

# radio Proactive

**It's not easy to cover local government elections in a volatile province with more than 90 'no-go' areas. But novel tactics and a no-nonsense approach helped SABC radio pull off an operation that sets a precedent relevant far beyond KwaZulu-Natal. JUDY SANDISON, regional editor, explains:**

**C**OVERING the first South African national democratic elections in 1994 provided our radio news team with solid experience to draw on in planning coverage of the much-delayed local government elections in KwaZulu-Natal — ultimately to take place on the 26th of June 1996.

I identified four key challenges that our news team had to meet to achieve successful coverage:

- ensure the issues and concerns of ordinary people were voiced on air;
- ensure that all political parties and role players were given fair unbiased coverage;
- ensure that our listeners received a wide spectrum of relevant, clear and useful information to enable them to make informed choices;
- ensure that journalists could freely report on events and issues without intimidation or duress.

In addition, we had to do a lot more than co-ordinate news and current affairs coverage on Radio Zulu, Radio Lotus and East Coast Radio. We also arranged for another 25 reporters to join our team from other SABC newsrooms to strengthen our presence across the province, and to report in another five languages on what was a national as well as an international story. The eyes of the world were on our politically volatile province and no-one could predict how much conflict and intolerance there would be. With more than 90 'no-go' areas this was no small challenge.

In '94 we had learnt that it was pointless having separate meetings with officials from the major political parties. They simply used the opportunity to lambaste us and make demands instead of focusing on improving communication channels. ANC and IFP officials had refused to sit down together in a meeting with us. What they did was meet with us individually and incessantly demand more air time and exposure, which put us under pressure from all sides. I vowed that next time round I would insist that **all parties** (in '96 there were twelve) meet **jointly** with us to share information and improve communication and professionalism while still keeping a good arms-length distance.

So, early in '96, I didn't set up any separate

meetings, but simply sent out a formal invitation to the public relations officers and officials of all the parties contesting the elections — large and small — to a meeting to improve communication. If they wanted to meet with us they had to come to the meeting. Most responded affirmatively. One that didn't hear about it from the others and made sure he was at the next one as he felt left out. This placed all the parties on an equal footing with us.

It made it much easier to manage our coverage by setting agreed-on ground rules from the start for all: for example, that we would ensure minority parties were given fair coverage; that we needed to be informed in good time about weekend events in particular so coverage could be planned; that we would not be covering every function; what the ground rules for debates were; that we would run a series of debates and listener phone-ins; that complaints would be immediately addressed; that parties would ensure we had up-to-date contact lists, etc.

With the parties all in one meeting, the pressure for airtime was more evenly distributed and we could manage the whole process better. We had a meeting roughly every six weeks from March to June with a review meeting in August. These then ceased except for ad hoc issues.

In an effort to prevent politicians totally dominating the airwaves and boring our listeners with too much rhetoric we involved non-governmental organisations (NGO's) in our planning. This had begun before the '94 elections and had been most constructive. However, we had often run out of interviewees as they were simply not enough neutral 'experts' to interview. Suitable organisations were too busy or over-used and at times our own journalists had to run listener phone-ins when invited guests did not pitch at the last minute.

I decided to revive regular contact with relevant NGO's in January '96, but broadened the base to include peace committees, human rights groups, church and rural groups, voter education, etc.

We met roughly every three weeks and these meetings were absolutely invaluable in identifying grassroots issues, projects and people we could interview. We also scanned the universities for credible academics for analysis and

## Gritty reporting

**A**LL IN ALL the feedback from listeners and role players about our radio news coverage was that it was fast, accurate, comprehensive, fair and interesting ....

Getting the results and experience of voters in from our reporters in rugged rural areas was quite a feat, and some staff had hair-raising experiences on gravel roads and byways, travelling long distances in 4-by-4's or armoured vehicles seeking

places where the cell-phones would work.

We got some useful pointers about where we could improve too: for example, in our use of percentages in election results. Many of our listeners — whether Zulu, English or Afrikaans-speaking — complained that they did not understand percentages. Some NGO's felt we had not focused enough on where peace projects had successfully got off the ground in

strife-torn areas, and on the dynamics involved.

Despite a complicated computer results system having been installed in the central Durban newsroom, it was really the leg-work of our reporters and current affairs producers that gave meaning and relevance to our news.

Counting took more than a week to complete and we resumed our normal schedules the second week, having had extra current affairs and update slots on Radio Zulu the week of voting. We had expected all the results to be in by Saturday latest,

but they were still trickling in the following week.

It was very ironic that, despite radio's reputation as the most immediate news source, some listeners asked in a phone-in why we didn't hold back the urban results until the rural ones were in. Initially the IFP complained that we gave the ANC too much coverage the first week — then the ANC complained that we gave the IFP too much coverage the second week of results.

Ultimately both parties conceded that overall fairness had been maintained.

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Photograph by Nash Narrandes. Courtesy the Natal Witness.

debate in our current affairs programmes.

The election procedures were very complex and we had to be sure that we as journalists understood them so that we could give a clear picture to our listeners. So we had briefings with the various task forces, with Durban Metro and rural officials, and Deputy Minister Valli Moosa came with elections expert Khehla Shubane to brief the news team on the mechanics of the elections and the run-up to them.

An election manual was compiled by a radio news researcher (jointly with TV researchers) and this included important election information, maps of the different Regional Council areas, and a database with contact numbers, NGO's, political parties, names, geographic and socio-economic profiles, etc. This experience was so useful that we now have a permanent researcher to assist reporters, producers and editors in a multitude of ways.

Reporters were deployed across the province several months before election day to do vox pops and audio packages on people's concerns. We broadcast the news stories — and also used the information in planning our programmes to meet their needs. We ran phone-ins now and again to monitor our own progress.

The voter education responsibility fell very heavily on radio news in '94 and we had hoped that more formal programmes would be recorded and broadcast this time. We took a decision country-wide that the radio news role was to report issues and events and not to do voter education. However, when the paucity of such education became clear, we felt that with one of our stations being the country's biggest, most influential broadcaster, we had to respond to our listeners' needs as best we could. So we incorporated stories on what was confusing or unclear in current affairs and had studio guests respond or debate these issues.

We had experienced death threats, intimidation attempts and harassment before the '94 elections and had hoped this would not recur. However, I realised more action was needed when one of our reporters was verbally harassed and his microphone shoved away by a South Coast political official who was being charged with murder. Although we made an official complaint to the party concerned and received a written apology from one of its leaders (which we broadcast), I was worried that such incidents could recur because of the increased political tensions in the province.

I raised my concern in one of our NGO meetings and it was proposed that a code of conduct be found or drafted and put forward for parties to give input and to sign. I contacted the World Press Freedom Committee in Washington for help. They gave me some names to contact and wished us luck as they had not come across such a code for politicians/media before. No existing election codes covered what we needed.

A copy of the novel "homegrown" code which we came up with is reproduced on the right.

I was pleasantly surprised to have this concept fully supported by representatives of the 12 political parties. The code was signed at a public ceremony in the foyer of the SABC studios in Durban on the 6th of June 96 in the presence of NGO leaders, Project Ukuthula bishops, editor-in-chief Barney Mthombothi and other guests. Bishop Stanley Mogoba, head of the Electoral Code of Conduct Commission (ECCO) had agreed to monitor any breaches at our request.

The code was well-honoured by all concerned during the election period. The elections as a whole passed with very little violence — far, far less than was feared or expected. There were incidents like stone-throwing between ANC and IFP members at Shakaville, but, remarkably, none of our radio news reporters experienced any harassment or intimidation.

If they had we would have documented it and passed it on to Bishop Mogoba for ECCO to decide on censure or fines or whatever. Ironically, shortly after the elections, some heated disagreements took place between some of our news staff and some political officials, but as a result of good communication channels, these difficulties were ultimately resolved and the working relationships put back onto a professional footing.

Our experience has shown us that the debate about the role and function of the electronic media in a democratic society needs to be carried widely through the whole fabric of society. If ordinary citizens do not see the value of media freedom and the significance of a free media as a building block of democracy then this freedom can be eroded with ease. This is a vital challenge for all media workers to address.

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## Media code of conduct FOR POLITICIANS

To ensure a free, independent news media, commitment is needed from all the main players:

- by journalists and editors to the ethical and professional codes of the profession;
- by politicians and political leaders to the following code of conduct:

“We agree that the rights of working journalists should be respected at all times while they are engaged in news-gathering;

We undertake to respect and promote the physical safety of journalists to the best of our ability, including:

- not inciting crowds or groups to attack media representatives;
- not verbally or physically interfering with journalists trying to report on stories;
- not restricting access to any news source;
- not preventing journalists from operating freely in any part of the country without fear of intimidation;
- not mentioning or attacking individual journalists at public functions such as rallies and so making them vulnerable to attack;
- not to pressure presenters/journalists, while they are on air, to do ad hoc interviews;
- not to attempt to bribe journalists;
- discouraging party members and others from making abusive anonymous phone calls or threats aimed at journalists or editors;
- using existing mechanisms to channel complaints about items broadcast;
- to wholeheartedly help party members understand the role of the media in a democratic society.”