SPEAKING FOR THE PEOPLE?

ANALYSING SABC MEDIA COVERAGE OF 2021 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 1 November 2021, at the end of a roller-coaster year, South Africans took to the polls to elect councils at district, metropolitan, and local level.

As always, the media played a crucial role in safeguarding the country’s vibrant democracy. Through rolling coverage, reportage and analysis, the nation’s journalists provided voters with the balanced, timely information needed to make informed choices at the ballot box.

Once again, the public broadcaster (SABC) was central to this process.

In recent years, the SABC has been embattled: caught in the cross-fire of numerous political interests, and rocked by financial crises. Indeed, at the time of the last local government elections, it was in danger of losing all credibility – and even its basic independence was questioned.[1]

In covering the 2021 elections, the public broadcaster therefore faced enormous challenges. More than 325 political parties[2] and almost 95,000 candidates[3] were jostling for votes: would it be possible to reflect such a complex political landscape fairly, and thereby meet the needs of 30 million plus[4] listeners and viewers?

Moreover, in a healthy democracy, citizens must be able to trust the public broadcaster: not just to provide equitable election news coverage but also to listen to them, and to communicate their needs to those seeking power. Could the SABC meet such expectations, especially when service delivery and human rights issues were at the forefront as never before?

In this report, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) seeks to answer these all-important questions.

2. HOW WE CONDUCTED THE RESEARCH

Between 13 September – 13 November 2021, MMA’s specially-trained team analysed 1,016 news items, gleaned from the public broadcaster’s major radio and television stations as well as SABC Online. This process covered 10 of South Africa’s official languages.[5]

For radio, we monitored two bulletins a day for each station (at 6am and 6pm), as well as selected elections town hall programmes.

For television, we monitored one prime-time news bulletin in the evening. We also monitored SABC 2’s Morning Live and SABC News Service Delivery Gauge: a full-length news programme, and an elections-specific programme respectively.

Our team recorded and checked information from elections-related stories, and used MMA’s in-house monitoring tool Dexter[6] to collect other content, which was stored in a searchable database for analysis.

The data included:

- Name of programme, type of news story and its origin;
- Headline and summary;
- Main theme/topic of the story;
- Identity of sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation of individuals or groups who were accessed either directly or indirectly in the stories);
- Identification of potential bias.

We are confident that the sample size, coupled with the two-month monitoring timeframe, provided sufficient data and content from which to draw fair and reasonable conclusions.

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[5] The 1,016 SABC news items represent 27% of news items monitored by MMA during the election period. A separate report covers findings from non-SABC media outlets.

[6] 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.
WHAT WERE OUR LIMITATIONS?

Inevitably, our monitoring process was not without challenges. Although we analysed more than 1 000 election items, load shedding and technical difficulties meant that some broadcasts could not be captured. We made every effort to retrieve these recordings but acknowledge that there may be a handful that escaped our analysis. Secondly, although all our monitors received the same training and followed the same carefully developed protocols, the possibility of some human error and/or bias cannot be entirely eliminated.
3. WHAT WE FOUND

3.1. What were the stories about?

![Figure 1: Top 10 story topics](https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019electionsFinal_v2.pdf)

Our analysis revealed that stories with highly politicised news angles made up the largest slice of SABC’s 2021 local elections coverage: a trend reminiscent of 2019[7].

In 2021, however:

- SABC’s major political focus was on party manifestos, rather than campaign events or political controversies[8];
- Stories about service delivery/community protests, and voter education featured more prominently than before, collectively garnering 15% of total coverage;
- Conversely, many important election-related issues (“Other topics”) received scant attention: crime, the justice system, human rights, education, health, and land.

MMA applauds the SABC for highlighting citizen-centred stories in its 2021 election coverage. In so doing, the broadcaster enabled its diverse audience to make informed choices at the polls, and drew attention to issues needing attention from those in power.

However, we recommend that SABC broadens its frame in future election coverage, so as to include a greater range of topics that are central to the lives and well-being of voters.

How did we categorise story topics?

The choice of story topics is intrinsically linked to a media organisation’s news values and editorial agenda.

To categorise the choices made by SABC in its 2021 election coverage, MMA used an existing framework developed from our previous monitoring experience and adapted this where necessary.

For example, we categorised the story “Police minister to visit Inanda after three killed at ANC candidate selection meeting over the weekend” (SABC Online, 14-09-2021), as a Political violence & intimidation item because the murders occurred at an election-related function.

Another story, “North West registration stations temporarily closed due to service delivery protest” (SAfm, 17-09-2021), was identified as a Demonstrations/Protests item because it showed the impact of such actions on voter registration: an issue of particular concern.

[8] This trend was prevalent across all SABC platforms and languages, with SAfm, Ukhozi FM, Phalaphola FM and Motsweding FM spearheading manifesto-related radio coverage; together with television programmes such as SABC 1 Nguni News (isiXhosa and isiZulu); SABC 2’s Sesotho and Setswana News, and its Morning Live show.
Whose voices did we hear?

Quality journalism depends on diverse sources, and MMA defines a “source” as any individual who is directly/indirectly quoted or mentioned in a news story.

In our election coverage analysis, we asked: whose voices and perspectives did the SABC prioritise? Which groups of people were given the greatest opportunities to shape and frame election debates?

Significantly, a total of 4,141 sources appeared in the items we monitored: an average of four sources per item, across all SABC channels and platforms. This not only aligns with global best practice: it surpasses local media trends, where the average number of sources per story is only 1.9.[9]

We commend SABC on this achievement: especially as the public broadcaster averaged just two sources per story in its 2019 election coverage.

Which groups did sources represent?

Affiliations of sources

- Political parties: 64%
- Government officials: 9%
- Citizens: 5%
- Corporations: 5%
- Commissions/Independent bodies: 3%
- Foreign government: 3%
- Academics/Experts: 2%
- International NGO: 2%
- Business leaders: 1%
- Professionals: 1%
- Others: 7%

Figure 2: Affiliations of sources

Our analysis showed that:

- Though the number of sources averaged at a high of four sources per item on SABC channels and platform, citizens’ voices were significantly under-represented in SABC’s election coverage, accounting for just 5% of all sources selected. This is a dramatic drop from 2019, when such voices made up 17% of total sources accessed across all SABC channels. In both instances, election-specific programmes like Daily Service Delivery Gauge provided platforms where citizens could be heard: so why were they not featured more prominently in 2021, considering that there were more sources accessed on average?

- Conversely, sources from political parties garnered the largest share (62%) of SABC’s coverage. This signals a 20% increase from 2019[10]. While it is true that 325 parties contested the 2021 local elections compared to just 48 in 2019’s national elections, the balance remains skewed. It is to be noted, however, that the number of parties contesting national elections will always be far less than those contesting local elections due to different criteria and other related factors. Political parties that dominated the share of voice include the ANC (30%), the DA (19%), and the EFF (12%).

- Government officials accounted for 9% of sources: the second-highest percentage overall.

When the voices of citizens are under-valued in this way, the credibility of the public broadcaster suffers. A healthy democracy depends on citizen participation, especially during election periods. If media does not provide inclusive platforms where voters can share their hopes and concerns, the election agenda will inevitably be controlled by political elites.

How did political parties fare?

The SABC’s 2021 election coverage of the top political parties was exemplary. Clearly, the recent transformation of the public broadcaster’s board – coupled with revamped editorial policies[11] and mandates[12] – played an enormous role in ensuring fair, equitable representation that accurately reflected each party’s share of the vote. Our analysis showed that SABC editors made a conscious effort to apportion coverage according to political track records and parliamentary support; balancing this with the need to grant right of reply, especially to less popular parties.

![Top 10 political parties](chart.png)

Figure 3: Coverage of top political parties

In our analysis we compared the media coverage allotted by SABC to the top 10 political parties, with the eventual vote each party received.

We found that:

- The ANC received most media coverage (30%), and the greatest share of votes (46%). Interestingly, in 2019 the party received 53% coverage and won 57% of the vote. However, the apparent discrepancy in 2021 can be easily explained. In 2021, the year of the local government election, the SABC had to report on many more political parties and party related matters, so coverage was inevitably spread more thinly (see Figure 1).

- Coverage of the DA and EFF aligned closely with each party’s eventual share of the vote. The DA received 21% of the vote, and 19% of the coverage; the EFF garnered 10% of the vote, and 12% of coverage.

- Media coverage of smaller parties was slightly (but not disproportionately) higher than their eventual share of the vote. This was especially true of new parties like ActionSA and the African Transformation Movement – as well as more established ones, like the predominantly Afrikaner Freedom Front Plus.

Again, the SABC should be commended for reflecting such a diverse political landscape so equitably.
South Africa’s history of prejudice, discrimination and polarisation has generated calls for transformation in all spheres of society, including the media. In 2021, such calls were echoed in party manifestos and rally speeches across the political divide.

So, how did the public broadcaster rise to this challenge in its election coverage? Did it seek out diverse voices from across the racial spectrum, or focus on one group at the expense of others?

**Race Coverage**

- Black: 82%
- White: 11%
- Coloured: 5%
- Indian: 2%

**Figure 4: Coverage of different racial groups**
Our analysis revealed that:

The public broadcaster outshone other media in its representation of Black voices in 2021. Black people comprise 81% of the South African population[13] and accounted for 82% of the voices sourced by SABC. By contrast, Black voices accounted for only 75% of voices sourced by other media in 2021[14].

Indian people comprise 3% of the national population, and equitably accounted for 2% of the voices accessed by SABC. According to our research, this marks an improvement on the public broadcaster’s previous election coverage of Indian voices.

However, Coloured people were still under-represented. They comprise 9% of the total population, yet accounted for only 5% of voices accessed in 2021. In this regard, SABC performed slightly worse than other media, which allotted 7% to Coloured voices.

Conversely, White people were over-represented by SABC in 2021. They accounted for 11% of voices sourced, yet represent only 8% of the total population. This discrepancy is worrying, but it was even more pronounced in coverage by other media which allotted 16% to White voices.

In summary, while we commend SABC for its representation of Black and Indian voices in 2021, we urge the public broadcaster to ensure that sourcing of Coloured and White voices is more equitable in future election coverage.

What was the gender breakdown of sources?

Gender Coverage

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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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Figure 5: Gender coverage

Women represent 51% of South Africa’s population. However, our analysis revealed that women’s voices comprised just 18% of SABC’s 2021 local election coverage. Additionally, this was the case for the elected representatives into the respective municipalities. According to the IEC, 63% of councillors who won seats in the 2021 local elections were men, compared with 37% women[15], yet was reported that there were more women (55%) registered to vote than men (45%).[16]

Sadly, this shameful situation is far from unprecedented. MMA has repeatedly noted similar gross under-representation of women by the public broadcaster: not only in election reporting, but also in other kinds of coverage.

In 2021, SABC’s performance was even worse than that of other media outlets. Men’s voices accounted for 82% of all voices sourced in SABC election coverage, compared to 79% in other media.

We acknowledge that this is not just a South African phenomenon. We also accept that gender disparity in SABC’s election coverage mirrors broader societal and political trends. However, we again urge the public broadcaster to make a greater commitment to sourcing and mainstreaming women’s voices more equitably in future.
Was election coverage regionally representative?

One of the key mandates of the SABC is to reflect the diversity and interests of South Africa’s people. Our analysis revealed the extent to which the public broadcaster met this challenge in its 2021 election coverage. Diverse representation is as important for local government elections as it is for national elections as it provides an avenue for citizens to directly engage with their leaders and speak on issues that are otherwise under-represented in national elections. This is more so for often neglected and overshadowed areas as mainstream news and reportage is usually centred around urban and metropolitan areas.

We asked:

- Was SABC’s coverage geographically inclusive?
- Did its geographical coverage proportionately reflect provincial populations?

![Coverage per province](image)
We found that:

SABC’s 2021 election coverage was generally geographically inclusive and equitable.

Although KwaZulu-Natal received more coverage (23%) than its population density (19%), this was probably due to the earlier political unrest which generated greater election activity than usual[17].

Compared with previous elections, the coverage of provinces like Free State and Limpopo was significantly more equitable, in line with coverage of Eastern and Western Cape respectively.

As we have noted before, historically marginalised provinces like Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West are still under-reported. However, SABC has made progress in this regard.

Interestingly, our research showed that although SABC’s coverage of Gauteng was slightly skewed (it received 28% coverage, but accounts for only 26% of the total national population), other media allotted 38% of coverage to the province. Therefore, the public broadcaster performed significantly better than other media outlets in this regard.

How fair was media coverage?

Fairness and balance are essential components of all election coverage[18]. This is especially true for the public broadcaster, whose duty is to serve all South Africans: no matter who they are, or where they live.

SABC’s mandate is based on editorial independence. Moreover, compared to other media, it has the widest reach: as well as a responsibility to access and serve the most marginalised areas of society. Finally, it is a highly contested space for politics that has often been manipulated by those in power for their own gain.

For example, in the 2016 local elections, nefarious forces attempted to control SABC news services. This led to systemic bias for the first time. However, in 2019 the President of South Africa appointed a new SABC board which transformed editorial policies, so as to build a democratic public broadcaster committed to quality content and services.

Since then, SABC’s election coverage has proved exemplary in terms of fairness, and 2021 was no exception. Our research revealed that 97% of the news items we analysed were free from bias[19]: an impressive result that augurs well for the future of our national broadcaster.

[18] For a summary of how MMA defines bias and fairness please refer to our separate report on election coverage by other media.
[19] In this regard SABC’s performance slightly bettered other media, which recorded 96% according to our analysis.
How did different SABC channels/platforms perform?

**SABC coverage**

Figure 8: Election coverage by different SABC channels/platforms
MMA monitored SABC’s election programming across different channels and platforms, based on the airtime/space allotted to election items within such programming.

We discovered that:

- SABC Online News produced by far the largest amount of the public broadcaster’s election coverage (32%). This platform not only generates its own content; it also carries items from other broadcast SABC channels. Indeed, for many people, SABC Online became the “go-to” place for election coverage: especially as it allowed consumers to catch up on news they may otherwise have missed from live broadcasts.

- SABC 3 English News, and Ukhozi FM radio station (which broadcasts in isiZulu), each generated 11% of election coverage: the second highest amount. This finding aligns with SABC’s audience and language profiles.

- SABC 1 isiZulu evening news, Phalaphala FM, Munghana Lonene FM, and Motsweding FM also produced commendable amounts of election coverage.

Our analysis showed that, while there is always room for improvement, it is remarkable that SABC again produced such strong election coverage across its diverse platforms.
MMA commends all SABC stations for their hard work, despite the financial and political crises that have plagued the corporation[20]. To the best of our knowledge, the SABC received no formal complaints about its 2021 election coverage: a testament to the success of the public broadcaster’s ongoing transformation process.

**We also applaud:**

- SABC’s wholehearted commitment to fairness across all its platforms throughout the election period;
- The exemplary use of multiple sources, to add credibility and depth to election-related stories. In this regard, the public broadcaster significantly outshone other South African media;
- The equitable coverage of political parties and racial groups;
- The increased attention given to citizen-focused election issues (like service delivery);
- The inclusive focus on all provinces, in line with their respective populations.

**However, we strongly urge the public broadcaster to:**

- Take urgent action to confront its own patriarchal bias, and develop practical strategies to ensure greater gender inclusivity in all its coverage;
- Highlight the voices, experiences and needs of citizens, instead of overly focusing on the powerful. Sadly, the public broadcaster has regressed in this regard. In 2021, citizens’ voices accounted for just 5% of all election sources: a dramatic drop from 2019, when they comprised 17% of total voices sourced.

To conclude, it is worth remembering that just five years ago, the SABC was in danger of losing all credibility as a reliable, balanced purveyor of news[21]. Its independence was threatened by numerous political groups, and it was facing financial meltdown.

However, as this report shows, there is now much to celebrate: even though significant challenges remain. MMA pays tribute to everyone at the public broadcaster for their inspiring coverage of the 2021 elections – and we hope that our insights will support the SABC in its journey of transformation.

5. Acknowledgements

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