

26. Media's coverage of the elections

Ronesh Dhawraj

South Africans celebrated 25 years of democracy on 27 April 2019. There is no doubt that elections are a vibrant time in a country's political development. Although forming only one aspect of the democratic project, elections and campaigning force politicians vying for office to demonstrate to citizens whether they are attuned or not to some of the most pressing issues facing society. Politicians also need an avenue to articulate these issues for citizens to remain informed and have the necessary information needed to make sound vote choices. Without such information, citizens will struggle to distinguish among the different available political options. This responsibility becomes even more pronounced during national, provincial and local government elections. Since the ushering in of democracy in 1994, the country has witnessed six general (national and provincial) elections and five local government elections.

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As a constitutional chapter nine body, South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is tasked with a number of responsibilities when it comes to organising and managing complex elections. Perhaps the most important test for any electoral body, at the end of an electoral cycle, is the declaration that says the poll was 'free, fair and credible'. Of the 19 functions the IEC is expected to fulfil, seven relate directly to the dissemination of information, promotion of knowledge and communication, and liaising with different stakeholders. Integral to this mammoth task is the IEC's ability to promote the right conditions for credible elections to take place, maintain an updated national voter's roll, and ensure sufficient stakeholder engagement and voter education happens before, during and after an election (South African National Editors' Forum, 2019). While it is true that the IEC is charged with lubricating this information-sharing process, it is the 'fourth estate' – the media – that serves as the main repository, facilitator and conduit of these electoral voter information and voter education drives.

By implication, the media serves as an integral link between political party, politician and ordinary voters; and thus can be hugely influential in the shaping of perceptions and final voter decision-making (Duncan, 2014). In this respect, the media has four key nation-building roles to play in a democracy, namely the provision of accurate information, provision of fair

and balanced analysis, facilitating a forum for open debate and discussion, and performing a 'watchdog' posture to ensure all players play fairly according to established electoral laws and regulations (South African National Editors' Forum, 2019). Here's a snapshot of the media's many responsibilities when covering electoral cycles:

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| Disseminate accurate information | Registration information, the voting process, how elections work, the code of conduct, counting, results, seat allocations, objections, appeals, roles and responsibilities of the IEC and Electoral Court, information on the different political parties, their candidates and election manifestos; and information on election monitors and observers |
| Analysis and debate | Deeper analysis of each party's manifesto and promises, past performance of governing political parties, facilitating debate and discussion of competing viewpoints; and providing a platform for minority voices |
| Watchdog role | Scrutinising political party promises, ensuring political contenders are playing within relevant legislations and rules; and factually reporting on any electoral breaches |

Source: Sanef: National and provincial elections 2019

At the time of the country's first all-race vote in 1994, South Africa's media landscape had limited print and broadcast choices. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), as an example, remained a dominant broadcast player with multiple television and radio channels that enjoyed maximum penetration levels in terms of language narrowcasting. This broadcast monopoly only began changing in 1995/96 with the opening-up of the airwaves, and the establishment of the Independent Broadcasting Authority – the precursor to the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa). Part of Icasa's responsibility is to issue licences and allocate spectrum to aspirant broadcasters. The organisation has since approved and distributed hundreds of licences to national, provincial and community broadcasters in a bid to diversify the South African radio and television media space even more (Lebone, 2017). This presence of hundreds of other media players meant that citizens were spoilt for choice when it came to multiple sources of election-related information. Additionally, this information could be received in languages other than English, considered a huge advantage especially when attempting to access fragmented

audiences outside the bigger cities and towns.

The SABC, though, remained a dominant disseminator of electoral information with its massive media footprint in terms of geography and language reach. SABC radio, for example, was still the primary news source for South Africans to access first-hand election information in their mother tongue. Today, SABC radio – language-based stations included – commands an overwhelming audience share despite relentless competition from community and commercial private players (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). This is perhaps the reason the SABC is indeed heavily courted around election season. Politicians are fully cognisant that radio has a greater chance of delivering their message to the right target audience. Another reason for radio's importance during elections in South Africa was the fact that television advertising was not permitted between 1994 to 2009 (Mail & Guardian, 2009). Politicians and political parties relied mostly on radio and print political advertising (Duncan, 2009 and 2014).



Plenty has changed since the landmark court ruling permitting television political advertising for the 2009 general elections. While South Africa has been slow on adopting a digital-styled campaigning trajectory, the country's two dominant political players, namely the African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance (DA) did experiment with this, albeit cautiously, as early as 2009. Dhawraj (2013), for example, showed how current DA Federal Chairperson, Helen Zille used Facebook extensively to cement her brand and that of her party in the 2009 provincial and national elections. Her Facebook page – Dhawraj (2013) argued – was even more popular than the DA's own page in terms of comments, followers and 'likes'. Social media only began to seriously penetrate South African election cycles from 2014 onward. By this time, other political players apart from the ANC and DA, began harnessing the wide-reaching powers of social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to tap into additional pockets of potential voting constituencies. Today, Twitter is viewed as an all-important political communication medium by a multitude of South African politicians, including Zille, and the Economic Freedom Fighters' (EFF) Julius Malema. Zille, for example, has 1.4 million Twitter followers, while Malema boasts approximately 2.7 million followers (Dhawraj, 2019).

Aside from being a blessing to politicians, one of the biggest

advantages of social media is how it has simplified the work of media houses and deadline-chasing journalists. With political leaders criss-crossing the length and breadth of the country interacting with local communities, media editors are constantly confronted with bold editorial decisions on what to cover, who to cover and why him or her over another politician. Resources, such as recording equipment, travel to the destination, and human resource capacity are key determinants in the editorial decision-making process too as media houses cannot be expected to be everywhere. Thankfully, with the onset of social media avenues such as Twitter and Facebook on which most media institutions have a presence, the issue of resources is easily addressed by the media often taking live feeds and/or following that political party's own posts. Such material is then thrust into the public sphere for all and sundry to use, including sound files, video footage and still imagery. Often, key quotes from politicians are lifted straight from their social media accounts for reproducing on media reports.

This option is not without its fair share of challenges. Easy access to news and live feeds from political parties also means that ordinary citizens are empowered to be publishers themselves – without the necessary gatekeeping to verify such information first. Internet-enabled phone access adds to this dilemma too, sometimes leading to the instantaneous spread of so-called 'fake news'. This variation of social media journalism around election campaigns also means that media reports are often communicated without the relevant understanding of legislation or the applicable rules and regulations around elections (Duncan, 2014 and 2019). Furthermore, the lack of institutional memory has a knock-on effect when it comes to the absence of providing context, and a deeper understanding when tackling more complex issues at play. Journalism, as a result, becomes superficial with 'citizen journalists' rushing to 'break' the story first in a quest to get more retweets, likes, followers, and online praise.

As part of its broadcast regulatory functions, Icasa is charged with ensuring the electoral playing field is fair as possible in the lead-up to, during and after any major election. During the 2016 local government elections, for example, the body again had to monitor the electoral landscape for possible breaches by broadcasters. Part of its duties was to monitor election compliance of 104 different radio and television broadcasters, comprising national, free-to-air, and community stations. For Icasa, this number was "significantly representative" of overall licensee coverage (Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, 2016). Icasa, additionally, observed which issues penetrated the electronic media space during the whole election phase (pre and post the 2016 Local Government Election (LGE)). Notable issues and/or themes which surfaced included service delivery, government wastage, the economy, Nkandla and ANC corruption, by-elections, the Public Protector, state capture allegations, local government matters such as nepotism, lack of accountability, and inaccessibility of local officials, the #feesmustfall campaign, education, the EFF's political gestures, a stronger opposition, and conversations around the country's vulnerable metros (Independent Communications Authority of

South Africa, 2016).

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is another body which regularly tracks media developments around elections. Unlike Icasas's 2016 LGE report - which focused solely on broadcast media - MMA tracked a wide cross-section of media outlets, including traditional and non-traditional platforms in that poll. Print media platforms, totalling 51, were observed, all of which were naturally absent from Icasas's report of electronic radio and television broadcasters.

The MMA report also confirmed the ANC and DA's persistent dominance of the South African media environment in the 2016 elections. While the ANC received the most attention across the media spectrum (50.5%), the DA was second (19%). Combined, the parties took up 69.5% of all election-related news between 1 June and 31 July 2016. Furthermore, this hegemonic command of this electoral media space meant that ANC and DA politicians continued to set the agenda instead of ordinary voters and other political parties.

South Africa will continue to be a fascinating country to observe when it comes to electoral voting behaviours. Despite not being an ideal research subject for the study of voter media effects because of persistent race-based voting, compared to issue-based vote choices (Ferree, 2011; Duncan, 2014), the country nonetheless provides a unique lens through which the

concepts of race, identity and the so-called liberation narrative can still be examined.

Three defining moments have characterised the role of the media and how its role has changed when it comes to election coverage. These are the liberalisation of the airwaves in the mid-1990s, the introduction of television advertising in 2009, and the adoption of simultaneous digital political communication strategies for election campaigning since the 2009 general elections. While South Africa is far from fully and energetically embracing digital election campaigning like other modern democracies, its use in past electoral cycles has demonstrated that social media election campaigning will continue to be an important aspect of the media bouquet of politicians and political parties. With mobile telephony added to the picture, voters will continue to be accessed via their hand-held mobile phones giving politicians first-hand access to potential voters at any time of the day 24-7. This becomes especially true and significant considering that South Africans are poised to go to the ballot box in the 2021 local government elections and 2024 national and provincial elections. Media outlets, from both traditional and non-traditional platforms, will begin to assert their hold even more on the way voters receive electoral information, and, concomitantly, act on those primed voting cues.

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Ronesh Dhawraj is a specialist politics researcher with the public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). He is the provincial news editor of the SABC's KwaZulu-Natal newsroom, managing the daily operations of two bulletin desks, two current affairs platforms and the provincial radio and television newsgathering news teams. Having worked across print, radio, television and digital media platforms, Ronesh is also regularly used as an in-house political commentator, notably around elections and major political events. Holding a National Diploma: Journalism from the ML Sultan Technikon (now Durban University of Technology), he also holds a Masters degree and a doctorate in political communication from the University of South Africa. Ronesh has published chapters on South Africa's by-elections for a book conceptualised on the 2011 local government elections, and for another book on using social media data for research purposes.

