

Media Monitoring Africa MediaMattersZA:

-Monitoring the media during the 2011 Local Government Elections

“Election Watch-Bias Patrol”

MediaMattersZA has launched **Elections Watch-Bias Patrol**, as a means of encouraging ordinary citizens to keep an eye on the fairness, balance and bias of the media’s coverage of the Local Elections 2011, through soliciting their input and concerns. Please go to this link for more information on the MediaMattersZA initiative Elections Watch- Bias Patrol:

(http://www.mediamonitoringafrika.org/index.php/news/entry/media_matters_first_tuesday_bulletin/).

Media Matters followers are encouraged to keep a lookout for possible incidences of bias, unfair or unbalanced reporting of local government issues and bring them to MMA’s attention. MMA has undertaken to raise them with the media concerned, go here to raise issues

(<http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=123543091030202&topic=242>)

In response to concerns raised of bias by one the SOS Coalition (Support Public Broadcasting) members, MMA has conducted a brief analysis of SABC 2’s Morning Live show (11 May 2011). MMA is a founding and active member of the SOS Coalition

(<http://www.supportpublicbroadcasting.co.za/>)

SABC 2 Morning Live show: In the interests of the ANC, not the Voter

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is currently undertaking a media monitoring project for the Local Government Elections 2011. For this we are monitoring 45 different media, including print, broadcast and online media. The overall aim of the project is to see:

- 1. Improved media coverage of elections that serves the democratic rights and responsibilities of South African citizens and that is in line with the human rights framework that is a foundation of media quality and ethical practice.*
- 2. Increased citizen participation in public debate around the role of media and information available on the elections, and improved quality in that public debate.*

MMA has monitored every South African election since 1994, both local and national, releasing the results as regularly as possible to highlight and advocate for improvement in elections, and this includes a focus on fairness of elections coverage. One of the most important elements of media coverage in an election period is ensuring that election coverage is balanced and fair.

It is important to note that one biased item/programme on a TV channel does not substantially alter the generally fair nature of the rest of the channel’s election coverage. On the other hand

substantial and democracy-threatening bias occurs as a pattern - a repeated ideological or discursive bias - which over time, and through repetition creates clear and distinctly unfair coverage. This does not mean that bias need be intentional, in fact, very often a pattern of bias (for example in gender coverage in the media) reveals a lack of intention, as well as the subconscious assumptions evident in societal discourses which influence the selection of news and information and its presentation.

Bias of presentation is one component of MMA's fairness assessment. This form of bias refers to the prominence in a newspaper or bulletin where an inordinate amount and/or prominence of coverage are given to a particular person or political party. The presentation of such a person or political party must be such that either through its dominance or overall portrayal it clearly favours or clearly disfavors a person or political party. Having viewed the broadcast of SABC 2's Morning Live how of 11 May 2011, it was clear that this indicator would be most appropriate to apply in assessing the fairness of the show.

The broadcast of concern can be divided into *three focus areas*. These were:

- A Department of Housing Settlement Limpopo initiative called "Hostel re-development Initiative";
- The news bulletins, weather and sports, and;
- Another live crossing to the launch of a Food Garden project by the Free State MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development.

All three of these segments were dominated by ANC party activities. A case in point is the second focus area, news bulletins. The opening set of news bulletins reveal that the ANC was given 68% (114 seconds) of total time given to news, whilst all the remaining parties were given of 32% (53 seconds) of time. (As comparison in 2009 National Elections, MMA found the ANC, overall on SABC 2 received 40% of total political party coverage, which was in line with most broadcast media. Again it must be emphasised that this is only one programme and not the overall figures.)

The *first focus area* was live crossings from the Seshego Hostel Polokwane which had as its focus covering the "Hostel re-development Initiative". This initiative is introduced at the beginning of the show as involving the demolition of current structures for a new housing development by the Department of Housing Settlements and a handing over ceremony of new houses. The segment is covered throughout the programme, and given much of the show's overall airtime. During this segment interviews are conducted with the MEC responsible for local government housing in Limpopo, the Limpopo Premier, the Minister of Housing Settlements, as well as recipients of the houses. While these sources were not clearly identified as ANC members or leaders, they were questioned about ANC issues and concerns including the alleged recent plot to oust President Jacob Zuma.

Morning Live show presenter Vuyo Mbuli also questioned the representatives about the government subsidised event, including whether or not the initiative was merely an electioneering ploy because of the timing of the event as well as the cost effectiveness of the project. Though clearly denied by the sources, the timing question is of legitimate concern. Although this focus area can be seen as covering a government initiative, it should be noted that at the end of one of the interviews, Vuyo Mbuli asked one of the housing recipients whether or not they saw the events as just an electioneering ploy by government because the ruling party seeks their vote. In emphasising that this was a ruling party government initiative it became clear that Morning Live was aware that this could have been seen as mere electioneering. While the event may be newsworthy, MMA questions why similar events taking place at different times of the year are not afforded the same extensive coverage.

It may have been wise – given the concerns raised by Vuyo Mbuli- to have had experts on housing policy, as well as other political parties commenting in order to ensure that the event was covered fairly. At the very least the presenter should have been asking critical questions about overall housing and linking it to the larger context of housing and settlement in South Africa. In failing to do so, and with no other political parties accessed, the item clearly favours the ANC.

The *second focus area* of the programme was contained in the breaking news stories regarding Local Elections 2011. The opening news item focused on President Jacob Zuma's comments responding to concerns of disgruntled ANC members regarding ANC member candidate lists, and continues showing Zuma campaigning in different part of Mpumalanga featuring an interview with Zuma. This is followed by a quick rap up of different political parties electioneering activities, including:

- The ANC's Gwede Mamtashé in Western Cape;
- The DA campaigning at the University Cape Town;
- The IFP campaigning in Western Cape;
- PAC campaigning in an unknown location (item does not mention place);
- United Christian Democratic Party campaigning in North West;
- The launch of the Freedom Front Plus Municipality website; and,

It should be noted that there was also an item that gave an update on the IEC's readiness for the Elections. The item on Jacob Zuma responding to concerns about candidate lists, and electioneering activities in Mpumalanga was given more prominence in both time and information communicated. The time afforded to President Zuma accounted for 59% (98 seconds) of the total coverage given to local elections news in the opening set of news bulletins. The time afforded to the ANC was 9% (16 seconds) It should also be noted that all these items on political party activities were merely events based reporting that provided very little useful voter information for example on housing or service delivery issues. Accordingly whilst other political parties were covered, the dominance of the ANC in the news, as well as election

roundup section of the news bulletins, clearly favoured the ANC. The time given to the remaining parties made up a mere 32% (53 seconds) of the time given for elections news in the opening set of news stories.

The *third focus area* evident in the programme was a live crossing to a Free State MEC Agriculture and Rural Development launch of a Food Garden project, aimed at alleviating poverty in the town of Jacobsdal. This focus area was introduced by Morning Live as Electioneering news about the town of Jacobsdal battling poverty and unemployment. The Free State MEC and a famous local musician were interviewed. The questions posed to the Free State MEC included, the sustainability of food gardens in light of past failures. There was also coverage of sporting equipment being handed over to Jacobsdal kids to encourage healthy lifestyle and malnutrition. It is interesting that SABC 2 Morning Live would introduce a government Free State MEC initiative as electioneering news, and yet not afford any other party coverage, or offer any expert analysis or discussion on the issues being raised. In excluding all other parties and expert analysis, as well as failure to ask critical questions or provide independent information about the scale of poverty and malnutrition in Jacobsdal, the story again clearly favoured the ANC.

It can be concluded that an overall assessment of the programme, reveals bias, clearly favouring the ANC. This is due to the uncritical coverage, as well as the prominent and overwhelming airtime afforded to the ANC, to the virtual exclusion all other parties. As the ruling party, it is not surprising that the media would dedicate comparatively higher levels of coverage to the ANC. However, it must be stressed that it must be not given undue levels of coverage at the expense of other political parties, nor unfair coverage. The media must not be seen as giving the ruling party “free political advertising”. According to MMA’s bias standards the programme showed evidence of this.

The role of the SABC as the public service broadcaster is perhaps the most vital during an election period. As the biggest broadcaster in the country with the greatest audience, the power and potential of the SABC is immense. In addition to its capacity and audience share however, the specific role of the SABC as the public broadcaster means that it has even greater responsibility to the public to report the elections in a manner that is balanced, accurate diverse and fair.

Also critical to the media’s role during Elections, especially for the public broadcaster, is that it reports from a “citizen’s agenda”, which can be defined as coverage that is clearly reported from the interest of the voter and not political parties or politicians. This requires critical reportage of promises, manifestos and going beyond events based reporting. MMA’s previous monitoring of 56 media during the 2009 National Elections (http://www.mediamonitoringafrika.org/images/uploads/elections_report09.pdf) revealed that a mere 10% of the coverage were reported on from a citizen perspective. This is indicative that coverage in 2009 was heavily dominated by reportage that failed to adopt a “citizen agenda” which negatively impacted the voter education value received. The SABC 2’s Morning Live programme (11 May 2011) was largely events based reporting that lacked in critical analysis, and an exploration of the issues. Amongst the issues that the programme looked at were housing and poverty. Sadly however the programme failed to link this to the larger South African context, and highlighting the seriousness of these issues. This could have been achieved by, for example, providing statistics and independent expert views from analysis or civil society bodies.

Whilst broadcasting services are not expected to give the same weight of coverage to the ANC in comparison to the remaining parties, the overall dominance of ANC activities as well as voices in the overall programme clearly positively biased the ANC.

MMA would also like to stress that this Morning Live show (11 May 2011) is one programme that exhibited bias, but does by no means suggest that the whole of the SABC's coverage of local Elections can be deemed as unfair. MMA is currently monitoring SABC's coverage and will be making an overall assessment after the elections.

MMA commends the SABC for its efforts in launching special programming and initiatives in its coverage, including a special Elections weekly debate show on Sunday nights. Please go to this link to learn more on the special programming and initiatives undertaken by the SABC in its coverage of Local Elections 2011: (<http://www.sabc.co.za/wps/portal/news/pages/radiotv>)