

DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS ARE A FAIRLY NEW PHENOMENON ACROSS MUCH OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT. THESE ELECTIONS IS ANYTHING BUT. IN ELECTIONS THIS YEAR SOUTH AFRICA SCORED REASONABLY WELL ON



**South Africa**



PHOTO: PETER ANDREWS/REUTERS

FNB Stadium, Johannesburg, May 1999. The anticipated handover from Mandela to Mbeki - much of the public participated in the elections with similar enthusiasm.

# Methods to the Madness

Strategies behind SABC coverage of election '99



**Amina Frense** tells how South Africa's public broadcaster coped with its biggest assignment ever...

missionary zeal, madness just short of 'certified' and a well of understanding - that's what it takes to cover elections in post-apartheid South Africa. Coverage of this year's elections in June was the biggest event ever undertaken by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). We couldn't secure all the prime time slots we wanted, but we developed a variety of pre-election programming enabling the voter to make an informed choice.

**ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:**

We drew people in in various ways. The more formal "Face the Nation" current affairs format put political parties on the spot. More participatory was "Two Way," a popular public participation talk show which elicited emotional responses from participants and viewers, dispelling many fearful predictions of voter apathy. Topics ranged from party lists to 'what makes a nation?' and reached a cross-section of society.

Other engaging programmes included

"Off The Record," political satire which captured many imaginations and wide support. It evolved as the election campaign unfolded, with more and more political parties calling in and demanding to be part of the programme - i.e., ridiculed. Some of the existing programmes - such as "Focus met Freek" (normally in Afrikaans and viewed by a preponderance of 35-year-old women) - had to shape a bit; the show hosted by Freek Robinson became "Election Focus," broadcast in English and aiming for a broader, more representative national appeal covering topics in all parts of the country.

We needed the public to actively participate and they did: by fax, by phone, in rural and urban vox pops, broadcast on "The Midnight Connection," a 15-minute slot for 'the discerning viewer'. The international community took a keen interest in our first post-liberation election and we invited their responses, too. This went down well, but it also meant more eyes and ears watching and listening - we had to get it right first time round.

**ON WHO SETS THE AGENDA:**

From my point of view mainly the media - that is, after the government of the day establishes the 'when' and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) implements the 'how'. All stakeholders play a part, but the media must do it well and timeously.

Very early in our pre-election programming we publicised our plans and intentions to all the political parties, big and small. We were complimented on our openness; it seemed to help establish trust. We also developed good working relationships with the IEC and other stakeholders such as EISA, the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and others. For everyone it was a learning curve all over again as we grappled with the election process.

Setting the agenda is one thing; fine-tuning it is another. There was not the same need for voter education this time round, and anyway there was no time. We needed to ascertain many things, such as voter support for political personalities and parties and the demographics of the voting popula-

## IN FACT IN MANY PLACES PURPORTING TO HAVE ELECTIONS 'FREE AND FAIR', THE MEDIA COVERING REPRESENTATIVE AND ENGAGING MEDIA COVERAGE – NIGERIA AND MALAWI, LESS SO. LOCAL JOURNALISTS REPORT:

tion whose concerns were big issues like jobs, education, housing and crime. We were assisted by Opinion '99, one of the biggest opinion polls in S.A. history and a joint venture between the SABC, Idasa and Markinor. The poll yielded material which served as working documents for the political parties, business and the international community in the run-up to the elections.

We stood to lose too much as television broadcaster if we did not deliver – especially with a new player on the block, e-tv. We spent considerable resources on setting up regional stations to broadcast in the other official languages. The SABC took its public mandate by the letter and tried to make regional voices for democracy heard as loudly as possible.

### ON COVERAGE OF WOMEN'S AND GENDER ISSUES:

In all our programming we are gender-sensitive, and we found a higher level of interest amongst women viewers. One of the "Two Way" programmes at the time dealt specifically with our liberal constitution and its implications for South African women today. The feedback was overwhelming, asking for more of that kind of programming.

We have had no complaints of bias or issues being underreported, so I would like

to believe we did not do too badly under the circumstances.

### ON COVERING THE SMALLER PARTIES:

There were two complaints by smaller parties of inadequate coverage but they got sorted out. In one instance it was clearly a case of too few resources to cover an event (which was not newsworthy in any case,

politically mature environment – working with others to get politicians to sign a code of conduct before the campaign – particularly in Kwazulu-Natal and the Western Cape, potential hotspots. This did not come about overnight but through a lot of hard work-shopping, out of the public eye.

We pretty much rose to the occasion when it came to the technology and logistics

stay on air – a near-impossibility. We didn't have the staff; people were already doing extra-long hours. No amount of money could have changed that at such short notice.

By then we did not have enough fresh programming and had to repeat broadcast some material. A 30-minute documentary on the election process called "Woza

**We** basically had to **transform** a concrete floor into an **election mothership** in the most **functional, cost-effective way**, and my SABC airtime colleagues **delivered**.

because of low attendance). The other complainant had more than his equitable share of coverage and was pushing his luck. We had many compliments of fair coverage from most of the parties.

### ON OUR OVERALL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES:

Strengths included good leadership, team effort and including all stakeholders in an assertive but non-compromising way. We continually discussed and redefined roles cooperatively. This applied to business units within the SABC as well as all stakeholders outside. We also managed to establish a

side, one of our biggest challenges. From carrying a zip-zip machine on a donkey cart in the Eastern Cape where running water is still a dream to the bits and bytes of the latest state-of-the-art IT technology merging with broadcast technology at the election results centre, we can boast about the software results. In setting up a temporary studio at the IEC, we basically had to transform a concrete floor into an election mothership in the most functional, cost-effective way, and my SABC airtime colleagues delivered.

We didn't, however, meet every challenge. On June 2, election day, we were asked by our boss, the Rev. Hawu Mbatha, to please

Democracy," featuring Brigalia Bam, was shown twice but we had no complaints as far as I know. Another glitch: the Northern Cape felt like the black sheep when one of their regional broadcasts went out to the soundtrack of "Three's Company"!

This will probably be the last time the SABC can afford to broadcast so extensively. The next time round we will all need to be far more multi-skilled and digitised to make sense to the electorate.

AMINA FRENSE is SABC Television News Editor for special assignments and elections.

## Giving Access

Franz Kruger reports...



### How SABC radio brought people into the election process

For around ten days some 700 T.V. and radio staff worked out of the election centre. There were several days for rehearsals, some programmes in the build-up, then virtually non-stop coverage on election day, which moved into results coverage on the days following the closing of the polls. Twelve temporary radio studios were set up, and each station had a full production team, working shifts to cover the extended hours.

Technical facilities were set up to allow a full range of programme elements. The election shows included live crossings to reporters around the country; interviews with newsmakers and analysts; studio discussions; pre-packaged items; live crossings to key IEC and party briefings; and much else. Key input came from a strong team of researchers and analysts, who helped make sense of trends as they emerged.

The decision to set up such a wide range of broadcasting facilities at election centre meant significant costs and logistical effort. But the benefits were huge. Many of our news producers struggle to overcome the relative disadvantage of working from the provinces, and in languages other than English – despite often having millions of listeners. Bringing them all to the election centre sent a clear signal that we treat all

our languages equally. They all had similarly easy access to IEC officials, political leaders and commentators. There was a great deal of cross-fertilisation of editorial ideas between teams. As many commented, it was great to be where the action was.

Broadcasting the results was the high point of election coverage, but major effort went into coverage of the election campaign. Besides coverage of politicians' activities, we also made extensive use of 'access programming' to create platforms for citizens to participate in the process. Some 60 hours of broadcast time were devoted to this programming, mostly in the form of town-hall meetings.

The recipe for these is simple: you take your equipment into a suitable venue, invite an audience, put politicians on the stage and broadcast the resulting debate live. It can be a sloppy form of broadcasting, but if the participants and the subject are well chosen, and the debate chaired with fairness and care, it can offer real insights to listeners. It evidently provides a viable platform for ordinary people to voice their concerns, participate in policy discussions and hold their (aspirant) representatives to account.

Town-hall meetings are hugely popular with the participating community. One of our first, arranged on the seTswana lan-

guage station Motswedding FM in a village outside Mafikeng, attracted some 4,000 people. Another, in the Eastern Free State, was held inside a farmer's shed, staged on a tractor's trailer with farmworkers and farmers debating issues in seSotho. Other formats included citizen panels quizzing candidates, phone-in programmes and panel discussions by party leaders.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) expressed "a slight concern about the tendency of broadcasters to cover events and not to focus on political parties' positions on issues of concern to the public". Similar criticism came from the Media Monitoring Project (MMP). The question of covering issues rather than events warrants more discussion than there is space for here, but a few points can be made.

Firstly, monitoring techniques by both bodies focused on a quantitative analysis of selected bulletins and programmes. These are mainly driven by a hard news agenda; they ask the question, what's happened? The special access programming described above, which offered real opportunities to focus on issues and to facilitate citizens' participation in policy debates, was not monitored.

In addition, the SABC made extensive use of opinion polls in an effort to make our coverage less reactive. Through the Opinion '99 consortium with Idasa and Markinor, popular views of a range of

issues were regularly polled. This exercise undoubtedly helped shape our coverage, and even the course of the campaign.

For instance, Opinion '99 gave us independent data on the extent of voter registration at an early stage, which gave us headline news and was well used in the print media, too. The polls also clearly indicated that crime and jobs were far and away the most important issues to South Africans, and these two issues dominated the campaign. Again, neither the IBA nor the MMP took this initiative into account.

Finally, the nature of the election itself needs to be considered. Among the big stories of the election were the race for second place, the IEC's arrangements for voting, the behaviour of minority voters and others. Various commentators have commented on the comparatively small differences in policy between the parties.

Undoubtedly, the media must cover elections in a way that facilitates citizens' active involvement in the democratic process. But it's a complex role, and reducing it to a question of 'issues versus events' doesn't do it justice. As the SABC, we set ourselves the aim of delivering fast, fair, insightful and interesting coverage. I wouldn't pretend to claim complete success, but we gave it our best shot.

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