WHOSE VOICE COUNTS?

EXAMINING COMMUNITY MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S 2024 ELECTIONS

Written by Musa Oswald Rikhotso
Edited by Lister Namumba-Rikhotso
Designed by Kgothatso Baatile Mohale

MEDIAMONITORING**AFRICA**

1. INTRODUCTION

On May 29, 2024, South Africa held its 7th National and Provincial Elections, marking 30 years of democracy. This pivotal election introduced significant reforms, including the participation of independent candidates and a new three-ballot system. These changes heightened the media's responsibility to deliver fair, accurate, and informative coverage.

To evaluate how community media fulfilled this role, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), with support from the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) conducted a comprehensive media monitoring exercise.

Community media are **defined** as media that:

- are controlled by a non-profit entity for non-commercial purposes,
- serve a specific community,
- encourage community participation in selecting and providing programs, and
- may be funded through donations, grants, sponsorships, advertising, or membership fees.

Community media play a vital role in informing and engaging voters, especially amid electoral reforms like the Electoral Amendment Act.

This report presents findings on how South African community media covered the 2024 elections, focusing on the volume and quality of coverage, dominant topics, source diversity, fairness, and the quality of information. It concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen community media's role in future elections.

2. METHODOLOGY

The period of monitoring of community media for the 2024 National and Provincial Elections is from April 1 to June 28, 2024. This period was selected to analyse elections coverage prior and post voting day on May 29. We monitored 21 South African community media outlets, including print, online, and broadcast platforms. These included six radio stations with three daily news bulletins (morning, afternoon, and evening), and 15 newspapers published in both print and online formats. The monitoring was conducted in five provinces namely, Gauteng, Western Cape, Limpopo, Kwa-Zulu Natal and Eastern Cape. A total of five languages, English, Afrikaans, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu and Tshivenda were monitored.

The table below lists all the media outlets monitored.

Name of the media	Type	Language
Alfred Nzo	Radio	English/isiXhosa
Radio Khwezi	Radio	IsiZulu/English
Jozi Fm	Radio	English/IsiZilu
Kasi FM	Radio	English/IsiZulu
Radio Tygerberg	Radio	Afrikaans
Vhembe FM	Radio	TshiVenda
Mega Artist Media	Newspaper	English
Food for Mzansi	Newspaper	English
Pondoland Times	Newspaper	English
KZN Nahumhla News	Newspaper	English/IsiZulu
Grocott's Mail	Newspaper	English
Umbele	Newspaper	IsiZulu
Orange Farm News	Newspaper	English
Ekurhuleni News	Newspaper	English

The table below lists all the media outlets monitored (Continued)

Limpopo Mirror	Newspaper	English
The Bugle	Newspaper	English
Dzindaba Iphendaba LesiXhosa	Newspaper	IsiXhosa
Sekgosese Voice	Newspaper	English
Sivubela Intuthuko	Newspaper	English & IsiZulu
Die Hoorn	Newspaper	Afrikaans
Pondo News	Newspaper	English

Figure 1: List of the 21 media monitored

When selecting the media sample for monitoring, the following factors were considered: audience/readership, media accessibility, and the location of human media monitors. MMA is confident that the sample size, timeframe, and methodology used provide sufficient data to draw fair and reasonable conclusions about how community media reported on the elections.

Trained MMA monitors analysed election-related stories using a standardised user guide designed to minimise inaccuracies. This guide outlined a consistent methodology for data collection and analysis.

During the monitoring period, MMA's team identified and recorded all media stories containing the keywords, "elections", "vote", "NPE", "Independent Electoral Commission", and "IEC". Details of each story were captured using MMA's online in-house media monitoring tool, *Dexter* as per the user-guide.

The monitoring process documented the following details:

- **Program details:** Name, type of story, and origin
- **Content analysis:** Headline, summary, and main theme
- **Source information:** Names, race, gender, and affiliations of individuals
- **Story quality:** Evaluation of reporting standards
- **Potential bias:** Identification of any partiality

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Media performance (quantity)

Community media published a total of 774 election-related stories: 583 from the six monitored radio stations and 191 from the 15 online and newspaper publications. This coverage was significantly lower than that of the SABC, which published 5,020 stories, and privately-owned media, which produced 6,859 stories during the same period. Findings from the SABC and other news media have been analysed into two separate reports. The limited coverage by community media is likely due to resource constraints and other challenges. While this is not a direct comparison, it highlights the significant disparity in election reporting between community and larger media outlets.

Among community media, Alfred Nzo had the highest number of election-related stories, followed by Radio Khwezi. In contrast, Sekgosese Voice, Sivubela Intuthuko, Die Hoorn, and Pondo News had the least coverage. Radio was the dominant platform for election reporting, accounting for 75% of all election-related stories in community media.
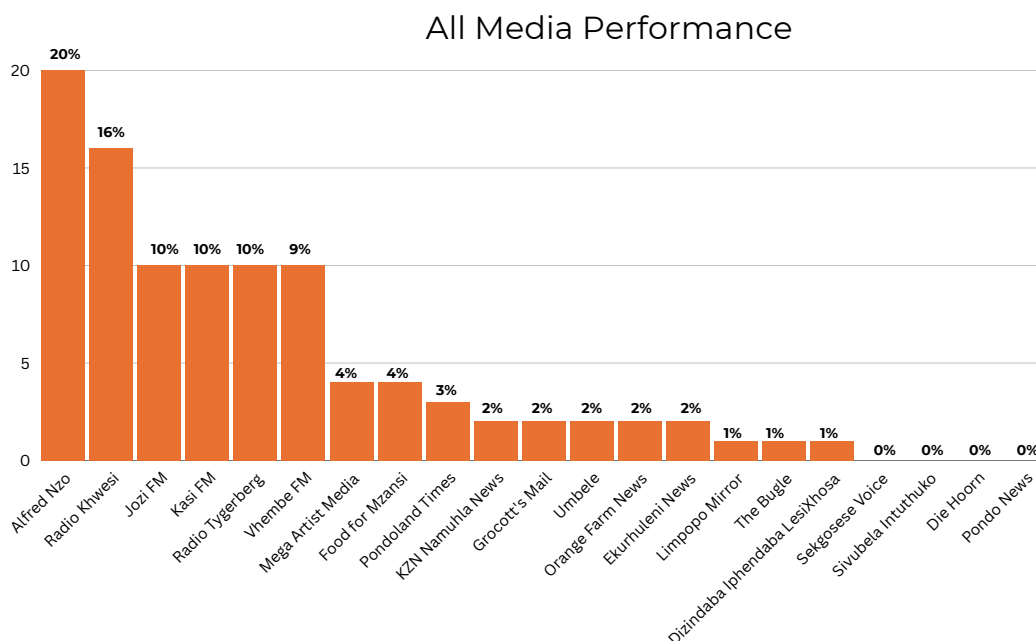

Figure 2: Media performance (quantity)

Among the monitored community radio stations, Alfred Nzo 93.8 FM accounted for 26% of the stories, while Vhembe FM had the lowest coverage at 12%. For online and newspaper publications, Mega Artist Media led with 17% of election-related stories, while Die Hoorn, Pondo News and Sivubela Intuthuko had the least, at just 1% each.
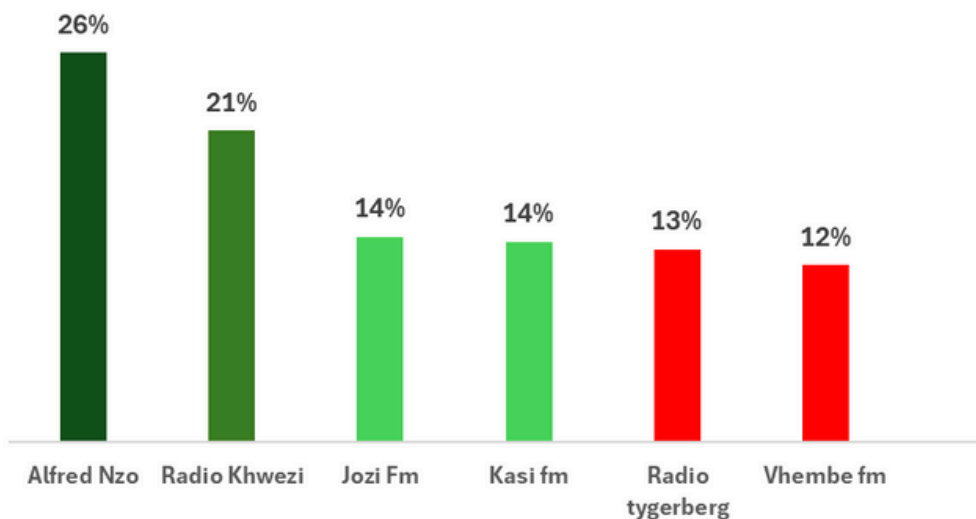
Percentage of coverage (Radio)

Figure 3: Media performance (Radio Stations)

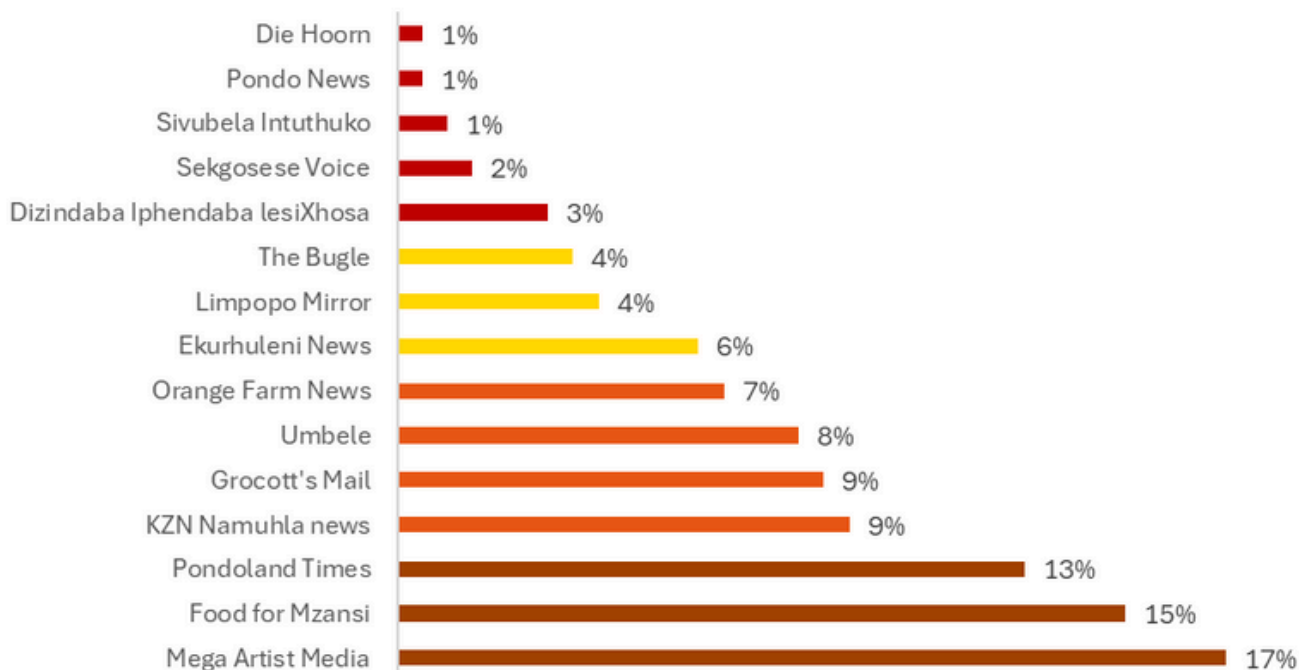### Percentage of coverage (Print and Online media)

Figure 4: Media performance (Print and online)

3.2 Article count over time

The graph below illustrates the distribution of election stories reported over the three-month monitoring period. The highest number of stories was recorded on May 30, 2024, the day after South Africa's National and Provincial Elections. Most stories on this day focused on voters casting their ballots and the voting process. This peak in coverage aligns with election logistics, which accounted for 19% of the total election-related stories and was the second most dominant topic as shown in Figure 7. It is important to note that a 0% on a graph does not indicate that no stories were reported on those days, but rather that the reported stories accounted for less than 1% of the total.
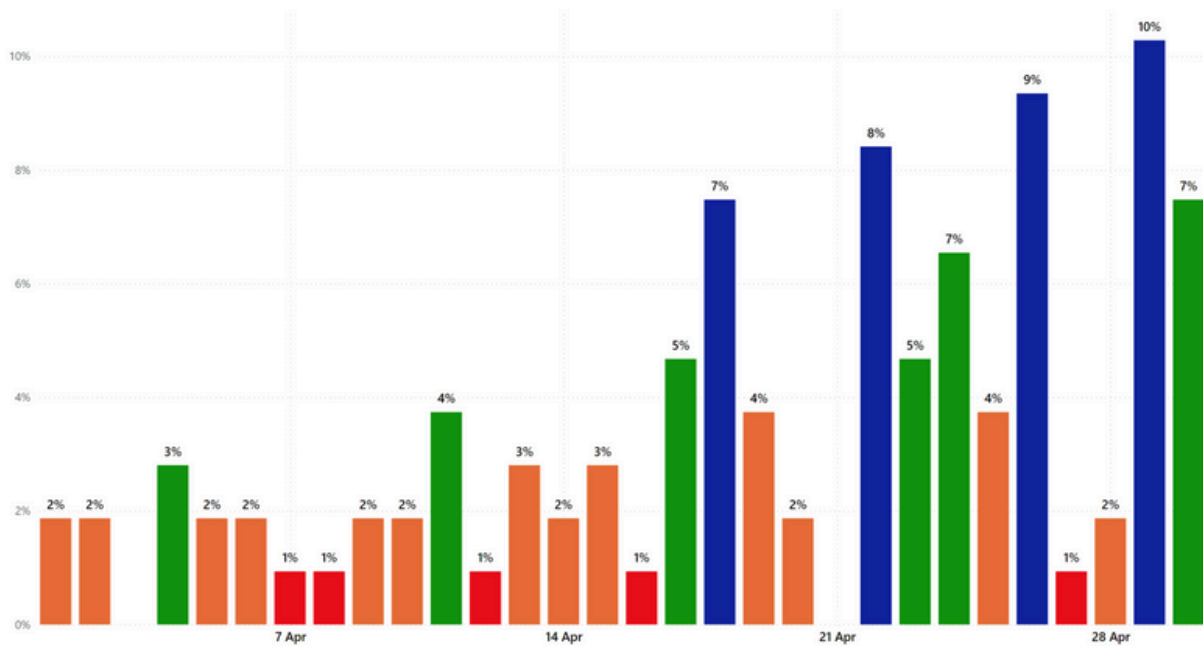

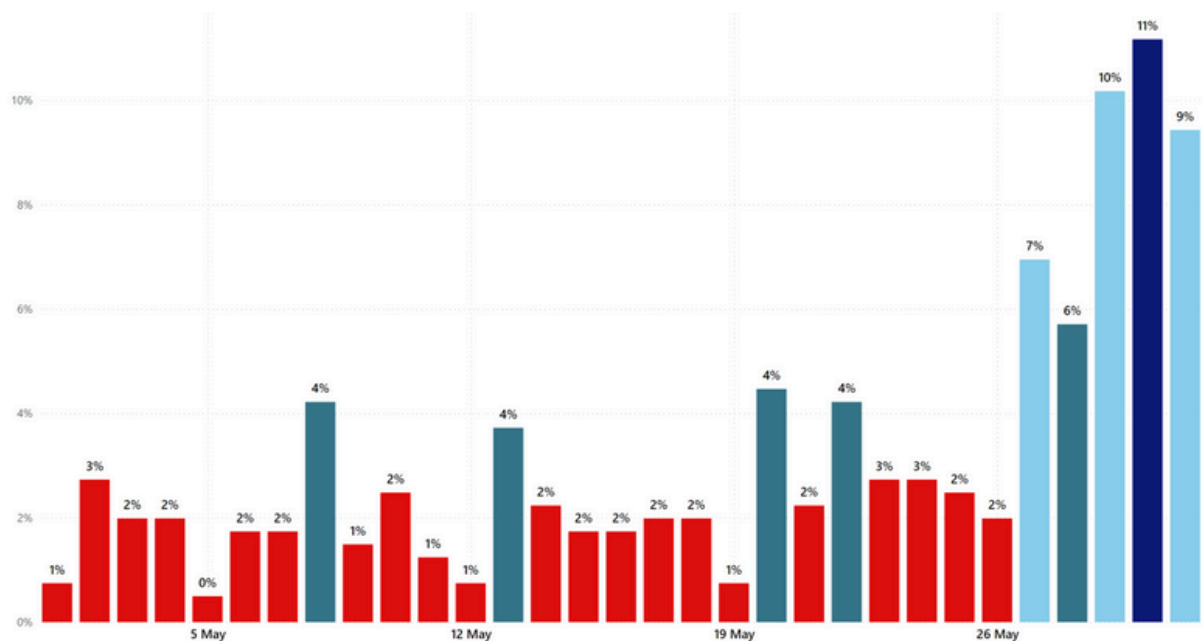**Figure 5 a: Daily percentage of coverage (April)**

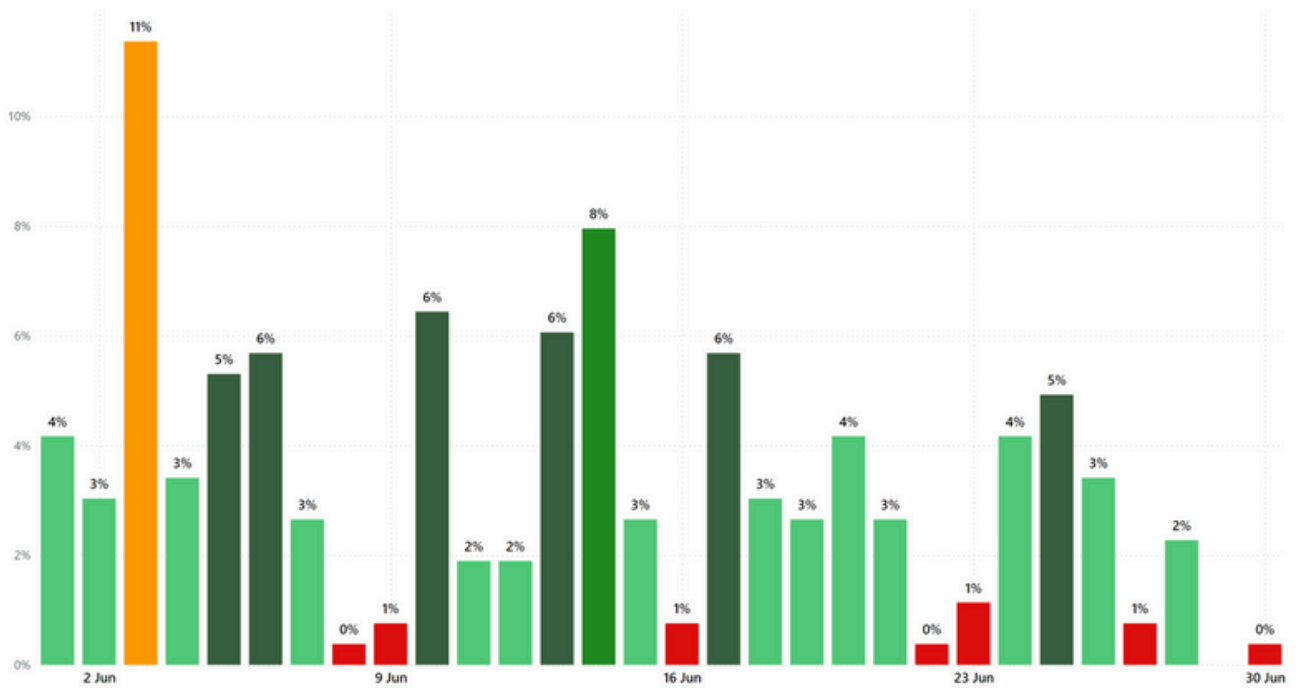**Figure 5 b: Daily percentage of coverage (May)**

Figure 5 c: Daily percentage of coverage (June)

3.3 Geographical representation in coverage

The regional coverage during elections should help the public understand key issues and ensure no areas are marginalised or overlooked.
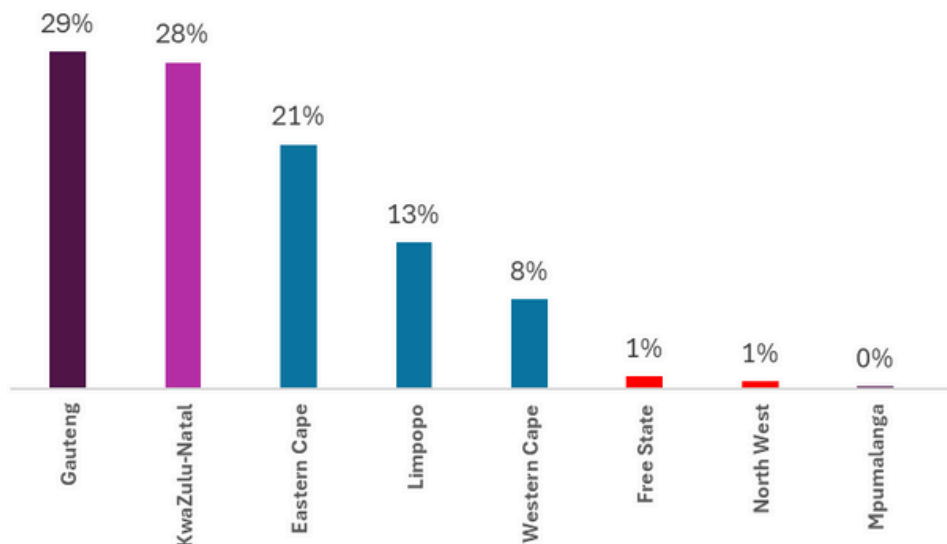
Geographical representation of coverage

Figure 6: Geographical representation of coverage (No stories recorded from Northern Cape from the monitored media)

The graph shows that election coverage by community media was concentrated in three provinces: Gauteng (29%), KwaZulu-Natal (28%), and the Eastern Cape (21%).

Only selected media outlets from five provinces were monitored for this research. As a result, the data presented for the provinces not monitored reflects coverage from the monitored media and not from media based in the excluded provinces.

3.4 Top 10 topics

A crucial aspect of our monitoring process includes examining what topics dominate in media coverage. This reveals not only the media outlets' news values but also the agendas of political parties and candidates as expressed in their campaigns. Each election-related item was assigned a single core topic by MMA. The graph below highlights the top 10 topics identified during the monitoring period which had a combined coverage share of 83% out of all the 20 election-coded topics assigned for this research.

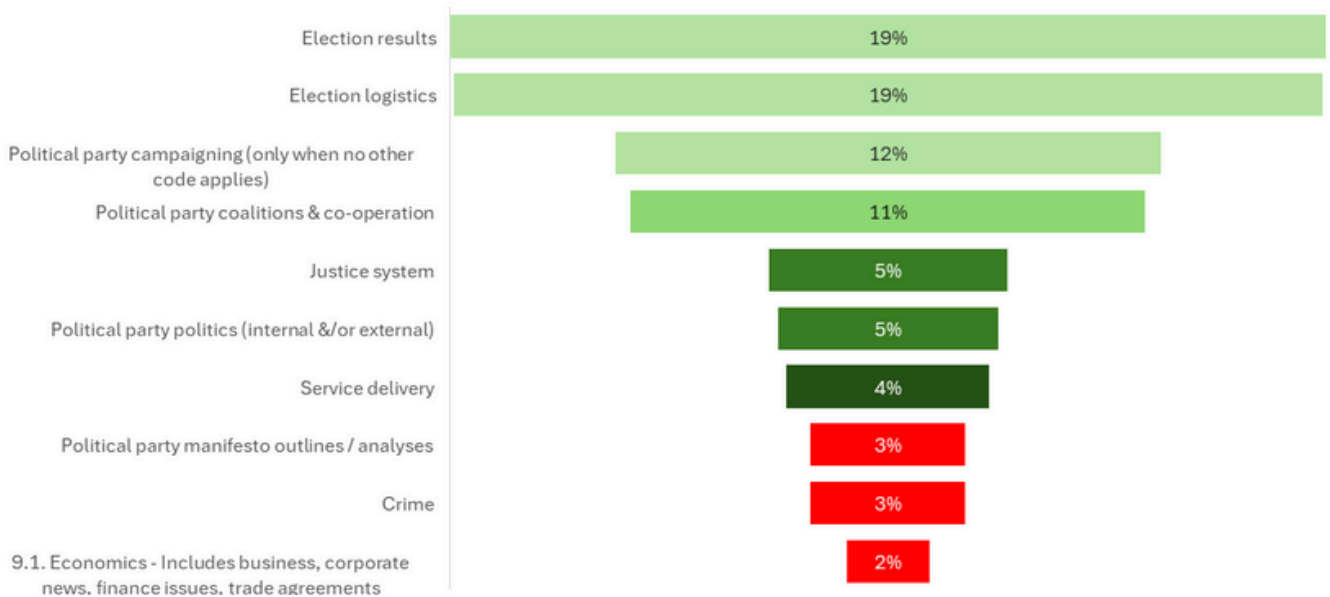Top 10 Topics (which is 83% of all coded elections topics)

Topic	%
Election results	19%
Election logistics	19%
Political party campaigning (only when no other code applies)	12%
Political party coalitions & co-operation	11%
Justice system	5%
Political party politics (internal &/or external)	5%
Service delivery	4%
Political party manifesto outlines / analyses	3%
Crime	3%
9.1. Economics - Includes business, corporate news, finance issues, trade agreements	2%

Figure 7: Top 10 topics during the elections

Community media is expected to report on and reflect the challenges faced by the communities they serve. However, these findings reveal that their focus was primarily on "election results" and "election logistics", topics that do not directly address the needs or concerns of community members.

To better serve their audiences, community media should prioritise reporting on issues that directly impact their communities – issues such as service delivery, which received only 4% of the coverage.

Notably, poverty was among the least-covered topics as can be seen in Figure 8 below, despite being highly relevant during elections. As one of the most unequal countries in the world, according to the **Inequality Trends in South Africa report by Stats SA**, poverty should have been a central focus of election coverage. Community media should have made a concerted effort to spotlight such critical issues, given their significant impact on community development.

Less covered topics	Percentage
International politics	1%
Land	1%
Education	1%
Demonstrations/Protests	0%
Poverty	0%
Health	0%
Human rights	0%
Family	0%
Gender	0%

Figure 8: Topics that were less reported

We also analysed the top 10 topics over time, as shown in the graph below. In April 2024, election logistics and political party campaigns each received 3% of the coverage, reflecting their dominance during the election period. In May 2024, election logistics took center stage, likely due to final preparations by the IEC. By July 2024, coverage had shifted to political party coalitions, driven by discussions on the potential and subsequent formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU), as no party secured enough votes to form a government independently.
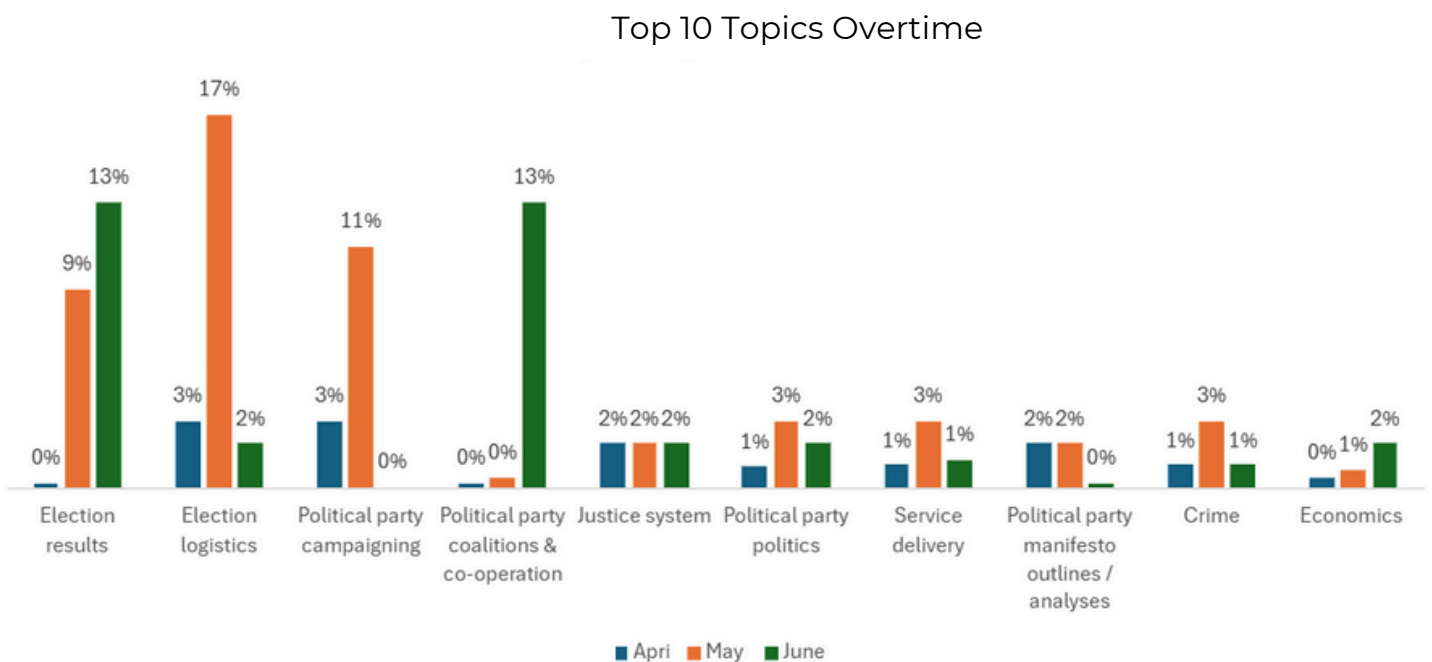
Top 10 Topics Overtime

Figure 9: Top 10 Topics overtime

3.5 Top 10 political parties' representation

Additionally, MMA analysed the political parties most frequently represented in community media coverage. The top 10 parties are shown in the graph below.
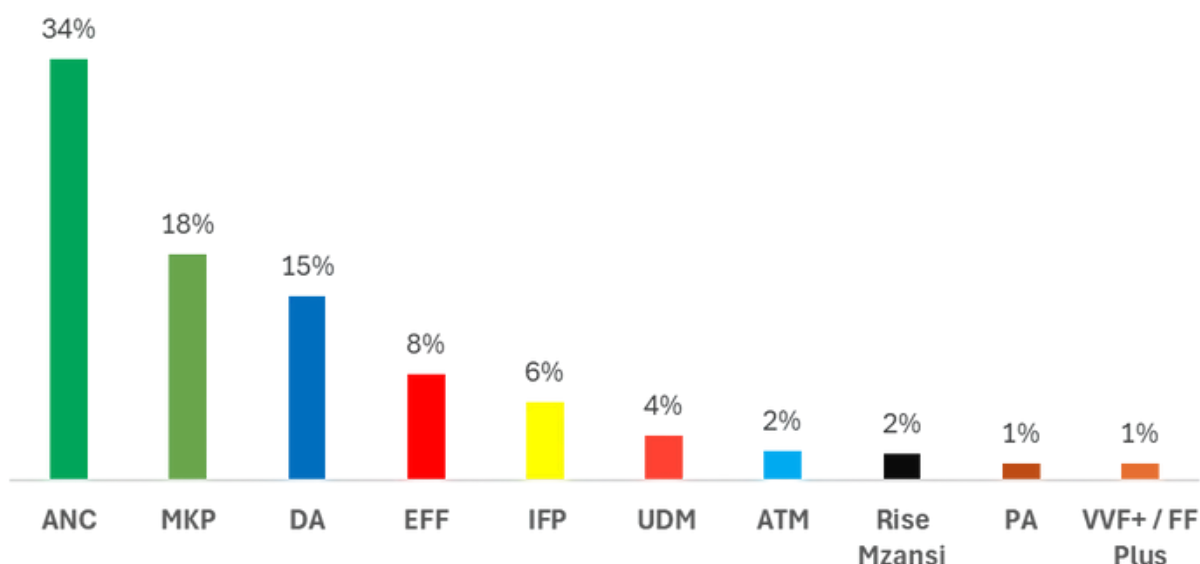
Top 10 Political parties

Figure 10: Top 10 political parties during the election

In the 2024 National and Provincial Elections, **52 political parties contested**. Our analysis shows:

- 10 political parties made up 92% of all sources.
- The remaining 42 parties and Independents accounted for just 8% of the voice share.

These findings highlight that community media did not sufficiently provide equitable election coverage to all political parties and Independents, limiting their opportunity to share their mandates and manifestos.

MMA also analysed political party representation over time and Figure 12 below shows that the ANC, during the entire monitoring period, dominated coverage. For instance, in April 2024, the ANC had 7% of the coverage, followed by the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) with 3% each. In May, ANC coverage peaked at 18%, with MK Party and DA at 10% and 9% respectively. In June, ANC received 14% of the coverage, followed by MK Party and DA with 8% and 5%.
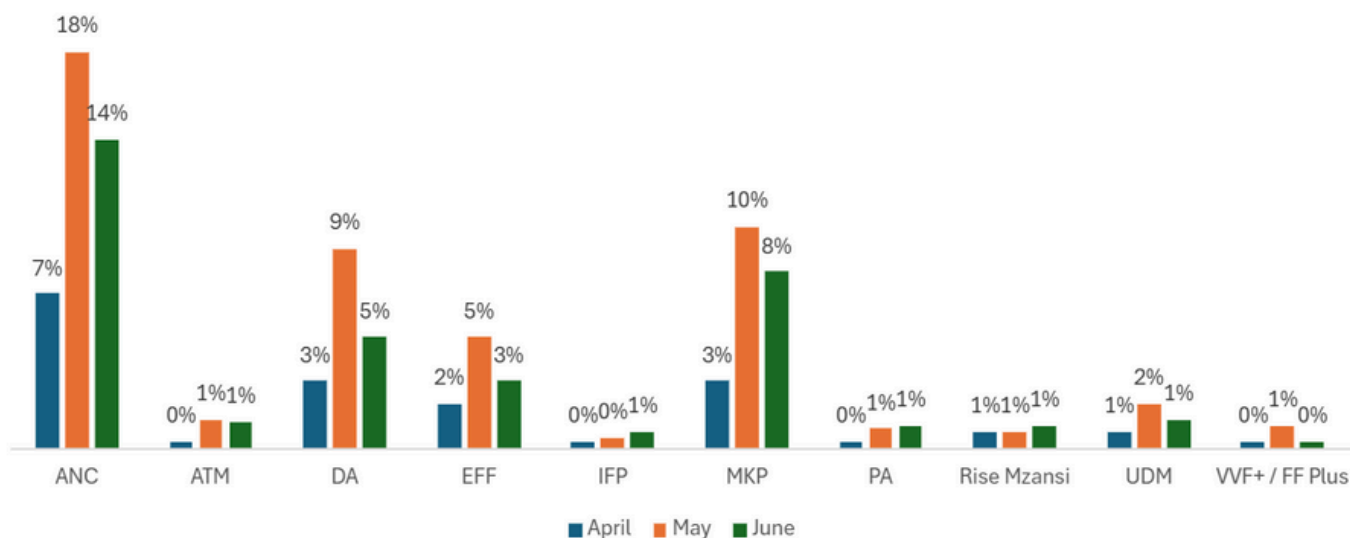
Top 10 Political parties overtime

Figure 11: Top 10 political parties overtime

3.6 Which sources dominated the coverage?

Quality journalism relies on diverse sources across various topics. In our media monitoring, MMA defines a "source" as any individual directly or indirectly quoted, pictured or mentioned in a news story. A total of 11,728 sources were captured using Dexter.

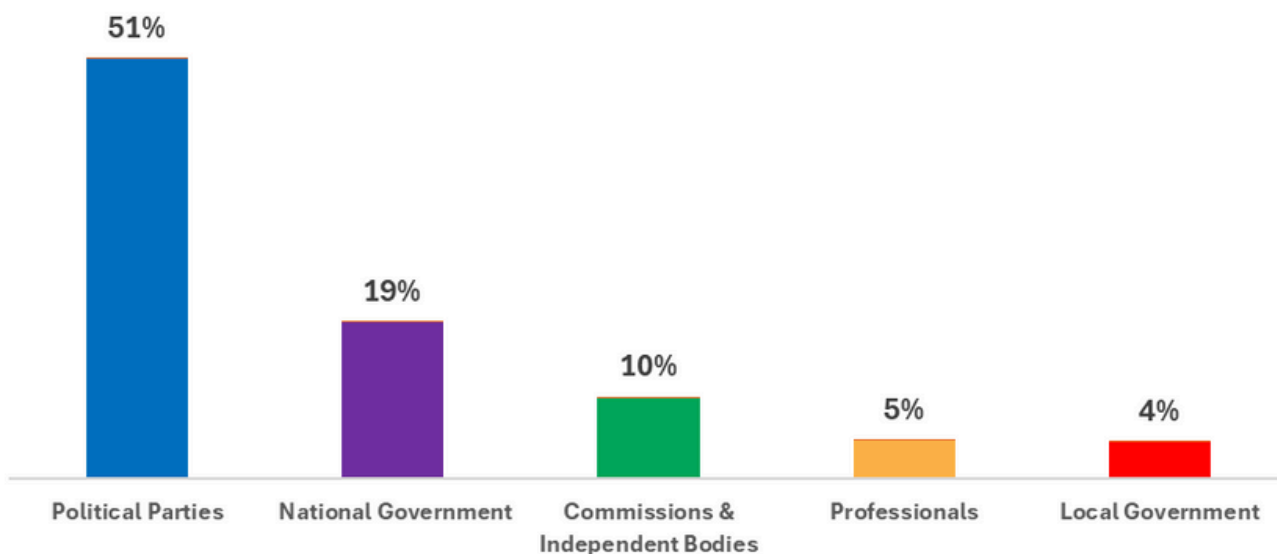Top 5 Sources by Affiliation (which is 89% of all coded source affiliations)

Figure 12: Top 5 Sources by affiliation during the elections

Our analysis revealed the following:

- 89% of the 11,728 sources were affiliated to the top five affiliations shown above in Figure 10 namely, Political Parties, National Government, Commissions & Independent bodies, Professionals and Local government. Commissions and Independent bodies include the IEC.
- Political parties dominated the coverage at 51%.
- The affiliation, Professionals had a voice share of 4% and these included sources such as health workers, social workers and teachers, etc.
- Meanwhile, other affiliations such as the Public, Experts, Unions, Justice System and more etc shared the remaining 11%.
- The voice of the public was not audible enough to feature on the top 5 list of sources by affiliation as it only had a voice share of 2%.

Community media should prioritise sources that represent the voices and interests of the communities they serve. The findings indicate that the top 5 sources by affiliation during the 2024 National and Provincial Elections did not include significant representation from community members. This suggests that the elections were more focused on political parties at the expense of the electorate.

3.7 Gender breakdown of sources

In addition to sources in general, the specific gender split in sources was also considered.
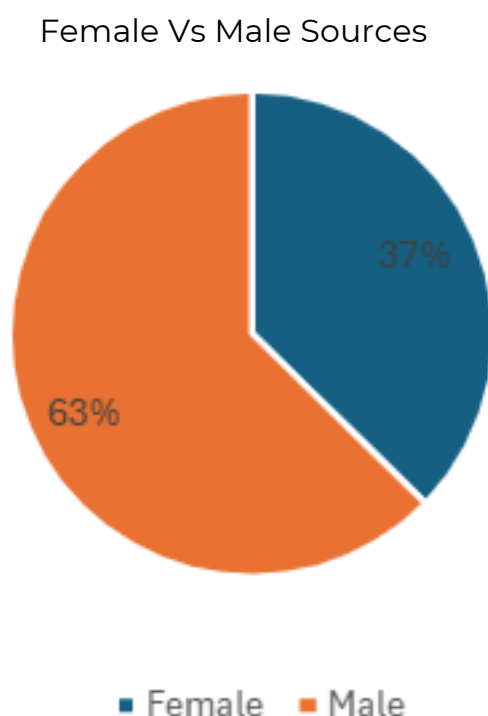
Female Vs Male Sources

Figure 13: Female vs Male sources in coverage

The results show that females only featured in coverage of the National and Provincial Elections as sources at only 37%, compared to the 63% recorded for male sources. This disparity is not new as all our **research** shows media's preference of male sources.

The findings do not align with the country's demographics, as females make up approximately 51% of the population, according to **the 2024 Mid-Year Population Report**. Additionally, **more females registered to vote than males, according to the IEC.** This then begs the question, why did community media prioritise male sources over females?

MMA also tracked how sources were represented over time and the graph below shows males dominating the voice share throughout the three-month monitoring period.
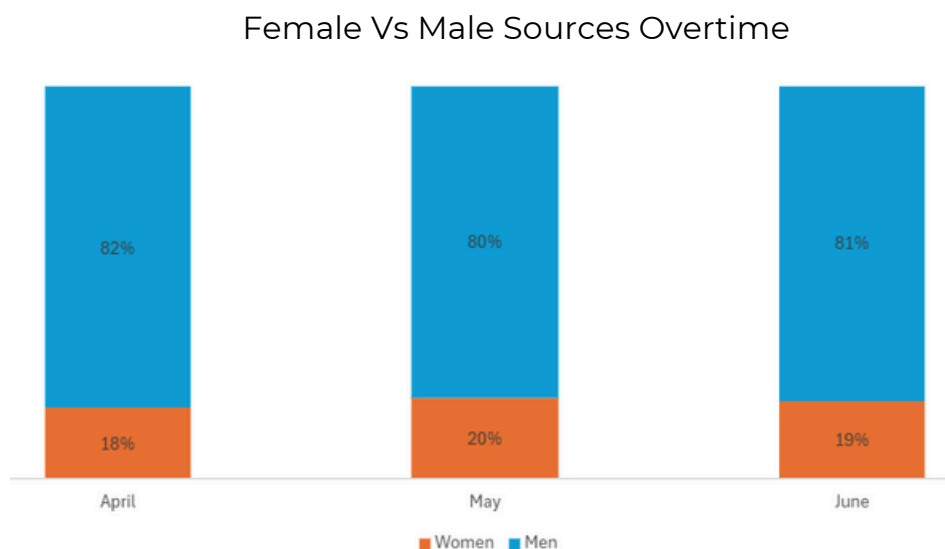
Female Vs Male Sources Overtime

Figure 14: Female vs Male sources overtime

3.8 Fairness in coverage

For the past 30-plus years, MMA has developed and refined criteria to assess fairness and bias in media coverage. Our default position is to assume that all news stories are balanced and impartial unless bias is clearly evident. While no media outlet is perfect, a single biased election story does not necessarily affect the overall balance.
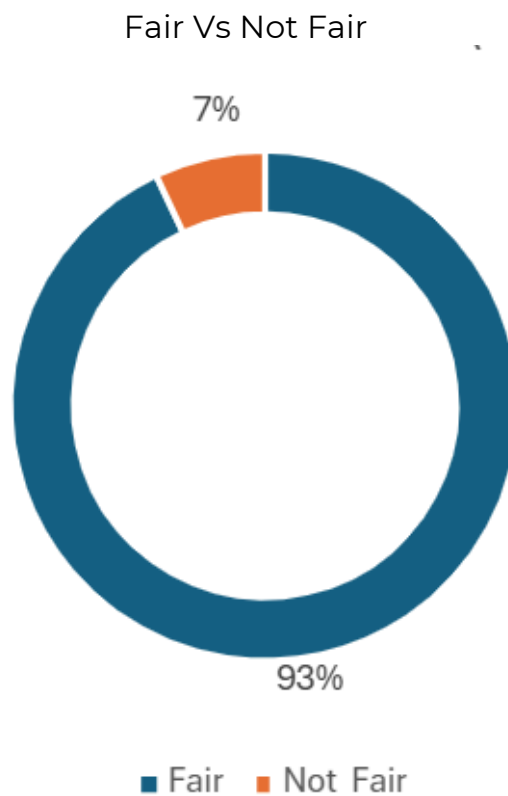
7%

93%

■ Fair ■ Not Fair

Figure 15: Fairness in coverage

The findings in the graph above show that 7% (54 stories) of all monitored stories had a bias evident.

The following criteria was used to assess bias:

- **Language** - where the language used in a news item clearly and distinctly favoured one party over another, or 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.

The graph below shows that from the 54 stories where bias was detected, bias by omission was the most common form of bias during the elections, followed by bias by presentation.

Community media are commended for their efforts in minimising excessive bias in their reporting. However, all media should aim for zero-tolerance to bias to ensure fair and more equitable representation of all involved.

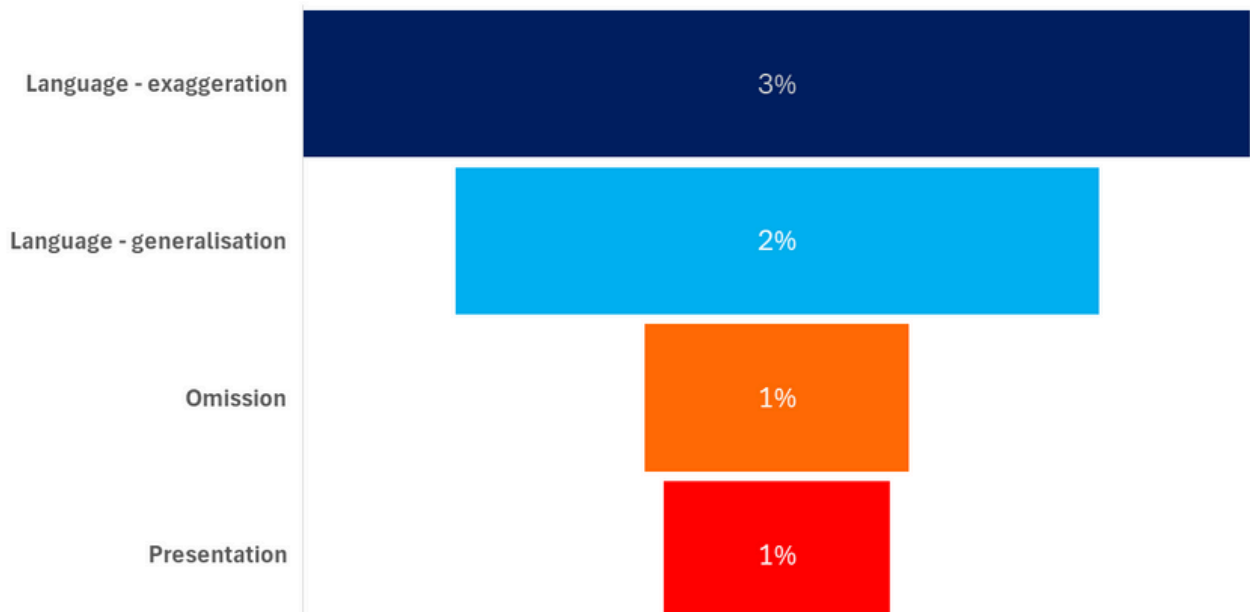Types of bias in the stories (from 54 stories that were not fair)

Figure 16: Types of bias in coverage

3.9 Quality of the information in the stories

Journalists should provide all relevant details when reporting, especially during elections. This is crucial for helping audiences make informed decisions when exercising their democratic rights and choosing which political parties or candidates to vote for.
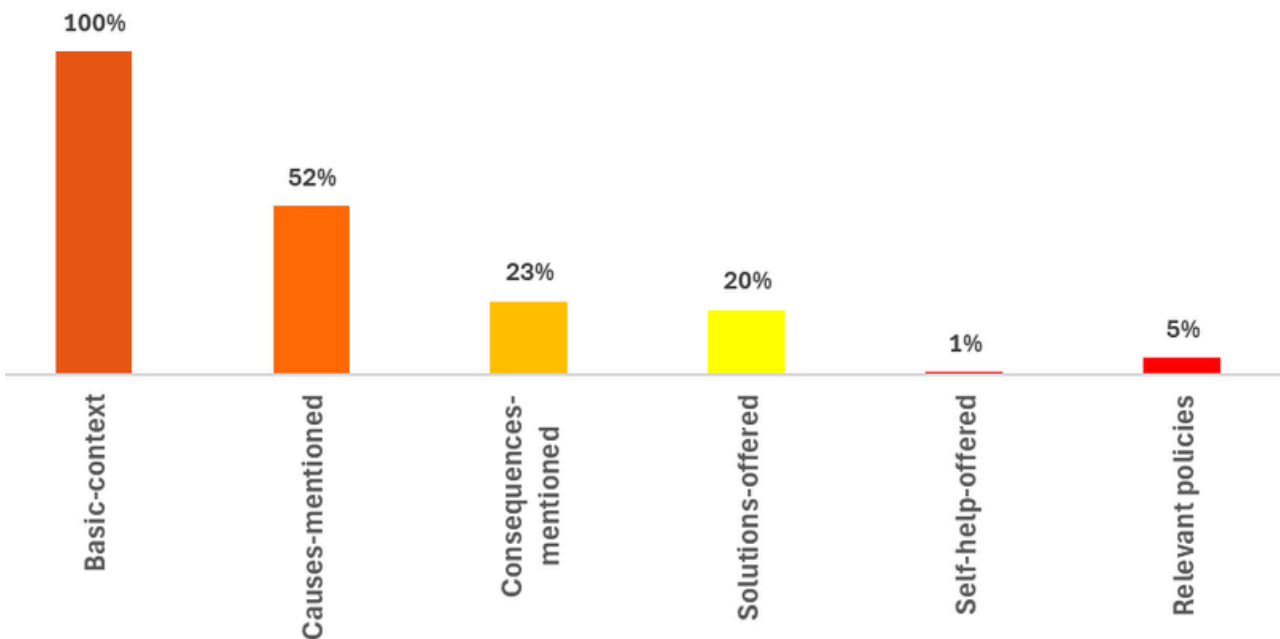
Quality of Information in the stories

Figure 17: Quality of information in the stories

Our findings show that the media provided basic information in all election-related stories and that just over half of the stories explained why the reported event was happening.

One of the most concerning findings is the lack of solutions explored in the stories. During elections, the media are expected to interrogate politicians or candidates on how they plan to address citizens' challenges, but this was largely missing.

The quality of the stories, as shown in the graph, suggests that community media was not sufficiently community or citizen-focused. Only 20% of the stories offered solutions, whereas ideally, all stories should have explored how political parties and candidates planned to tackle community issues.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024 South African National and Provincial Elections presented an opportunity for community media to play a critical role in informing and engaging voters, particularly in light of significant electoral reforms such as the inclusion of independent candidates and the introduction of a three-ballot system. The comprehensive media monitoring exercise conducted by MMA offers valuable insights into how effectively community media fulfilled this responsibility.

The analysis revealed that community media produced a total of 774 election-related stories, a figure substantially lower than that of larger media entities like the SABC and privately-owned media. This limited coverage can be attributed to resource constraints and operational challenges, which hindered comprehensive reporting. Radio platforms dominated the election coverage within community media, accounting for 75% of the stories, with Alfred Nzo Radio leading in content volume.

Geographically, coverage was predominantly concentrated in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Eastern Cape. The media's focus largely centered on election results and logistics, with minimal attention to critical community-centric issues such as poverty, service delivery, health, and education. This misalignment suggests a gap between community media content and the pressing concerns of their audiences.

Source diversity was another area of concern. Political parties overwhelmingly dominated media sources, accounting for 51% of voices, while the general public constituted a mere 2%. Additionally, the representation of female sources was disproportionately low at 37%, despite women comprising a majority of the population and voter registration. This imbalance points to the need for community media to amplify diverse voices, particularly those of women and ordinary citizens.

In terms of fairness, 7% of the stories exhibited bias, primarily through omission and presentation. While community media demonstrated commendable efforts in minimising overt bias, striving for complete impartiality remains essential. Moreover, the quality of information provided was basic, with limited exploration of solutions to community challenges. Only 20% of the stories addressed how political parties planned to tackle these issues, indicating a lack of in-depth, issue-focused reporting.

To enhance the impact and effectiveness of community media in future elections, several recommendations are proposed:

- **Resource Support:** Increased funding and capacity-building initiatives to expand coverage and improve reporting quality.
- **Focus on Community Issues:** Prioritise reporting on pressing community concerns such as poverty, service delivery, and education.

- **Diverse Source Inclusion:** Actively seek and include voices from the general public and underrepresented groups, particularly women.

- **Training on Fair Reporting:** Implement training programs to reinforce unbiased and balanced reporting standards.

- **Solution-Oriented Journalism:** Encourage journalists to engage candidates on actionable solutions to community challenges.

By addressing these areas, community media can better fulfil their role in supporting a well-informed electorate and strengthening South Africa's democratic processes.

Contact us.

✉ musar@mma.org.za or

listerr@mma.org.za

☎ 011 788 1278

🌐 www.mediamonitoringafrica.org

🐦 @Mediamattersza

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