

CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN ELECTION ISSUE

**Analysis of media's coverage of
climate change during the LGE2021**



Image by: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp

Written by Jacques Ndong
Edited by Lister Namumba
Designed by Nomshado Lubisi Nkosinkulu

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than three decades, leaders and activists from around the world have been pointing out the dangers of letting the planet warm up. According to different climate experts, the world recorded its hottest year in 1988 and that event placed climate change in the spotlight. Climate change experts say the situation has become worse and that the issue needs to be addressed immediately. Climate change is mainly measured by using the temperature of the planet. Ice lost is a key factor in the acceleration of climate change and here, experts say that the earth loses 1.2 trillion of ice per year and this represents a 60% increase from 1994.[1]

According to previous research conducted by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), findings indicate that the voices of policy makers have been dominating the debates and discussions around climate change, both locally and internationally.[2] MMA's 2020 analysis on how the media reported climate change in that year showed that 73% of all sources quoted were government leaders, which included the presidency.[3] Given this finding, MMA decided to conduct a media monitoring exercise looking at media coverage from the 2021 local government elections in South Africa to determine whether climate change featured on the agenda of politicians and political candidates during the election period.

Further, the monitoring was conducted to ascertain trends in media's reporting of the issue. As has already been determined by experts, climate change is an important issue that has to be addressed with utmost urgency.[4] The question is no longer just about whether or not there is climate change, but about how leaders intend to face the crisis, and it starts with the solutions they offer during elections. The media is key in ensuring that climate change is highlighted in order to grab the attention of policy makers and so its coverage of the issue has to be monitored not only to ascertain trends but to also to identify gaps in coverage and make recommendations.

[1] <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/earth-loses-12-trillion-tons-ice-year-nearly-60-increase-1994-180976877/>

[2] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Climate-Change-Report-1.pdf>

[3] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/2020/06/11/launch-of-the-climate-change-media-coverage-analysis-report/>

[4] <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-seeking-understanding/climate-change-most-important-life-issue-today>

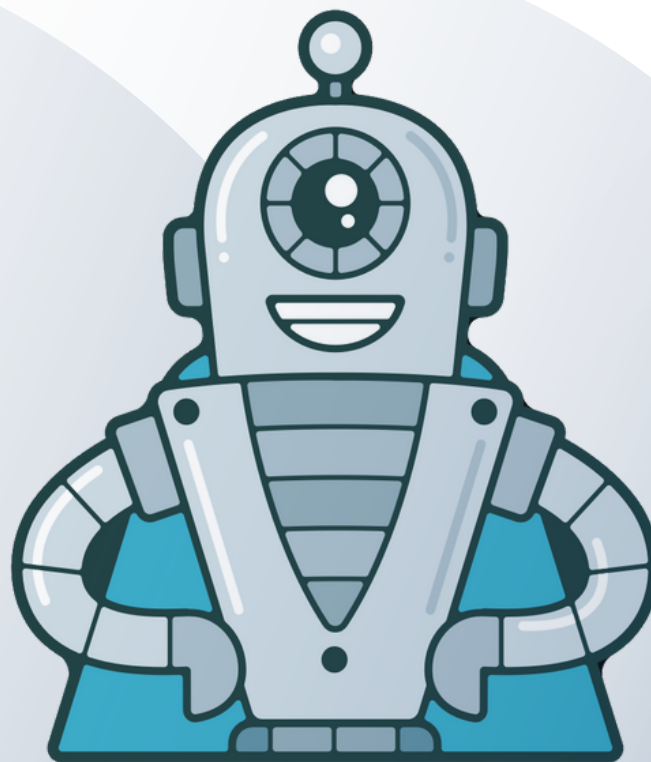
Monitoring data was collected between the 5th of July, 2021 and the 27th of December, 2021. This time frame includes the local government election period and the findings have been analysed into this report. The report will analyse aspects like article count over time to see how the story grew through peaks and troughs. Sources will also be analysed and this includes their race and gender. The affiliation of the sources will also be analysed.

Where necessary, the findings of the 2021 monitoring will be compared to those of the 2020 monitoring to show improvement in coverage of climate change in South Africa or the lack thereof. The 2020 monitoring showed, for instance, that females only account for 22% of the sources quoted in coverage of climate change against a strong 78% for males. In terms of race, the previous report shows that 38% of sources were black and 56% were white. Most sources were government leaders at the expense of ordinary citizens, experts and activists. Has there been an improvement in diversity of sources or in media coverage overall?



2. METHODOLOGY – How we conducted the monitoring

South African news media were monitored for a period of six months from 05th July, 2021 to 27th December, 2021. Dexter,[5] MMA’s internal monitoring tool was used to analyse news stories, using keywords, “Climate change” and “Global warming”. A total of 1, 864 articles were collected and analysed. Once the articles are ingested, machine learning was used to collect meta data to run a basic analysis extracting specific elements such as topic, source information and source affiliation. Further manual monitoring added an element of quality control to the analysis.



DEXTER

MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA INITIATIVE

[5] Access to Dexter can be granted upon request

3. FINDINGS

3.1 ARTICLE COUNT OVER TIME

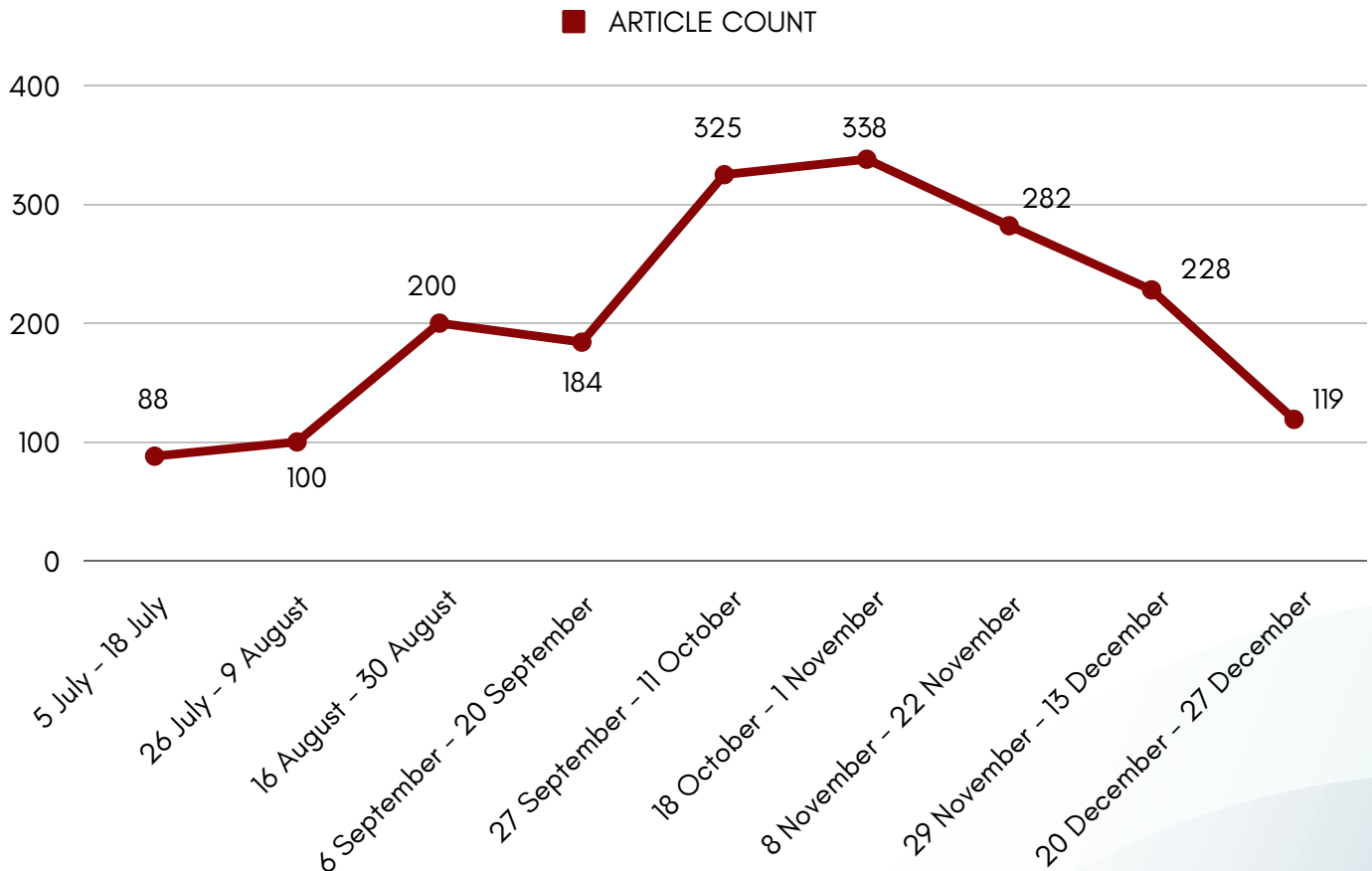


Figure 1: Article count of coverage over time

The findings show that prior to the election date which was the 1st of November, 2021, climate change received very low coverage in the media. The month of July received the lowest coverage with only 88 articles published in the first two weeks of that month. This either indicates that climate change was not, or not yet an election issue or that, there were no climate change events happening in the month of July. The media has been found to report more on an issue when there is an event about that issue happening.

The figure above shows that the week of the 1st of November when South Africans voted had the most coverage of climate change in the South African media. There is a visible increase in stories from the 27th of September, a few weeks before voting. While this might seem as though climate change was an election issue, a deeper analysis of the articles that were reported in the media during the increase of stories indicate otherwise. During the period in question, stories that dominated the media that could have contributed to the increase were, for example, stories about droughts and fire in few provinces in South Africa.[6] Other stories were on the debates/discussions on cabinet's approval of new carbon targets in line with the country's commitment to reduce carbon emissions.[7] From August to September, Eskom received a significant amount of coverage around its coal dependence and reduction of emissions.[8] Eskom's clean energy plan[9] has always been a national topic in South Africa which again contributed to the increase in articles during the reporting period.

In addition, during the week of the biggest increase of stories, activists, world leaders and scientists gathered for the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26)[10] which took place from the 31st of October to the 12th of November, 2021. By the time the conference was ending, coverage of climate change had dropped from 338 articles in two weeks to 282 articles.

The Shell's seismic survey also received a huge amount of coverage in the media between mid-November and December with activists protesting against Shell's project on the wild coast. The two parties eventually went to court and Shell had to stop the survey.[11]

[6] <https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/climate-change-more-droughts-floods-and-fires-for-sa-says-un-report-20210812>

[7] <https://www.news24.com/fin24/companies/industrial/cabinet-approves-new-carbon-targets-for-companies-and-eskom-wont-be-exempted-this-time-20211125>

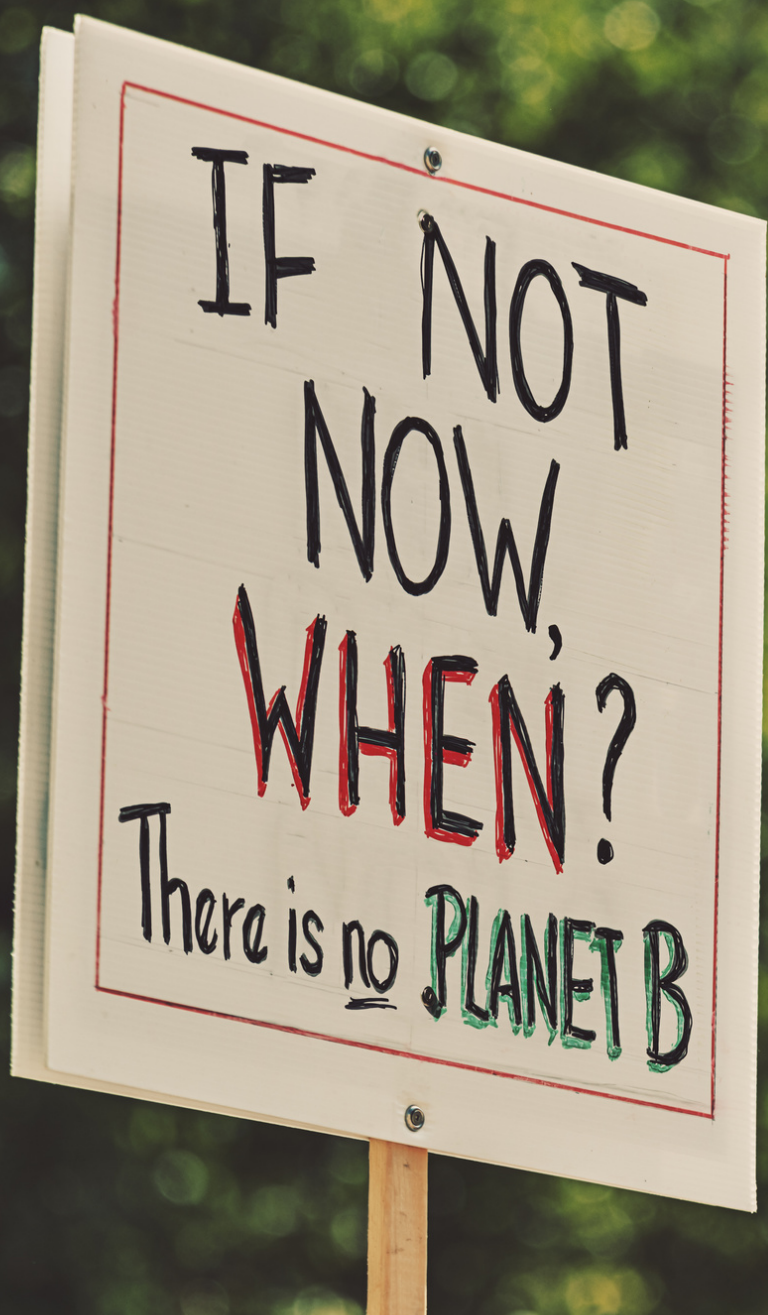
[8] <https://www.enca.com/videos/watch-discussion-helping-sa-end-coal-dependence>

[9] https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/eskom-ceo-sees-end-to-crisis-in-shift-from-coal-2021-12-01/rep_id:4136

[10] <https://www.iol.co.za/news/environment/cop26-who-will-pay-tops-the-agenda-as-un-climate-talks-approach-end-in-glasgow-0a8cb7db-8848-4efd-8f9d-b63b7da97d8a>

[11] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4M6xrQ6TUs>

The findings have shown that climate change was not an election issue even though it received the highest amount of coverage during the week of voting. As has been mentioned, a deeper analysis showed that the media focused on the COP26 which took place during the same period as the elections. This therefore means that an opportunity was missed to highlight climate change as an important issue requiring urgent redress from policy makers. It also means that citizens were robbed of an opportunity to learn about climate change outside of events. The media could have used the election period to bring the issue to policy makers. The media should have also interrogated political candidates about their proposed commitments to addressing climate change once voted into power as it has been found that the media's agenda often reflects what is prioritised by agenda setters who in this case are politicians.



3.2 TOP 10 MEDIA WITH MOST COVERAGE

An element of analysis that informs trends in coverage is to understand how much focus is given to a certain topic. News media should aim to have a diversity of topics covered at any given time, and too much focus on one issue limits this diversity, which impacts general news quality. The graph below gives an indication of how much attention individual media focused on climate crisis issues.

More than 60 media were monitored for their coverage of climate change. Of these, the top 10 media with the most coverage on the topic were selected and findings in Figure 2 below show that the top 10 media had a combined coverage share of 59%. This shows that these 10 media sites are publishing far more articles compared to the other remaining media that were monitored. While this is encouraging, it shows that many media only allocate less than seven percent and in some cases zero percent space to climate change.

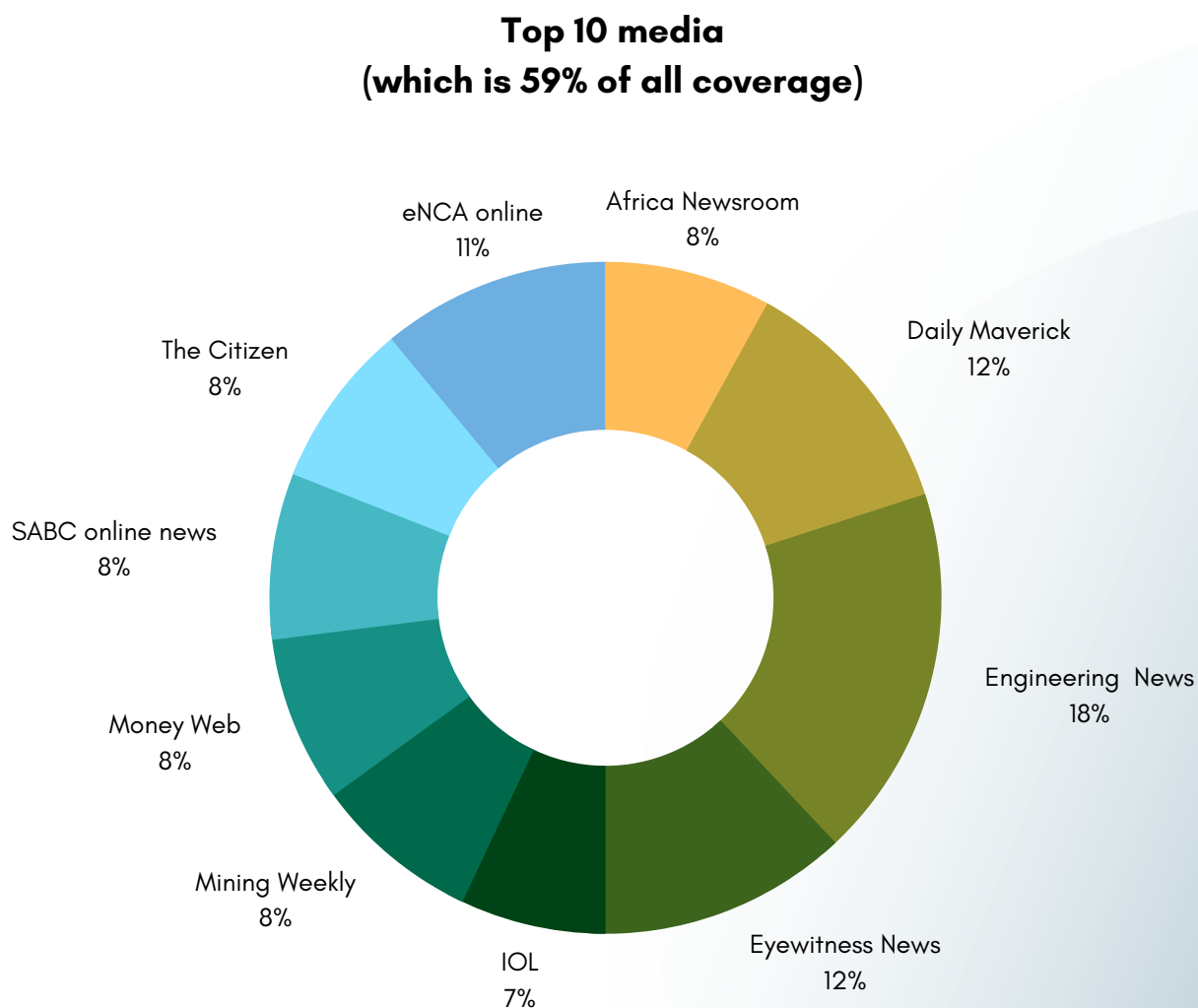


Figure 2: Article count of coverage over time

Figure 2 above shows that at the top, we have *Engineering News* standing at 18% of the climate change coverage. In the 2020 climate change report,[12] *Engineering News* was number nine with a coverage percentage of five. Comparatively, *Engineering News* increased its coverage of climate change by 13% and such improvement is outstanding and commendable. The increase could be attributed to the editorial on climate change developed by *Engineering News* becoming wider.

At the second place is *Daily Maverick* and *Eyewitness News* both with 12%. *eNCA Online* follows closely with 11%. The figure above shows that between these media and *Engineering News* is a significant gap in percentage of coverage.

The main area of interest with the graph above resides in the fact that this top 10 list includes almost the same media collected in the top 10 of the 2020 climate change analysis. Other media need to come on board and publish more articles about climate change in order to bring more attention to the issue that greatly affects many lives and livelihoods. The media have a responsibility to make sure that South Africans understand what climate change is and how they can join efforts to address the issue. The media's responsibility also includes reporting adequately and consistently on climate change to foster redress from policy makers.



[12] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/2020/06/11/launch-of-the-climate-change-media-coverage-analysis-report/>

3.3. TOP FIVE TOPICS

We identified and analysed major topics reported when the media report on climate change. This process helps to provide a good comprehension into the type of content in the climate change stories. It also helps us understand which topics under climate change are prioritised in media coverage.

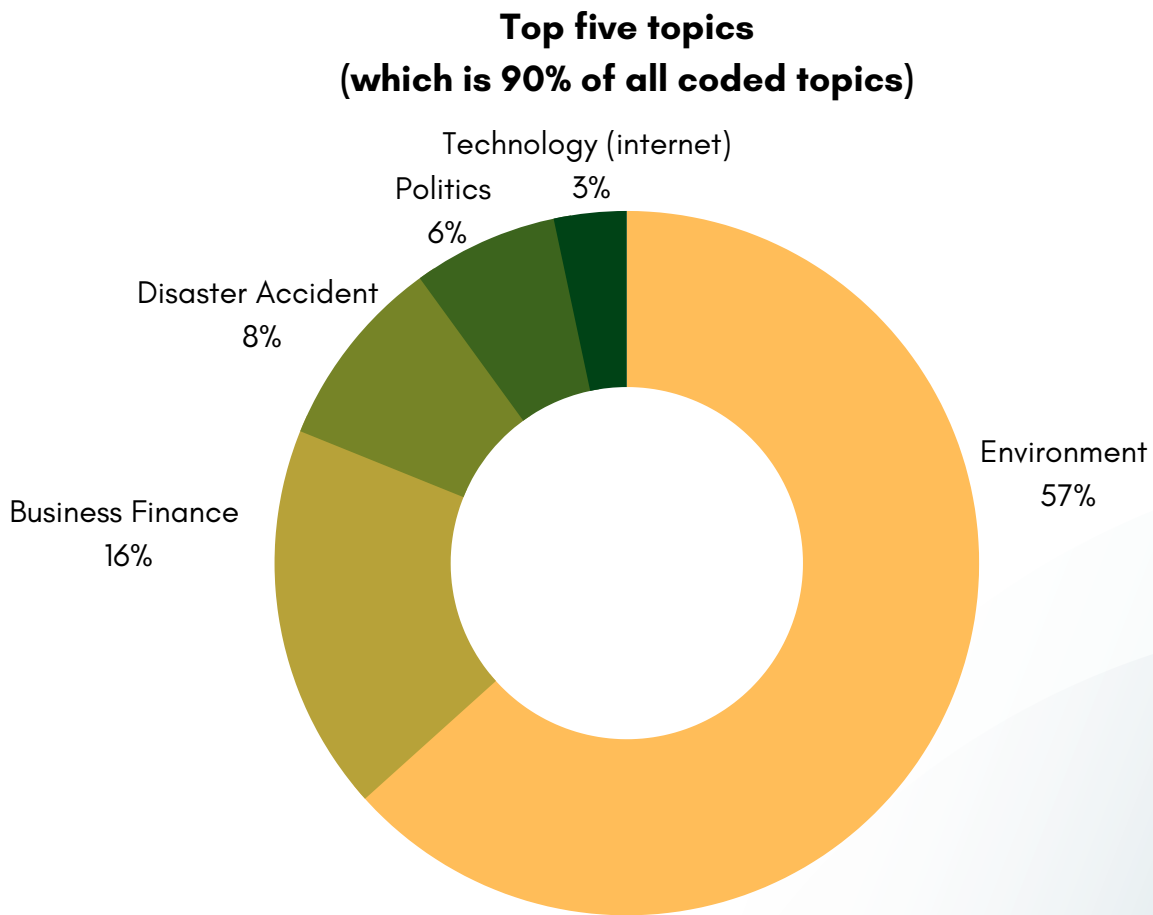


Figure 3: The top five topics in climate change coverage

From Figure 3 above, we see that the bulk of climate change articles in the media focus mostly on the environment at 57%. Articles on droughts, storms, heat waves and the rising sea level were coded “Environment”.

The second most reported topic under climate change is Business Finance at 16%. Stories reported under this topic mostly related to renewable energy and funding to achieve it.

The third most reported topic in coverage of climate change is Disaster/Accident with a share of eight percent. Articles coded under Disaster/Accident are those focusing on forest fires, hurricanes, storms that destroy, for an example, properties.



3.4 AFFILIATION OF SOURCES

Affiliation of sources

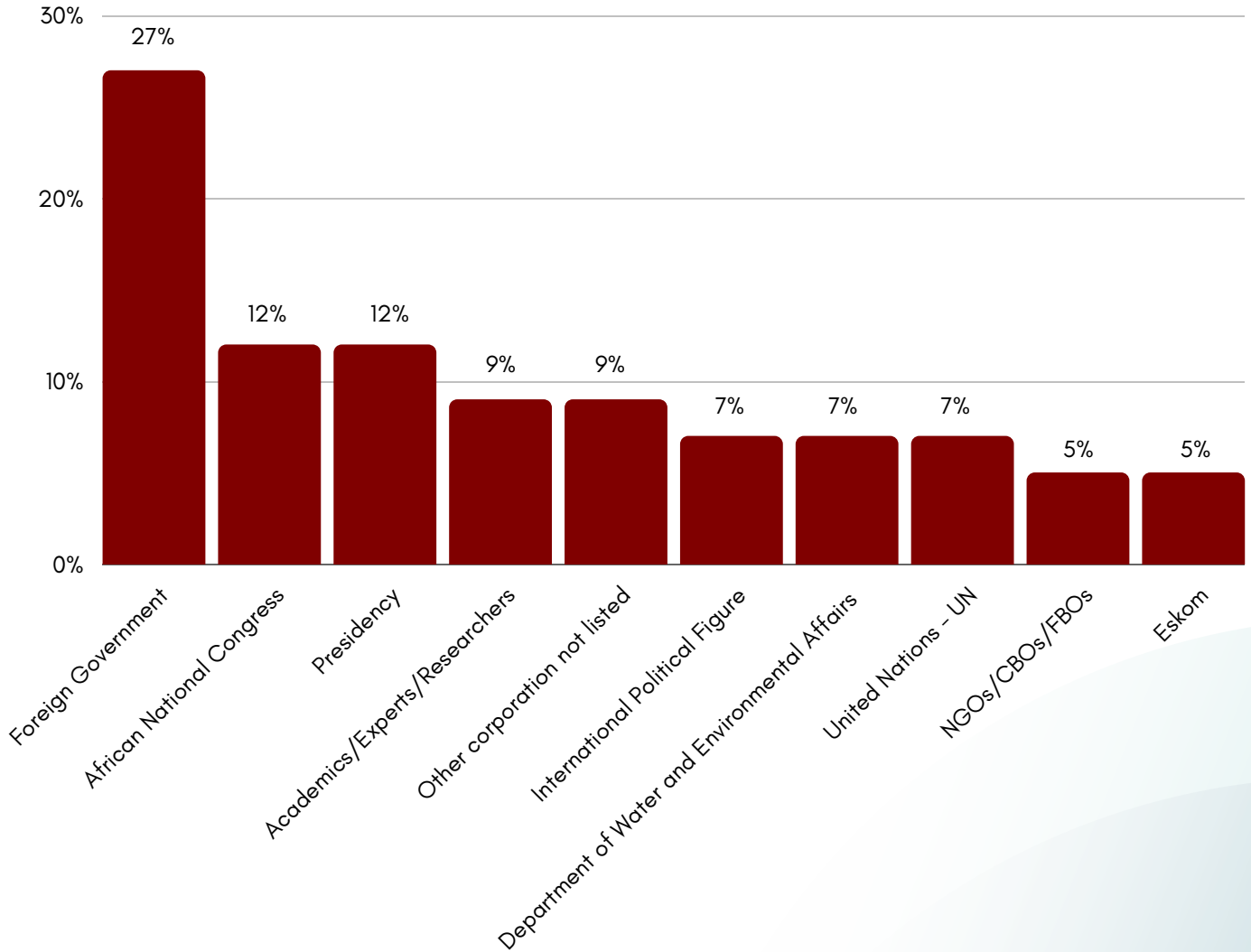


Figure 4: Affiliation of sources

Unpacking affiliation of the sources allows us to appreciate the type of views media feature the most when it comes to climate change coverage. It is known that those who have the biggest voice in media coverage usually hold the most power and so analysing the affiliation of those speaking the most in coverage of climate change helps us to understand whether it's government, experts or activists who hold the most power and drive the agenda.

The findings show that foreign government is the most accessed source with the highest percentage of 27. This is a decrease from the previous 56% recorded in the previous climate change report. The lead is not surprising as the South African media tend to give a lot of coverage to international events involving climate change. However, of concern is the fact that this climate change monitoring was done during an election period in South Africa yet foreign government voices were still more represented than national and local government voices. This shows and as has already been determined in section 3.1, that climate change was not an election issue in 2021.

The ANC, the ruling party in South Africa is second with 12% of the voice share in media coverage of climate change. The same percentage of 12 is true for the Presidency. Since this monitoring was done during an election period, one would have expected local politicians to be the most sourced in coverage of climate change. Sadly, this was not the case.

The affiliation of academic/expert/researcher represented nine percent of the sources accessed. This is commendable as in the 2020 climate change report, this affiliation only had a four percent voice share. It is very important that the media include academics and experts in discussions around climate change as their views are needed to provide expertise.

The low ranking of NGOs at five percent is concerning because NGOs involved with climate change for instance are often led by experts, activists and researchers. Therefore, they should be receiving a significant share of voice.



3.5 GENDER BREAKDOWN OF SOURCES

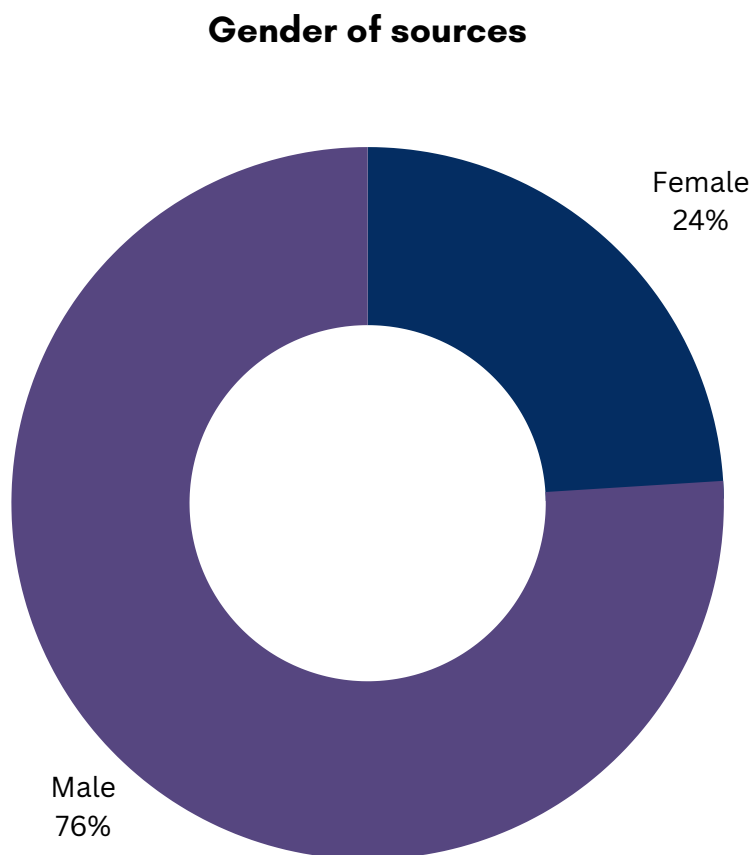


Figure 5: Gender breakdown of sources

One of the key roles of the media is to represent the different genders equitably in coverage. This is so critical as it ensures that no gender is marginalised in the media coverage.

Our findings show that the share of voice remained largely unequal, with men on average being accessed three times more than women. This gender disparity is a consistent trend and has been repeatedly shown in different media research conducted by MMA. We do note and commend the media though for increasing the female voice representation from the 22% recorded in 2020 [13] to the 24% seen in figure 5 above.

Such low representation of women in climate change coverage is very concerning as it marginalises women and perpetuates the stereotypes that women are not important enough to add to the debates/discussions on climate change. Women should effectively participate in media coverage of climate change and influence decisions that affect their lives.

[13] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Climate-Change-Report-1.pdf>

3.6 RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF SOURCES

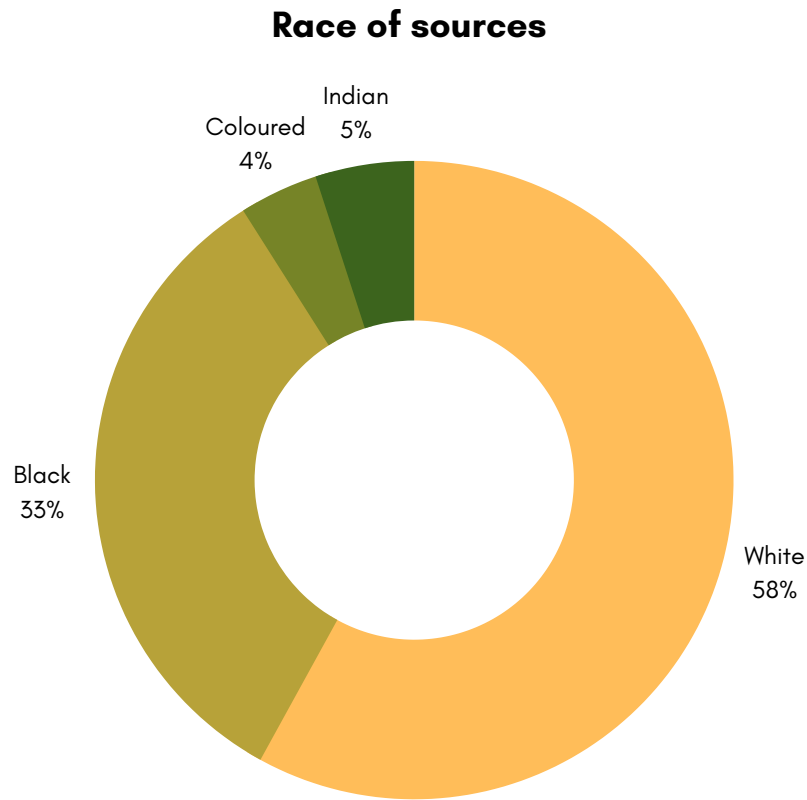


Figure 6: Racial breakdown of sources

The race of the sources in coverage of climate change was monitored to determine whether there was a balance in the representation of the different races in South Africa in comparison to their population share in the country. The sources monitored are those who speak in the media, are merely mentioned, referenced or pictured.

As can be seen in the graph above, there is a disproportionate representation of race in the media. The monitoring reveals that white voices are dominating the coverage on the climate change debate/discussion.

- White voices represent 58% of the sources in the coverage of climate change. In South Africa, the white population[14] stands at eight percent of the total population yet in the climate change coverage, white people are the majority of source.
- Black people were clearly under-represented in coverage at 33%. This is concerning as 81% of South Africa’s population is made up of black people.[15]
- Indian people were represented in coverage at five percent and Coloured people at four percent.

The media is urged to represent the different races equitably in coverage of climate change to ensure that all races contribute and feature in debates/discussions of the issue.

[14] <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022019.pdf>

[15] <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022021.pdf>

CONCLUSION

This report has presented findings on how the South African media covered climate change during a period that included the last 2021 local government elections. The findings have revealed that climate change was not an election issue, and this was arrived at by analysing periods of increases in coverage and going deeper to analyse the type of stories that contributed to those increases. In addition, to ascertain whether climate change was an election issue, the sources were analysed to determine whether the voices of local government officials, community leaders or ordinary citizens were speaking. These were not sufficiently audible in coverage.

The findings have also shown that coverage of climate change in the media is still very low and only a few media are allocating adequate space to the topic.


This report has also revealed that the reporting on climate change is still event-based as has been shown in section 3.1 where the COP26 dominated coverage during the period with the biggest increase in media coverage.


There are other areas that the media need to improve on in terms of reporting climate change. The gender and race representations are still unequal as the disparities are still very significant. The affiliations of sources should also be improved with more NGOs, civil society, ordinary citizens and experts accessed as sources in coverage.

In conclusion, MMA implores the media to increase their coverage of climate change and shift their focus from event-based reporting to issue-based reporting that is citizen and expert driven. The media should report on climate change adequately and this should be deliberately focussed on during an important period such as an election to put climate change on the agenda and, interrogate politicians on their commitments to addressing the issue. This is one way the media can help influence change in or creation of policies relating to the matter.

Questions? Contact us.



 jacquesnemma.org.za / listeremma.org.za

 011 788 1278

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