MONITORING THE MEDIA: A SHIFT FROM VERTICAL TO HORIZONTAL MONITORING.

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ABSTRACT

The Media Monitoring Project (MMP) was the leading organisation monitoring the total output of news in radio, television and print before and during South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994. The main objective of the MMP was to monitor the vertical top-down distribution of information from powerful media institutions to citizens many of whom were first-time voters, the majority illiterate, unfamiliar with the concept of human rights and not accustomed to the language of democracy.

After the elections the MMP has had to change its role from vertical to horizontal monitoring and to observe the equal distribution of information TO all citizens, and FROM all citizens, and ensure that channels of access are available to all citizens. As Hamelink states:

"Conventional human rights thinking focuses on the vertical state-citizen relation. This ignores the possibility that concentration of power in the hands of individuals can be as threatening as state power. Whenever citizens pursue different economic interests, individual human rights will be under serious threat. Citizens also need to be protected from each other" (Hamelink: 12).

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This paper describes the development of the MMP from a vertical to a horizontal mode of monitoring.

HISTORY OF THE MMP

From the time that the Nationalist government assumed power in 1945 the broadcast media have been perceived to be the voice of the state. When television was finally introduced in 1976, state skills in

utilising the broadcast media for propaganda purposes had become finely tuned. However, little consistent monitoring of radio and television was undertaken although several newspapers expressed concern about the disproportionate time devoted to editorialising, as against hard news, in SABC broadcasts.

A survey reported by *The Star* newspaper as early as 1976 (Anon A, 1976) found that South African cabinet ministers were getting nearly 10 times more exposure on television than spokespersons for all the country's opposition parties combined. The survey found that:

> In 24 newscasts (nearly 8 hours of viewing time) cabinet ministers were featured 38 times for a total of 27 minutes. Compared with this, United Party spokespersons were featured 6 times, for a total time of about 2 minutes.

The survey went on to note some of the strategies used by SABC-TV:

* The promotion of government viewpoints by quoting its ministers and officials while generally not recording or inviting the views of its critics.

* The promotion of pro-government black spokespersons while ignoring black government critics.

* Using material that discredited foreign governments that were critical of apartheid.

* Giving prominence to violence, social discord, race problems and oppression elsewhere, while playing down similar problems related to the Nationalist government's policies.

* Promoting the spectre of Communism.

* Reporting on black-ruled countries in a way likely to create the impression that black rule is synonymous with violence, chaos and impoverishment.

The issue of state interference in news broadcasts was kept alive in the press during 1976. In 1977, with the prospect of an election to be held later in the year, Donald Woods, writing in *The Daily Dispatch*, stated:

> If you keep your eye on the television set you will find that the spokesmen of the pro-Nationalist 53 per cent of the white voters get something like 3 000 per cent more opportunity to express their political views on TV than the spokesmen of the anti-Nationalist 47 per cent (Anon B, 1977).

In 1977 a weekly television column, on the Box with *John van Zyl* started in *The Star* newspaper which was to consistently and critically analyze the output of SATV for fourteen years until 1991.

In the face of the upcoming election Rhodes University Journalism Department undertook a quantitative monitoring project in November 1977 under Professor Les Switzer (Anon C, 1977). This project was a

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response to various disturbing comments made by SABC executives including a leaked note circulated by Don Briscoe, Manager of Children's and Magazine programmes, which stated "programmes should follow government policy, SABC policy and department policy." Although Jan Schutte, Deputy Director Programmes, repudiated the statement, the suspicion lingered that the SABC slavishly followed party lines.

The Rhodes survey followed standard content analysis lines. News programmes totalling 75 minutes and 58 seconds were monitored and it was found that 47% of the time was devoted to Nationalist Party officials, and 34% of the time was devoted to the activities of the Nationalist party, a staggering 81 % total. The survey ends with the words:

If television is a prime source of information about candidates in a political campaign, one might well question how effectively SABC television is fulfilling this function in terms of the 1977 election in South Africa?

In 1989 the Institute for A Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA) commissioned the Media Studies Unit of the School of Dramatic Art of the University of the Witwatersrand to monitor the general elections. The resulting document (Van Zyl: 2) showed quite conclusively the nature and extent of the blatant support given to the Nationalist Party by SABC-TV. Sophisticated propaganda strategies were employed by SABC-TV news managers, backed by similar radio programmes.

THE BMP

Two years later, in 1991, partly as a result of the IDASA project, a concerted monitoring project, initiated and funded by Hylton Appelbaum of the Liberty Life Foundation, was started at the Media Studies unit of the University of the Witwatersrand. The intention was basically a "watchdog" one which would look for bias and propaganda in television news and in *Agenda* specifically. This reflected a feeling that in spite of the unbanning of the ANC and other parties and the release of Nelson Mandela the previous year, the news department of the SABC was still staffed by the same Total Onslaught warriors and that the news did not represent the realities of the new South Africa. For instance, resistance in the so-called homelands to corruption and repression was seldom reported. Instances of legitimate industrial action (usually referred to as "labour unrest") were systematically under-reported.

This initiative became known as the Broadcast Monitoring Project (BMP) and it began to issue statements regularly to the media about examples of biased reporting. It opted for a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, mode of analysis and

adopted as a model the methodology devised for monitoring the 1989 elections for IDASA. At first the monitoring was done in conjunction with the Broadcasting Commission of the Film and Allied Workers Organisation by Bronwyn Keene-Young. The first study was on the TV1 coverage of the plenary session of CODESA 1 in December 1991 which was submitted to the Codesa Working Group 1.

In January 1992 the BMP was represented at the Campaign for Open Media's "Free, Fair and Open Conference" and as a result monitored the SABC coverage of the whites-only referendum. This paper subsequently became a submission by the COM to Codesa Working Group 1 in early April. In May 1992 a second researcher, Lara Kantor, was appointed and by July 1992, an arrangement had been entered into with COM through which the researchers would be paid by Liberty Life and COM would assist in the distribution of the reports. In the hectic broadcasting negotiations that followed in 1993 between COM and others that resulted i.a. in the establishment of the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting and the appointment of a panel of eminent persons to select the new SABC Board, the European Community added considerable funding to the monitoring project through the COM.

This additional funding enabled the BMP to extend its monitoring activities. Although it had worked closely with the COM/CIB alliance and shared its democratic principles, it was decided that the BMP should be seen as independent and not aligned with any political party and on April 21st became an autonomous body.

It then began to train a team of monitors (drawn mostly from the cadet journalists at the *Weekly Mail*) and established regional teams in Natal and the Eastern Cape. Monitoring was extended beyond the main "white" English/Afrikaans television news on TV1 to the shorter news bulletins on the "black" CCV channel. This was soon extended to the four main black radio channels and ultimately to all of the radio channels and the main newspapers.

(Interestingly, the decision to monitor the English "liberal" press was greeted by some editors with some indignation as an infringement of journalistic freedom.)

The BMP now converted itself into the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) and began actively preparing for the task of monitoring the television coverage of the pre-election phase of the first democratic elections in South Africa. Funding was now supplemented by donations from various donors including the Canadian Embassy, the Australian Embassy and the Belgian government. Additional experts in media monitoring, like Professor Rodney Tiffen were seconded from Australian and Canadian universities.

The MMP deemed it to be of vital importance that all broadcast news and actuality should be monitored since South Africans had never had the chance to participate in democratic electoral procedures and it was essential that they should be fully informed about issues of national importance. At this stage there was a change of emphasis in the motivation of the MMP's activities. Not only would there be an analysis of news and actuality for bias and propaganda, but there would also be an account of events under-reported, or not covered at all.

In this the MMP reflected the simultaneous struggle in late 1993 and early 1994 of the Independent Forum for Electoral Education (IFEE) which was attempting to get the SABC to play a significant role in voter education. It was common knowledge that a low turn-out of first-time voters at the polls would favour the conservative and rightwing parties and the SABC was dragging its heels in providing free airtime for voter education programmes. IFEE, representing a coalition of some 40 democratic NGO's and civic organisations, created several committees to approve voter education scripts meant for both radio and TV. Through this procedure marginalised voters, like rural women, the disabled and prisoners would not be forgotten, and democratic principles of civic responsibility would be emphasised.

IFEE objected to the SABC's plans to produce and air voter education programmes that its staffers had written. Fresh in the mind of oppositional groups was a typical policy statement contained in the 1984 SABC Annual Report concerning the *Current Affairs* programme:

> The talks are offered as an SABC editorial in which, from a South African point of view, positive comment is made on the affairs of the day. The broad objectives are (1) to project a true picture of South African motives, politics, problems, achievements and goals; (2) to give constructive guidance to listeners on the innumerable situations which are continually developing at home an abroad and which affect the fate of the nation; and (3) to counteract influences which are hostile to South Africa and which seek to undermine the South African pattern of society.

The IFEE initiative had to intervene actively when the SABC's conservative partners (Die Vroue Federasie, Die Landbou Unie etc.) insisted on equal time for Afrikaans programmes that included emphasis on the right of voters NOT to vote! These partners also reflected the traditional political view of the Nationalist Party that there should be equal representation as a matter of course between black and white in spite of the 8 to 1 majority of blacks to whites.

The establishment of the Democracy Education Broadcast Initiative (DEBI) late in 1993, which was a coalition of representatives from IFEE and its members and the SABC and its supporters, marked an important step in attempting to bring together the state-supported broadcast media and the oppositional media groupings. At first there was some disruptive games-playing with the DEBI secretary (who happened to be a SABC employee) keeping inaccurate records of meetings and failing to supply minutes and agendas in time for meetings. But after the initial skirmishes a working relationship was negotiated that determined the amount of airtime and viewing time would be devoted to voter education, who would pay for this time, and, crucially, who would approve of the radio and television scripts before they were produced. It was decided that all scripts would be submitted to sub-committees of IFEE for approval or comment.

The important implication for the MMP was that a sort of pre-monitoring was already taking place in the area of voter education and that it could therefore devote most of its energies to monitoring the news on radio and television.

Mission statement

The original mission statement of the BMP arose from the need to assess the extent to which the SABC was fulfilling its obligations as a public broadcaster in terms of internationally accepted standards of promoting fairness, impartiality and diversity of opinions.

The BMP believed that the SABC should be informed by the ideals of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa which were fundamental to the reconstruction of the society. It acknowledged the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly Article 19:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes the hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

This, together with other Human Rights conventions like the 1978 UNESCO "Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media..." in its entirety were taken as forming the mission statement of the BMP.

In an internal document approved by the Board of Trustees at that time (Anon D, 1993:1) the BMP stated that it was essential that first-time voters be informed about issues of national importance and that it had set itself the task of analyzing news coverage and publicising the results in order to enhance public awareness about the manner in which the media were reporting the political situation. It stressed that it was particularly concerned with monitoring the news and current affairs output of the

publicly funded SABC radio and TV stations in view of its history of propaganda and being the mouthpiece of the Nationalist party.

The SABC with 8.8 million television viewers and 12.3 million daily radio listeners had a monopoly over the airwaves. In addition, since most South Africans were functionally illiterate and large sections of rural South Africa had limited access to newspapers, SABC radio news was often the sole source of information (and invariably judged to be accurate and impartial by those listeners.) Recognising that the SABC existed in a particular context and time in South African history the BMP noted Resolution 4.301 adopted in 1970 by the General Conference of UNESCO which states that the mass media can make a fundamental contribution to the furthering of international understanding and cooperation in the interests of peace and human welfare.

Since the SABC had played an active role in disseminating information which helped maintain the apartheid system it has an added obligation to redress past information imbalances. As Article 2 of the UNESCO Paris Declaration of 1978 states:

The mass media throughout the world, by reasons of their role, contribute to promoting human rights, in particular by giving expression to oppressed peoples who struggle against colonialism, neo-colonialism, foreign occupa-

tion and all forms of racial discrimination and oppression and who are unable to make their voices heard within their own territories.

Furthermore, the BMP believed that the SABC, as public service broadcaster was obliged to represent the social and political aspirations of the whole population. It had the obligation to "level the information playing field" by redressing racial, cultural and political myths propagated during the apartheid regime. Lastly, the SABC had historically been the propaganda arm of the Nationalist Party government. This had resulted in an imbedded "naturalised" news culture, so pervasive as to be invisible to the journalists involved it.

This meant that even sincere attempts to reform news reporting from within would result in cosmetic change at best. The BMP therefore had both an educative as well as monitoring role with regard to the SABC.

THE METHODOLOGY

At the outset it was decided not to use a purely quantitative method of news analysis, although it was realised that some empirical data would be necessary to contextualise the findings.

The shortcomings of the previous empirical work seemed obvious:

1) simply timing a news item using a stopwatch does not take into account

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the "frame" of the item. For instance, a short insert on a politician being soft on law and order during a crime wave could be highly damaging to his party, while a long piece featuring an unpopular politician could also be damaging,

2) placement tends to override the length of a news item. A short lead story carries more weight than a longer item further down the news,

3) grouping of stories creates an internal logical dynamic that overrides length. Three short stories on famine in various developing countries will outweigh a longer piece on a successful development programme,

4) one cannot measure or evaluate news stories that do not appear. Events in rural areas or affecting marginalised communities are spiked or do not become part of the cognitive map of the world that journalists have.

5) one has to consider the language used for its ideological luggage (with the example of "freedom-fighter/ terrorist".)

An eclectic qualitative methodology was devised that drew upon discourse analysis, semiotics, structuralism and communication theory. Drawing upon aspects of the IDASA document, the researchers assumed that:

> News is not simply a complete (or incomplete) description of facts, but a particular reconstruction of

reality according to the norms and values of some part of society, usually the part hat has power. It also assumes that news involves knowledge (short-term memory) and beliefs (long-term memory) (Van Zyl: 3).

The media are a constructed representation of the world based on a set of conventions which, particularly in the case of electronic media, enable it to give a very powerful illusion of immediate access to reality and truth. Within this, news is understood to be a particularly highly mediated product.

> News is not a neutral product .. it is a cultural artifact, a sequence of socially manufactured messages which carry many of the culturally dominant assumptions of our society (Eldridge, 1993).

These messages involve choices on the part of news editors, journalists, camera-persons on the one hand, as well as choices on the part of viewers/listeners on the other to create a preferred reading (Fiske & Hartley, 1978: 18). Such a preferred reading has much to do with the master narratives of society that have been cultivated by the media themselves.

Of course, there is always the possibility of subversive readings when the media messages conflict with the lived experience or the ideology of the viewer/listener. But such oppositional readings do not detract from the contours and

structures of the preferred meanings that are being cultivated by the media. Identification of the strategies is necessary, even though one does not subscribe to the behaviourist hypodermic theory of mass communication and suppose that persuasive messages will have the intended effect immediately.

However, in a situation where there is a monopoly over media institutions (as there still is over the SABC) and the press is divided between two giants (Times Media Limited and The Argus) and two smaller Afrikaans groups, there is reason for concern. One believes with Gerbner that through the "cultivation" of certain beliefs viewers and readers will be encouraged to understand news in the way the mass media have repeatedly and massively interpreted them.

Teun van Dijk contributes to this argument through his discussion of the relationship between news and the viewer/listener/reader's "cognitive script." He explains how choices of topics, images and words activate the receiver's selective understanding of a particular event. This selective understanding can be cultivated by repetition. The choice of the term "labour unrest" rather than "industrial action" will trigger a consumer society's fear of strikes, for instance. Van Dijk's study of the way that print media perpetuate racism (Van Dijk, 1988) looked at the use of language in the news and how the choice of language impinges on the content, in

fact, creates the content.

Van Dijk's work raises the issue of the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the media. Even though the BMP had opted for a qualitative approach, it was obvious that a certain amount of quantitative analysis would have to be done. Van Dijk uses the quantitative to control his mainly qualitative methodology. He used information gathered in his quantitative analysis of news reports on race related matters (frequency, placement, type of newspaper, incidence of certain words and terms, target audience etc) For instance, he counted the frequency of words used in 2 755 headlines from different British newspapers and then examined the choice of words in different situations relating to race, as well as the structure of the words in the headline. In general he found that words with negative associations were used to describe members of minority groups, while incidents of racism against minorities were described in a manner that tended to obscure responsibility for racist behaviour.

The Glasgow University Media Group adopted a similar approach, collecting empirical data on the television coverage of industrial action in Britain. From these statistics they drew conclusions about the prejudiced representation of striking workers. Aside from drawing on the empirical data, they also conducted a detailed analysis of language use and

visual codes.

The BMP drew upon this work that had been done to devise its own form of discourse analysis. The three keystone of this method were:

1) Finding and analyzing **critical events**.

A critical event is a narrative, more often found in news and actuality, but also occurring in other programmes. This narrative can either be directed to appear significant, or it can also be the product of an embedded news culture so naturalised as to be unconscious. Critical events are seen as newsworthy, coming easily over the "threshold of newsworthiness," however, they are often made to appear newsworthy through facilitation or manipulation. Placement as headline, repetition, dramatisation, length, intensity and use of language all help create a critical event. Beyond the genres of news and actuality a critical event can manifest itself, for instance, in an educational programme when white characters are invariably placed in a teaching role, and blacks are cast as the receivers of knowledge.

2) Determining the **"Flow of Approval."**

When a number of disparate news, actuality and other programmes repeat a certain idea (or variations on that idea) then a pattern is cultivated that tends to induce a certain mindset. This could be a long-term strategy stretching over a few years

or a short-term plan. A good international example would be the flow of approval created by CNN about the necessity for American intervention against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Another example would be the myth of the Total (Communist) Onslaught that was so carefully cultivated in South Africa during the regime of P.W. Botha.

3) Mapping the **"Spiral of Silence."**

Gaps and lacunae in the news can contribute to a spiral of silence in which unwanted news-makers or news-items are reflected less and less often in the news until they disappear from the news horizon completely. The "threshold of newsworthiness" becomes a very effective, unnoticeable form of censorship. An NGO or oppositional group like IDASA or COSATU finds itself mentioned less and less frequently, its leaders are seldom accessed, its policies become unknown and the whole structure is sent into obscurity, only to be revived, if the state so wishes, as a re-creation of the same media that marginalised it. The trouble is that during this "re-creation" period the media can choose to fabricate a whole new set of principles to foist on the public who have way of evaluating the truth of these principles.

In 1989 some of the effects that were achieved by the SABC through a use of the three strategies were the following:

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a) criminalising political or industrial protest. By attributing statements about violence to oppositional forces or by grouping sequences of violence together, a protest or a strike can be made to appear violent and illegal.

b) demonising a group or party. By suppressing statements about policy or strategy by a group, the group can be made to appear leaderless, without principles and this can stir deep atavistic feelings of terror in a population that fears mob-violence.

c) constructing the violent actions of a police state as legal. By reporting that the police were "forced to act" and showing the police to be the recipients, not the instigators of violence, suppression of any protest action is legitimised.

d) valorising the actions of the police through their sharp reaction to a "crime-wave." The SABC reporting many cases of drug-gang busts, ivory-smuggling rings caught and child-abusers rounded-up.

IMPLEMENTATION OF METHODO-LOGY; THE PROGRAMME OF ANALYSIS

A programmes of analysis was devised that consisted of:

a) comparative analysis

b) content analysis

c) discourse analysis.

Comparative analysis

Comparative sources can be divided into three areas:

1. Reports by local mainstream print media, independent radio as well as international media: These were assessed daily as means of comparing SABC news to other news sources in terms of priority, accuracy and detail.

2. Original statements released to the news media by organisations or individuals: These were assessed daily to evaluate how the SABC presented the original material.

3. Source monitoring - eyewitness accounts from BMP monitors who have attended newsworthy events: This firsthand knowledge is invaluable in assessing the SABC's representation of the event.

Content analysis

1. Bulletin as a whole.

a) What are the headlines?

b) What news appears in the bulletin?

c) What is the order of the items in the bulletin?

d) What is the length of each item?

2. Individual news items.

a) What information is included?

b) Nature, style and mode of graphics accompanying the story.

c) Nature, style and mode of visual footage.

d) Description of allegiance and status of organisations and individuals quoted

e) Relationship between actual quotes and attributed quotes.

f) Exclusions and omissions.

Discourse analysis

a) Ordering, selection and juxtaposition of items

b) Point of view.

c) Socially constructed implicit meanings in word usage ("freedom-fighter" vs "terrorist", the police "said" vs the demonstrators "alleged".)

d) Deliberate vagueness ("Three men died in a shootout with police")

e) Overcompleteness and unnecessary detail.("The marchers left a lot of litter lying around the Union Buildings which has yet to be cleared up," or "Patients were subjected to extreme discomfort while the nursing staff demonstrated for higher pay.")

f) Semantic strategies. Attribution and reversal, blaming the victim ("The Ciskei Defence Force then acted in self defence and shot back.") Unwarranted comparisons (following an item about malnutrition in SA with an item about Somalia.) Hyperbole ("The police are about to move in for the kill.")

g) US and THEM. The creation of favoured "in" and relegated "out" groups, political, cultural, national or global.

Process of analysis of news broadcasts

a) Each news broadcast is recorded and transcribed.

b) Information about each news item is noted (eg length, placement, graphics etc)

c) This is recorded on a logging sheet

d) Analysis of the broadcast to determine the agenda-setting of the SABC

e) Comparison of this news with other media reports and source monitoring

f) Factual accuracy of the SABC news report is evaluated.

g) Detailed discourse analysis of the previous quantitative data.

RESULTS OF THE MONITORING: Categories of news stories

The project chose three categories of news stories as the focus of the analysis.

During 1992 and 1993, political violence in South Africa soared. The violence involved political organisations as well as state structures and therefore had a profound impact on the progress of the constitutional negotiations process. The first category which the project focused on was news coverage of violence. This included an assessment of the presentation of the various players, the extent of the coverage given to violent incidents, the context provided to the causes of the violence and the manner in which perpetrators and victims of violence

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were portrayed on SABC.

The second category was an assessment of the representation of the political scenario in the country - particularly, the portrayal of the transition process. The coverage of the minority parliament, government and structures of apartheid such as the homelands and self-governing territories was also examined. This area of analysis laid the groundwork for the project's focus on the coverage of the election.

The third category was an analysis of how the SABC was responding to the changing socio-economic environment in the country. SABC coverage of various socio-economic issues, such as housing, social services, poverty, and labour was assessed in terms of the priority afforded to them by the SABC and the discourse through which the issues were represented.

The BMP was always concerned that its research not just be an academic exercise but that it be distributed to those organisations with an interest in the transformation of the South African media. To this end, reports were issued every two weeks to a wide variety of political, media, academic and monitoring organisations, as well as the SABC's board and editorial management. A bi-monthly newsletter reviewing particular aspects of news coverage and commenting on the process of change within the SABC was also sent out.

Performance of the SABC in 1993

At the end of 1993, the then Broadcast Monitoring Project released a report entitled "6 Months of the New SABC". The report was an overview of SABC news and current affairs coverage in the six months since the new board of control had assumed office. The report found that there had been "little substantial change in either radio or television news broadcasts", that "many of the old-style myths and prejudices are still evident in the news bulletins" and that "a bias towards the government is clearly manifest in much political reporting."

The report stated that the SABC's institutional structure was one of the determining factors in its failure to reorient the content of its news programming.

The structural separations between broadcast channels at the SABC were one of the major problems influencing news coverage. On television there were clear racial and ethnic differences between CCV (the "black" broadcasting service) and TV1 (the "white" broadcasting service). The news bulletins were produced separately by black and white journalists and editorial teams which, aside from resulting in an unnecessary duplication of resources, often resulted in the development of "black news" and "white news". There was a marked difference in coverage between the two news services. Black political

parties received less time on TV1 than on CCV, and traditionally white political parties were prioritised on TV1 news. Moreover, the project provided several examples of cases in which TV1 and CCV had given differing, sometimes conflicting, perspectives on news issues of national importance.

Finally, the report concluded:

The research undertaken by the Broadcast Monitoring Project over the past year has shown that SABC news services have revealed a distinct sympathy towards government and state institutions, while largely misrepresenting or under-representing opposition political organisations, particularly those organisations who have opposed apartheid in the past. Simultaneously SABC has continued to perpetuate a racial division in its news coverage -both by retaining an infrastructure that was essentially based on the policy of separate development, and by marginalising black society and perpetuating racist myths in its news coverage.

Less than another six months later however, the MMP was to conclude that there had been an improvement in SABC news coverage and that the SABC and other media's coverage of the election had been adequate.

As has been noted above the MMP changed its monitoring operation quite considerably in the four month

period before the election and it was decided that it should monitor a wider sample of media including the print media and independent radio. The point of departure at this stage was to assess the role played by the South African media in covering the country's first democratic elections. The project saw the key standards in the media's news reporting as:

* That there be equitable treatment of all parties.

* That there be no discrimination against any political party, that there be no preference for any political party and no prejudice against any party.

* That there be no material reported as news which was intended to support or advance the interests of any political party.

The MMP was not solely concerned with the coverage of different political parties. The project also wanted to ensure the electorate was kept fully informed of the election processes and policy issues.

The research was distributed in the form of a Daily Report. From the beginning of February, Daily Reports were sent out each morning to a mailing list of over 50 organisations comprising local and international monitoring groups, embassies, the media and political parties. Each Daily Report was a critique of the news of the past 24 hours. The Daily Reports also contained a commentary section which

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highlighted particularly interesting or noteworthy aspects of the previous day's coverage.

The MMP was also contracted by the Independent Media Commission (IMC) to undertake some of the monitoring on behalf of the commission. The IMC was one of the statutory structures set up during the multiparty negotiating process to monitor and observe South Africa's first democratic elections.

The IMC's task was to ensure that all participating political parties were treated equitably on editorial programmes broadcast on all South African broadcasters. The monitoring results of the MMP and the South African Communications Services (which provided statistical data) were synthesised by an analysis unit in the IMC's Broadcasting Directorate. It was on the basis of the synthesised monitoring results, that the Directorate made the decision whether to initiate a complaint against a particular broadcaster.

For the purpose of the project's monitoring system, some of the monitors (working on selected electronic media) were asked to make further evaluations and numerically code the work. The primary aims of this were to examine the way in which political stories were structured, and the attention and type of coverage given to different parties and groups, and to different issues and themes.

At the end of March, the MMP

printed and distributed a report on the project's interim findings. The MMP's Final Report was produced in the week after the election.

Media performance during the election

In its Final Report, the MMP concluded that, overall, the media had recognised the importance of the election, and had aided the democratic process by according it extensive coverage. In giving access to a variety of views, the media had contributed to climate favourable to a free and fair election. As expected, the coverage of political news during the election was extensive. The MMP found that in television news, political stories often took up more than half the bulletin during the election period. The MMP concluded that the media coverage certainly did nothing to invalidate the election result. The MMP observed nothing on radio or television to substantially advantage or disadvantage any party to the extent it could be claimed the election result was unfairly skewed.

The MMP's final figures on who appeared in the news did not present any gross departures from what might be expected given the electoral support and political resources of the major organisations.

In current affairs programmes, considerable effort was made to give all players - including minority parties - adequate opportunity to put their case. In news programmes, the campaigns and policies of major

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parties - and their reactions to those of their opponents - were covered extensively.

The prolonged election campaign was therefore a period of growth and improvement in media performance. Experimentation with formats designed to provide greater pluralism gradually improved reporting of political violence etc.

In some ways, the process of growth could be said to have climaxed with the SABC's coverage of the election days themselves, achieving a sustained quality of coverage that little preceding it would have led one to predict. As a result, the media fostered an atmosphere of diversity and open-endedness in the political process.

However, the country's first democratic election produced many new challenges for the media, challenges to which they did not always respond with sufficient professionalism. The MMP identified a number of shortcomings in media performance. The following is a summary of some of the project's observations.

Lack of critical analysis

Careful scrutiny and penetrating analysis of political claims and counter-claims were frequently lacking during the campaign. The role of the news media should be to provide information and analysis on the parties' policies. To do so, reporters must sift through a mountain of policies, statements, interviews, claim and counter claim - cut through the speculation, hype and rhetoric - to get to the real issues of the campaign. But too often, political speeches or statements were reported without the real story being told. This lack of critical analysis meant the message was omitted. The presentation of policy took second place to a concentration on personalities or tangential issues. News became "event-driven" rather than "issue-driven."

The dominant issues for the media were those dealing with the political and electoral process itself. Only 38% of stories on television were deemed to have a clear reference to policy and over 60% of these involved issues to do with the political process. Relegated to virtual invisibility during the campaign were economic policy questions (about 1% of policy references) and questions to do with social policies and quality of life (2%).

Politicians appeared frequently in the news (coding revealed 1177 quotes from political representatives) and were too often allowed to set and control the news agenda. There was also lack of editorial initiative in evaluating, or relating the claims of politicians from different parties to each other, at least in the same story. Many stories had a simple source structure in which the political figures were able to put their views, without any counter-arguments, even by those they were making claims

about.

Editorial direction

Some South African media (notably the Afrikaans press and the SABC) have a legacy of passive, obedient and unquestioning editorial practice. This manifested itself in a number of different ways: in the presentation of news and current affairs, in the quality of interviews, and in particular, the failure of the SABC to keep up with international stories, and in the broadcasters' ability to cover stories as they break.

News programmes were often slow off the mark to cover major events. On occasion, important stories were allowed to die because of an inability on the part of journalists to do follow-up legwork. Consequently, issues sometimes remained unresolved, statements unchallenged and the real story untold. In the electronic media, the major gist for the news-mill was provided by public occasions and the publicity seeking activities of political groups and institutions.

Three major categories could be distinguished. The first, comprising almost half of the news occasions reported, involved deliberate publicity moves and public campaigning. The second large group of news generating occasions were formal meetings and the proceedings of political institutions, totalling about 20%

The third group of story occasions

involved what can be broadly labelled as disorder news. Incidents of group violence (4%), strikes (5%) and other protest activity (5%) were the staples of this coverage.

The extent to which the electronic media were reacting blindly to media events constructed by major political players, and to obvious public events, was shown by the rarity of reports based primarily on media enterprise and in-depth journalism. Only two television stories were labelled as special media reports. None were specifically called special investigations. The MMP was concerned that the reporting of some issues was so fragmented that it concealed or distorted the real story. This was especially true of the treatment of violence in kwaZulu/ Natal by some media. The story was not an easy one to report on because of the remoteness of the area. The confused and uncertain situation was not helped by the contradictory statements of some party officials. However, the fragmented way in which some of the South African media covered the incidents of violence and the comments of public figures did nothing to build a coherent picture of what was happening in the province. As part of its Interim Report, the MMP proposed four points as a media guide for reporting of violence. They were:

1. All victims of violence should be treated with equal dignity, irrespective of class, race and gender.

2. Forecasts and fears of violence must be treated with great caution by the media.

3. Media reporting should never treat the occurrence of violence with indifference, or imply an acceptance of its inevitability or acceptability.

4. As far as possible, media reporting should aim to make the incidents explicable to their audiences, to portray them with precision, and where necessary, pinpoint responsibility.

Sadly though, by the end of the election, there was very little improvement in violence reporting.

Audience segregation

Perhaps the most important problem that the SABC, and to a lesser extent the press, failed to counter, was the traditional apartheid separation of news audiences based on race. Although newspapers, radio stations and television channels claimed their target audiences were not racially defined, the selection of news stories often betrayed a crude racial classification of their audience and did little to promote a common cause of democracy.

Vast differences in line-ups, angle and tone were noticed frequently. On the surface, the idea of a range of newsrooms exhibiting different approaches, values and attitudes has merit because of the diversity and choice it offers. However, if all it means is that each language group is provided with a single news focus

based on a news editor's racially-based news judgement, there is no diversity, only biased reporting.

CONCLUSION - PROSPECTS FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

Having successfully crossed a major hurdle in its coverage of South Africa's first democratic elections, South African media are now faced with a number of other formidable challenges.

The political order in South Africa has changed, and with it the environment that the media operates in. There are a range of factors which could potentially inhibit a free, open and vigorous South African media. As far as the electronic media is concerned, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) has recently been formed, and will in future, regulate the airwaves. This will have serious implications for the broadcasting sector. It will formulate broadcasting policy and will grant licenses, as well as regulating such issues as local content, license conditions, cross-ownership and language policy for broadcasters.

With the domination of the airwaves by the state broadcaster in previous years, a body such as the IBA has not existed in South Africa before. Its policy formulations will challenge the SABC's near monopolization of the electronic media and will have a substantial effect on the range and nature of broadcasting in South Africa. Unfortunately the IBA's progress so far has been limited, with

the structure seemingly unwillingly to take any major decisions. The media and interest groups like the MMP will have to ensure that the IBA plays a meaningful and positive role and does not inhibit the growth of the broadcast media.

A second challenge for the media will be attitudes towards freedom of expression and the right to information in the new South Africa. Although freedom of expression and freedom of the press have often been proclaimed by the liberation movements in the past, the heritage of censorship and repression of the apartheid era may be difficult to evade. This was demonstrated by the July 1994 actions of the Minister of Defence, Joe Modise who got an interdict preventing the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* newspaper from reporting a story involving military intelligence.

While the minister eventually backed down, the case sent alarm waves through the country's media, who are fearful of a repeat of past impositions.

Outside of government, there are other potential threats to freedom of the press and human rights. A number of journalists have recently been the victims of violent attacks while working in townships. Unless the safety of journalists performing their duty in volatile areas can be ensured, there is a danger the South African media will continue to only reflect the experiences of, and cater to the needs of, the predominantly white middle-class.

A third challenge for the South African media is a more cryptic one. With the election of the first democratic government, a hegemonic shift has occurred towards national unity and nation building and away from the ethnic and racial separatism of the apartheid era. With this, there could be a danger that outspoken criticism of the new order will quickly translate into an anti-South Africanism, where critics of government policy will be dismissed as unpatriotic and destructive. An ominous note was sounded in an address by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki to the Cape Town Press Club in August in which he raised the question of the role of the press in a democratic society:

> Does it continue to see itself as the conscience of the public, a watchdog? (That) is perfectly correct when you are addressing a system which is unjust and must be changed.

The implication being that in a just society the press should relax its vigilance and devote itself to nation-building. However, the result could be that there may be a media system which never criticises anything. The SABC has yet to prove itself as a truly independent broadcaster and could continue to follow the party line. Other recent evidence of this tendency is one paper renowned for its virulent criticism of the liberation

movement, which now obsequiously praises Mandela and the actions of the ANC. While this may not appear to be a serious problem in itself, the next five years facing South Africa are especially important ones. The South African public is faced with a Government of National Unity which has no real political opposition.

In many ways, it is therefore up to the media to play that oppositional role. Issues such as the increased payment received by new Members of Parliament, the cost of the RDP and the recent hike in the petrol price are controversial decisions for which the government could be criticised sternly by the media. In the absence of an effective political opposition, it is up to the media to guard the interests of the South African public.

Horizontal monitoring

The MMP has associated itself with the world-wide move to ensure the quality of the provision of information and culture to all citizens. The Penang-based Third World Network is putting civil society interests on the agenda, and The People's Communication Charter initiative which was launched at the 1994 IAMCR conference in Seoul (reported in the June 1994 IAMCR newsletter) can provide the basis for this sort of monitoring.

The sort of horizontal monitoring that The People's Charter implies can be detected in its objectives:

The Charter intends to contribute to a

critical understanding of the significance of communication in the daily lives of individuals and peoples;

The Charter articulates a shared position on communication from the perspective of people's interests and needs;

The Charter aims to bring to (national and international) policy making processes a set of claims that represent people's fundamental right to communicate.

The MMP sees a clear purpose for itself in lobbying the media to guard the interests of the SA public, and monitoring whether they report events in South Africa in a fair and balanced fashion, informing citizens fully and properly. While the MMP cannot claim responsibility for the changes that have already taken place in the South African media, the project believes it played an important role in raising debates and interest in media issues. It will continue to do this. Current areas of research are:

News Bias, Education and Development and the Media, Gender and Race and the Media and Media Legislation and Regulation.

The MMP continues to release two forms of research on a regular basis: a monthly publication and a weekly Media Update, while also undertaking media research and analysis for other organisations on a contract basis.

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