge that lack of resources may partially explain the under-reporting of the 2021 local government elections. Newsrooms are shrinking. Many media outlets are struggling to survive in an increasingly hostile economic climate. Perhaps the paucity of financial and human resources – rather than apathy – is to blame for any shortcomings in election coverage.
What were the stories about?

The media’s choice of election-related story topics was a key component of our monitoring process. Not only do such choices reveal editors’ news values; they also reflect the agenda of different political parties and candidates, as articulated in their campaigns.

MMA allocated a single core topic, or subject, to each election/election-related item. The figure below shows the top five coded topics we identified:

![Figure 4: What were the stories about?](image-url)

**WHAT WERE THE STORIES ABOUT?**

*Top 5 which is 58% of all coverage*

- Political party campaigning: 15%
- Political party politics: 15%
- Election results: 12%
- Election logistics: 9%
- Service Delivery: 7%
- Others: 42%
Our analysis showed that:

- Service delivery – an issue that lies at the heart of local government elections – accounted for just 7% of election stories.

- Conversely, political party campaigning and political party politics received a combined coverage share of 30%: the largest slice of the top five coded topics.

- Only 42% of total coverage was devoted to topics like health, crime, gender, and human rights: all crucial issues for voters and their well-being.

Although election coverage inevitably centres around the campaign trail, the lack of media attention given to service delivery in 2021 is particularly concerning.

Service delivery is intrinsically linked to municipalities: the institutions which local election candidates hope to lead. Indeed, the South African Constitution (Act Number 108 of 1996) lists the duties of municipalities to: “structure and manage its administration and budgeting and planning processes to give priority to the basic needs of the community. And, to promote the social and economic development of the community”[9]. The Development Bank of South Africa further points out that: “poor service delivery and general poor government services lead to the decline of resources, zero job opportunities, job losses and overall poor living conditions”[10].

Accordingly, in a local government election period, service delivery should surely receive a huge amount of attention: from media, and from political candidates. Sadly, this was not the case in 2021, and the electorate was robbed of an opportunity to contribute to debates about the issues that most affect their lives – and threaten their livelihoods.

If service delivery was not prioritised by political candidates, the media should have interrogated the reason for this, and thereby played a more citizen-focused role in determining campaign agenda.

Figure 5 shows important issues that received scant attention in media coverage of the 2021 local government elections. Other sorely neglected topics included: economics; education; human rights; environment; gender; arts / culture / entertainment; religion; development; election funding; refugees/migration; disaster; labour; land; children; poverty; and disabilities.

The fact that the topics in Figure 5 affect the everyday lives of citizens should have meant that the media and politicians place them high on their agenda. For instance, health which received a mere 1% should have been prioritised by the media as the country was living through the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, the media should have interrogated political parties and candidates as to how they would improve the delivery of quality health care to citizens once elected. This also goes for crime which received 3%.

Voter education receiving 4% coverage share means that the electorate were potentially robbed of an opportunity to learn about democratic processes as well as about candidates and their plans or promises. This would have potentially aided in engagement between the electorate, candidates and media and, perhaps would have enhanced the voice of citizens in coverage of the 2021 local government elections above the percentage shown in Figure 6 below.
3.3 Whose voices did we hear?

In a democracy, media has the power to choose whose voices are highlighted – and a responsibility to amplify those who are unheard. This is especially significant during an election period when so many different voices compete: often to the bewilderment of voters.

Our analysis focused on the choices made by media in their coverage of such voices; notably:

- The five major political parties, as compared to election-related groups/institutions & stakeholders;
- The ten major political parties, in relation to the votes they ultimately received;
- The racial demographic;
- The gender demographic.

Which groups were accessed?

![Figure 6: Top five political parties and elections-related groups](image-url)
Our findings revealed that the collective voice of political parties dominated media coverage of the 2021 local government elections, with 44% of the total share. Moreover, sources representing national government accounted for 19%: the second highest share.

By comparison, 25 key groups (categorised as “others”), which included local government officials, unionists, traditional rulers, and community leaders, collectively received only 28% of coverage.

To break this down further, local government voices in 2021 represented less than one percent of the total share: a decrease from the last local elections in 2016, when they garnered 1.7%[11] of coverage.

This raises the question: does local government play a negligible role in setting the agenda for local elections, or does media ignore local voices in favour of those who represent the interests of national government and national groupings? If so, why?

Our monitoring also revealed another worrying trend in 2021 election coverage: a significant decrease in citizens’ voices, which dropped to 4%, as compared to 5% in 2016.

Voices speaking in media coverage of the local government elections are synonymous with the topics that are mostly reported by the media. As shown in Figure 4 above, political party campaigning and political party politics topped the list of top five and in Figure 5, political parties topped the list of top five groups accessed by the media. In the same light, Figure 4 shows that service delivery as a topic received the least amount of coverage from the top five and in Figure 5, citizens who are expected to drive the agenda in terms of service delivery are among the groups with the least amount of voice share in the top five.

In a democracy, elections – and election agenda – should be voter-focused, not driven by political parties. Media therefore plays a crucial role in sourcing the voices and views of citizens during an election period: not only to articulate needs, but also to hold the powerful to account after they have been elected.

As yet, it remains unclear if the dumbing down of citizens’ voices in 2021 can be attributed to poor newsroom resources, voter apathy, Covid-related issues, or a combination of all these factors.

How did political parties fare?

A total of 325 political parties (represented by 95,000 candidates) contested the 2021 local government elections[12]. Figure 7 shows how much media coverage the top 10 parties received, in relation to their eventual share of votes.

![Figure 7: Coverage of top 10 political parties compared to percentage votes received](image-url)
In an election, visibility is inextricably linked to strong performance. Campaign rallies, social media, and strong party manifestos all play a role – but the influence of print, radio and television cannot be ignored.

So, to what extent did media coverage of the top political parties reflect their respective share of the votes?

**Our analysis showed that in 2021:**

- Although the African National Congress (ANC) led the field with 45.60%[13] of votes, it garnered only 41% of total media coverage. This suggests that the party was actually under-represented: even though it received the largest slice of all media coverage.

- The Freedom Front Plus (FF+) also received slightly less than its proportionate share of media coverage: just 2%, compared to 2.3% of votes.

- On the other hand, our analysis shows that two of the top parties received more media coverage than their actual share of the vote. The DA, which is the second largest political party in the country and the largest opposition party, received 24% media coverage: the second highest of all parties. However, it garnered only 21.66% of the vote. The DA was mostly in coverage of the party’s posters that were erected in Phoenix which some people called racially insensitive. The two posters which read, “The ANC called you racists” “The DA calls you heroes”[14] received huge media coverage with political parties and members of the public condemning the DA. Furthermore, ActionSA received 8% media coverage, but garnered only 2.34% of the vote: a discrepancy of more than 5%. We can therefore conclude that ActionSA was the most over-represented political party in media coverage of the 2021 local government elections. ActionSA was mostly in coverage where the party was accusing the IEC of “sabotage” after the party’s ballot paper for Tshwane and Johannesburg were presented without the party name and just with the logo and candidate’s name[15]. This issue that ended up in the Electoral Court[16] was massively reported during this monitoring period.

- Our analysis also revealed that media coverage of the 1 500 independent candidates[17] was worryingly skewed. Although they won 1.73%[18] of the vote, they collectively received less media coverage than some of the political parties with fewer votes.

What was the racial breakdown of sources?

MMA analysed how different races were represented in media coverage of the 2021 elections.

We found that:

- Black people were under-represented. Although they accounted for 75% of the voices accessed (the largest share), according to Statistics South Africa they actually comprise 81% of the country’s population[19].

- Coloured and Indian people were similarly under-represented. Coloured people comprise 9% of the population, but accounted for only 7% of voices accessed; Indians comprise 3% of the population, but accounted for only 2% of voices accessed.

- By contrast, White people were significantly over-represented. Although they comprise just 8% of the population, they accounted for 16% of voices accessed.

What was the gender breakdown of sources?

Women comprise 51% of South Africa’s population, and 55% of registered voters[20]. But to what extent did media coverage of the 2021 elections reflect this reality?

Once again, MMA found that women’s voices were shamefully under-represented, accounting for just 19% of all sources accessed: a negligible increase of 1.5% from 2016, when local government elections were last held.

Moreover, this concerning trend is by no means restricted to election coverage. MMA’s research has shown that women’s voices are similarly disregarded in other forms of media coverage: notably Covid-19,[21] and climate change[22].

South Africa has committed itself to achieving the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals[23], one of which is gender equality.[24] Indeed, in 2021 the ANC - the country’s biggest political party - announced that more than 40% of its election candidates were women[25]; while other parties have also highlighted the need for gender parity.

Why then, does media consistently fail to honour women’s perspectives when covering events of national importance like elections? Why are men’s lived experiences prioritised, especially in coverage of election-related issues such as Gender-Based Violence or HIV/AIDS, to the detriment of women’s voices who most need to be heard?
Was election coverage regionally representative?

One of the most important responsibilities of media is to cover news from all parts of the country: not just urban areas and hubs of power. During local government elections, when local leaders are chosen, this responsibility is obviously even greater.

In our 2021 monitoring, we compared the percentage of media coverage with the percentage of population[26] across different provinces, to ascertain how successfully media was able to meet the needs of voters in every part of the country.

Using these criteria we found that:

- Three provinces were over-represented in media coverage: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape. Unsurprisingly, these provinces all include large metropolitan centres.

- Of these, the most skewed representation was that of the biggest province, Gauteng. This province accounts for 26% of the country’s population, yet it received 38% of total media coverage.

- Conversely, Limpopo was the most under-represented province. It garnered just 3% of media coverage, yet it accounts for 10% of the country’s population.

Sadly, these findings are not unique to the 2021 elections. Indeed, they are reminiscent of similar trends identified by MMA in the last two local government elections of 2016 and 2011[27].

Again, we must question why there has been no improvement. One reason may be that most media are still located in metropolitan areas with easier access to stories and sources. Moreover, the reality of ever-shrinking newsrooms[28], compounded by the effects of Covid-19, may have made it even more challenging for media to access rural areas in 2021.

However, if this trend continues, the information gap between urban and rural populations will widen; and poorer South Africans will become more marginalised. Given their limited access to social media, most people from rural areas still rely on traditional media as their key source of information. If this is lacking during an election period their ability to make informed voting choices will be gravely compromised. Moreover, they will be deprived of the platforms through which other South Africans engage in debates on issues of importance to their municipalities. In the long-term, such neglect may further jeopardise the ability of rural people to access quality education, healthcare, and other basic services.

How fair was media coverage?

MMA has spent the last 27 years defining and refining criteria to assess fairness/bias in media coverage. Based on this experience, our default position is to assume that all news stories are balanced and impartial until bias is clearly identifiable.

Of course, no media outlet is perfect. But we believe that one biased election news item does not necessarily jeopardise overall balance.

Moreover, bias is not always intentional:

“... very often a pattern of bias (for example in gender coverage in the media) reveals a lack of intention, as well as the subconscious assumptions evident in societal discourses which influence the selection of news and information and its presentation. Therefore, it is important that the media report on political parties in a consistent and balanced fashion, more so during elections.”[29]

On this basis, in our monitoring of the 2021 elections, we used the following criteria to assess bias:

- **Language** – where the language used in a news item clearly and distinctly favoured one party over another, or substantially disfavoured/damaged the image of a party or parties: be it through exaggeration, generalisation, or trivialisation;

- **Presentation** – where it is clear that one or more parties were favoured, by virtue of how they were reported overall;

- **Omission** – where a party was not given the opportunity to respond to substantial allegations, or to an issue of substantial importance to that party.

So, what did we conclude?

Our analysis showed that South African media was 96% fair in its coverage of the 2021 local government elections. This should be celebrated: especially as it marks a distinct improvement from the previous election in 2016, where we detected 12% bias.
How much election coverage did different media outlets produce?

In 2021, MMA monitored the quantity (percentage) of election coverage delivered by the different media outlets in our study. For previous elections we analysed the quality of such reporting.

Our change of focus this year enabled us to gauge how much prominence was given by each media outlet to election coverage compared to other news.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media outlet</th>
<th>% Coverage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eyewitness News</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>The Post (SA)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12: How fair/biased was the coverage?
Our findings showed that:

- Eye Witness News gave the greatest prominence to election coverage: 12% of its overall news coverage during the monitoring period.

- News24 and IOL were not far behind, with 11%.

- Conversely, five media outlets recorded a percentage of zero, which meant that their election coverage was too insignificant to reach 1% or higher: a worrying trend, especially for the readers of these publications.

- BusinessLIVE was among those outlets which failed to reach 1% in its coverage. This implies that the publication did not consider the local government election to be newsworthy from a business perspective: a decision which should be questioned.
This report on media coverage of the 2021 local government election seeks to answer one key question: did South African media sufficiently fulfil its mandate to inform and educate the electorate?

In terms of fairness and balance, it certainly did. This is reason enough to celebrate, especially in light of the challenging circumstances facing journalists in 2021: political unrest earlier in the year; the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic; and the shrinking of newsroom resources.

However, as this study shows, media outlets still fell short when it came to equipping citizens to make informed choices on polling day. Moreover, most media failed to go beyond lip-service when seeking out the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups.

Therefore, in any future election coverage MMA strongly urges editors and journalists to:

- Amplify and reflect the diverse voices of South Africa’s citizens: both by highlighting the important issues that affect their daily lives, and by providing platforms where the electorate can engage politicians and candidates;
- Commit to ensuring a gender-aware approach to election coverage, thereby encompassing greater input from and about women (and women candidates); and better representation of the LGBTQIA+ community;
- Broaden the existing range of election-related issues, and re-think which issues require particular focus. In 2021, political party campaigning was highlighted at the expense of service delivery – surely the most crucial issue in any local government election. Similarly, other important topics like crime and health received scant attention;
- Ensure equitable coverage across the political spectrum. In 2021, the top 10 political parties received 97% of overall coverage, leaving just 3% for the remaining 315 parties, even though they arguably represented local interests more than their larger counterparts;
- Ensure all geographical areas are equitably represented, in proportion to the size of their respective populations. In 2021, coverage was skewed in favour of bigger provinces with metropolitan hubs, to the detriment of those with extensive rural communities.

In conclusion, while fairness is a non-negotiable element of election coverage, media has a much deeper responsibility to the electorate: to honour and reflect their current realities, and their hopes for the future. Such citizen-focused reporting not only builds voter trust; it also nurtures a sense of ownership in the electoral process. MWA hopes that the recommendations in this report will help media to strengthen their capacity in this regard - and thereby encourage the 54% of voters who stayed away in 2021 to cast their ballots next time round.
5. Acknowledgements

As Elections Project Coordinator, I would like to pay tribute on behalf of MMA to the many people who helped make this challenging media monitoring process successful. Firstly, our research would not have been possible without the funding generously provided by Open Society Foundation (OSF), Raith Foundation, and Luminate. MMA also gratefully acknowledges the contribution of our developers, based at Open Cities Lab and Assemble.

Special thanks go to our dedicated team of media monitors: Musa Oswald Rikhotso, Msizi Mzolo, Yinhla Ngobeni, Girlie Sibanda, Jacques Ndong, Ntsako Manganyi and Bantse Pelle.

The following people also contributed greatly to other aspects of the monitoring process:

- Musa Oswald Rikhotso and Msizi Mzolo gave refresher training to the monitoring team. In addition, Musa conducted quality-control checking and extracted the data analysed in this report;
- George Kalu ensured that broadcast media recordings were captured, and gave valuable guidance;
- Thandi Smith managed the monitoring team, and methodologies/tools;
- Azola Dayle analysed SABC media coverage (see separate report);
- William Bird provided oversight and facilitated problem-solving, as always.

Finally, as author of this report, I also thank:

- Nomshado Lubisi-Nkosinkulu (graphic designer)

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February 2022