This year marks 25 years of democratic governance in South Africa, and this milestone coincides with the country’s sixth election, due to be held on the eighth of May 2019. During an election period, the media are a crucial vehicle to communicate information to the electorate and to facilitate informed decision-making when citizens go to the polls. To vote effectively, and to exercise informed choice, voters need to know where candidates and parties stand on key policy issues. For this to happen, it is important that the media demonstrates not only fairness and impartiality, but also highlights issues that affect South African citizens’ lives and futures including, but not limited to poverty, inequality, unemployment and gender-based violence, to name a few.

Half of South Africa’s population is women\(^1\), and with eighth March being International Women’s Day, we decided to reflect on how gender was covered during this elections period thus far. This is made all the more important given that there are over two million more women registered to vote than men\(^2\). Thus, it becomes of tantamount importance in the lead up to elections that media representation should reflect this proportion.

The past 25 years have adequately illustrated the importance of elections as one of the cornerstones of democracy by giving people, through the ‘one man, one vote’ franchise, the power and opportunity to express their views on current issues as well as their frustrations towards leaders and political parties who may be failing them. Yet, previous research shows that women are continually marginalized on issues that affect them, and that a patriarchal agenda continues to frame our media landscape. As Media Monitoring Africa, we conducted this research to see if this election period would be any different to the ones we have monitored in the past.

For more information, please feel free to contact us on (011) 788 - 1278 or at info@mma.org.za.

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\(^2\) According to the independent Electoral Commission, the total number of registered voters is 26,741,021, with women leading at the top with a total of 14,708,219 compared to the men’s total of 12,032,802.
This interim report analyses the elections coverage from 45 South African online news media from 1 March – 31 March 2019. We used Dexter, MMA’s internal online monitoring tool, to scrape all media content from the websites of online news media outlets and the data that is collected is then stored in a searchable database. We identified elections stories as all those that relate to the 2019 National and Provincial Elections (NPE) in South Africa. This could be items that specifically speak to these elections or elections in general, links the issue under discussion to the elections or just mentions the elections. Given that we are in an elections period, all news stories about political parties and candidates were also included in our analysis. Importantly, we excluded any items that discussed elections elsewhere e.g. Nigeria, European Parliament etc.

For each story, Dexter used machine learning to extract important information, which is supplemented by human analysis including: (1) name, type and origin of publication, (2) headline and summary, (3) main topics of the story and (4) the identities of all sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation). As a key element in quality control, specially trained media monitors then analysed each news item in Dexter and ensured that all data from each story was correctly captured in the system. The results below are an analysis of the dataset in the 31-day period.

[3] For the full list of media monitored, please contact Media Monitoring Africa on (011) 788 – 1278 or sarahf@mma.org.za
WHAT WE FOUND

WHAT WERE THE MAIN TOPICS?

The results below highlight the levels of attention afforded to various subjects and help us understand to what extent elections reporting caters to citizens’ needs. For this research, an overall theme or topic was identified in each story. For example, stories that specifically focused on the different rallies or events of political party candidates would be identified as “Political party campaigning”. In the same way, stories that specifically spoke about the country’s readiness to host elections and that centred on members of the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) giving progress on the preparation towards the election would be categorised as “Elections logistics”. These topics are then added together to give an idea of the main themes across coverage.

Figure 1. Top 5 topics across elections coverage in March 2019.

Of the 2321 analysed stories, we found that reporting was dominated by local and national politics. Items that spoke about internal and external political party politics (16%), general elections updates (10%), national politics (10%), political party campaigning (8%) and corruption (6%) received the biggest share of coverage respectively. Critically, when combined together, these top 5 topics tally almost half of all stories (48%).
On the other hand, issues that spoke to democracy building, human rights and a citizen’s agenda such as gender-based violence, land, health, education, poverty, child abuse and housing scantily featured and all received below 2% of total coverage. While we expect some of the reporting to draw attention to general politicking and electioneering activities, an elections period is a crucial time for the electorate to hold their leaders accountable on issues that affect them. We would therefore expect to see, in this period more than ever, citizens driving the political and media agenda by pushing forward on key social issues that they want addressed rather than simply focusing on public campaign events.

Of even greater concern was that gender was a primary theme in only seven stories (0.3% of the total articles analysed). Within this limited coverage, stories were either steeped in political rhetoric and electioneering or focused only on women in relation to violence or child-rearing. This limited view of the complexity women’s issues relegates women to the bottom of the political and social agenda, and undermines their legitimacy as a fundamental segment of the electorate. With women far outweighing men in terms of registered voter numbers¹, one would think that they would be a key focus both of political campaigns and media coverage. Here, even in a period in which International Women’s Day (8 March) was commemorated, issues associated with gender appear to have been overshadowed by local politics.

"OF EVEN GREATER CONCERN WAS THAT GENDER WAS A PRIMARY THEME IN ONLY SEVEN STORIES (0.3%)"
WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR?

Sources accessed for news stories are a good indicator to understand who gets to speak on what issue. A diverse set of sources is therefore a sure-fire way to give a news story balance and depth, as well as to provide an opportunity to empower those who've previously been denied a voice in the media.

Which groups are accessed in the coverage?

What is immediately clear from our research is that citizen voices for the first time are on par with other key political voices. Here, citizens were the second most accessed group where, after political parties, made up 7% of all sources. This level of citizen access is highly unusual when compared to previous monitoring and is certainly a fundamental step in the right direction. Despite this, however, there remains an excessive concentration of coverage on “official” or political voices, with political parties alone receiving 45% share of all voices heard. Other sources accessed frequently include national government (7%) as well as the office of the Presidency (7%). Once more, this paints a picture of a heavy reliance on “official” voices above all others and this speaks to how the political elite continue to set the agenda.

We argue that the weight given to such political voices is disproportionate to the issues that need to be unpacked. This oversight means that those voices who could provide expert opinion and independent analyses outside of electioneering narratives, such as academics, civil society groups, political commentators and organised labour groupings, are largely ignored.

Figure 2. The most frequently accessed groups in elections coverage in March 2019

1. POLITICAL PARTIES
   45%

2. CITIZENS
   7%

3. JUSTICE SYSTEM
   5%

4. CORPORATES
   4%

SA PRESIDENCY
7%

GOVT DEPARTMENTS
7%
How did political parties fare?

There are 48 political parties contesting the 2019 elections, with a record number of 19 new registered political parties[^4]. During an election period, it is the responsibility of the media to interact and engage with the many political parties in order to report in such a way that informs the electorate of what the different parties have to offer and why they should be voted into power. Against this, of course, is the prickly challenge media face in terms of covering and affording equitable coverage to those 48 parties. When looking at political party representation in our analysis period, 91% of the coverage is absorbed by the top three political parties. This is unsurprising as these parties, when combined, make up 90% of the seats in the National Assembly. The rest of the 9% of coverage is shared between the remaining other political parties.

Importantly, we found that the African National Congress (ANC) enjoyed a greater share of the party voices than all other political parties reaching an all-time high of 57%, surpassing the 38% coverage it received in 2014. The two biggest opposition parties in the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have more or less remained the same in terms of share of voice with 20% and 10% respectively. Smaller parties, including the National Freedom Party (NFP) and Congress Of The People (COPE), experienced a massive reduction in coverage, leaving them below the 2% mark.

It also appears that many of the smaller, well-established political parties are having to share the “leftovers” with the new kids on the block. Out of the new political parties to appear on this year’s ballot, the GOOD party fared the best, receiving 2% of overall coverage, which is the same amount of coverage received by the well-established IFP. This could be because the party leader Patricia De Lille has an existing media profile and is an effective media communicator with established networks and knowledge. In addition her exit from the DA as mayor was also controversial and this may also benefit her access and voice in the media.

[^4]: IEC Political Party List http://www.elections.org.za/content/Parties/Political-party-list/
Women in politics?

Importantly, women as representatives of political parties were severely under-accessed. Our findings demonstrate that across the top 10 sources from each of the top 3 political parties, women representatives were only accessed 16%, 13% and 2% of the time from ANC, DA and EFF, respectively. Importantly, this is well below average across all political party sources as well as below the gender average across all sources (see next section). Understandably, this stems from the majority of parties having predominantly male leaders and senior officials and therefore those are most commonly accessed. Regardless, the absence of a gender focus or alternative female voices within parties is concerning across all groups involved.

Figure 4. Breakdown of top 10 most frequently accessed sources for ANC, DA, EFF and across all parties respectively.
What was the race breakdown of voices?

Given South Africa’s history of racial polarisation and its subsequent transition to a democracy, there have been calls for transformation and representation in line with the country’s demographics in all sectors and spheres of society, including the media. Our question becomes: how does the racial diversity of sources compare to population demographic data? Do the media seek out voices from across the racial spectrum or do they tend to focus in on one type of group over another?

As a starting point, we found that white voices were over-represented with a 17% share of overall coverage despite only making up roughly 8% of the population of South Africa. This finding is consistent with previous trends of an overrepresentation of white sources. However, current analysis shows that many of these white sources are political party voices, where individuals such as Alan Winde and John Steenhuisen (both in the DA) were accessed 40 times each respectively. Another noteworthy contributing factor to the substantial share of white voice coverage is the inclusion of Angelo Agrizzi and Gavin Watson, who are both central figures to the Bosasa corruption scandal which is currently being uncovered. Here, Agrizzi, who is giving testimony at the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, was sourced 75 times while Watson was mentioned 56 times.
In a significant diversion from previous results, Coloured (6%) and Indian (5%) voices have steadily picked up from previous findings. Although these figures do not reflect the country’s population demographics, where Coloured people make up 8.8% and Indian people 2.5%, it still shows an upward trend towards a critical and diverse media representation in South Africa. Importantly, though, there seems to still be a heavy reliance on accessing the political elite as sources, as Ebrahim Rasool (23), Patricia De Lille (66), Jessie Duarte (17) and Vincent Smith (18) (collectively make up 39% of the overall accessed Coloured voice). With regards to the Indian voice, the same applies. Prominent political Indian voices in Pravin Gordhan (68), Karima Brown (35), Shamila Batohi (23) and Ajay Gupta (33) make up 34% of the overall Indian voice.

“This still shows an upward trend towards critical and diverse media representation in South Africa.”

What was the gender breakdown of those accessed?

Men and women should be represented fairly across all issues. An easy way to draw attention to possible gender inequality is to examine the balance of voices between men and women and see whether these voices reflect the demographics in the population.

According to our findings, the share of voices remained heavily unequal in terms of men and women, with men (78%) being accessed over three times more than women (22%). This is alarming and not in line with national demographics, considering the fact that women make up 51% of the entire 57 million population of South Africa. This failure to consistently and meaningfully access women is not surprising, and has been shown in research time and again. Ongoing marginalisation of women’s voices remains a huge barrier to quality media reporting the world over.

[6] 51% (approximately 29.5 million) of the population is female (Stats SA, 2018).
Despite this, it is also important to draw attention to those journalists and media houses who are pushing the boundaries in terms of accessing female sources. Bearing in mind that men continue to receive the lions-share of coverage, media organisations including GroundUp, City Press and Daily Dispatch are going above and beyond in terms of accessing female sources. Each of these publications are specifically mentioned as they have published huge volumes of elections-related content (>40 stories) and have far exceeded the national average (22%) of accessing women. Other organisations, including Weekend Argus, The Daily Vox, Sunday Tribune and The Mercury, have also done a sterling job in terms of raising female voices, albeit across lower levels of elections reporting. These results clearly point to how the opportunities to access women are available and can be leveraged for better quality reporting.
HOW FAIR IS THE COVERAGE?

Media from around the world understand the critical importance of balanced and fair journalism, where unpacking important issues or events is made possible by accessing sources and portraying those opinions in a clear constructive way. Giving everyone an opportunity to share their insights is made all the more important in an election period where the exclusion of one party voice or the favouring of another party has drastic consequences on the quality of information the electorate receive. These biases, in some cases subconsciously put forward, has the potential to alter the freeness and fairness of elections and is therefore a critical component of any media elections analysis.

**Figure 8. Percentage of stories that were fair vs biased**

This results from this month show that 98% of all news items monitored were fair and only 2% of coverage bore indications of potential bias. Given that accusations of bias have severe repercussions both for the journalists themselves and for their media houses, more work is needed to unpack exactly the types of bias published, which groups were favoured/disfavoured and on which platforms. These will be shared in future analyses.

“ONLY 2% OF COVERAGE BORE INDICATIONS OF POTENTIAL BIAS”
CONCLUSIONS

The 2019 South African Elections coverage thus far remains highly politicised both in terms of the types of stories covered and the diversity of sources accessed. This is not unusual when looking at trends in media coverage over time, as previous research indicates. While the stark improvements to accessing citizens as well as Coloured and Indian voices is a key positive shift, we would argue that more needs to be done in terms of the types of stories published and the types of voices accessed (outside of citizen groups). This is made all the more critical as only a few select media appear to be making a concerted effort to include more female and marginalised voices in coverage. And as Giuliana Sorge suggests, “This perpetual poor coverage on gender issues is a reminder that journalists are neglecting their duty to represent a diversity of voices and move these important social conversations to the forefront.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from these results and given the constraints of newsrooms, we have included some tips on how journalists could improve the interrogation of gender issues in elections coverage going forward:

1. Although politics remains highly patriarchal, ask parties questions that reveal whether gender gaps exist in party policies. For example, ask them to unpack how their party policies or strategies affect men and women differently?
2. Ask parties about the concrete steps (including budget allocation) to address: (1) violence in all forms, (2) gender-based violence, (3) termination of pregnancy, (4) sanitary pads and tampons, (5) glass ceilings in the workplace, (6) maternity leave constraints, and (7) equal pay in the workplace.
3. Ask parties for their top gender policies and then do a series of clear gender focused pieces unpacking parties’ top priority areas.
4. Ask female politicians about their gendered experience in their parties and in the elections generally.
5. Identify gender experts and ask them what their big gender questions for politicians are. These can be women experts in (1) science and tech, (2) civil society, (3) women in business, (4) women in academia, and (5) women in politics.

[8] Giuliana Sorge, 10 August 2016, Mail & Guardian. The media’s coverage of gender issues during elections was not on their agenda. https://mg.co.za/article/2016-08-10-00-the-medias-coverage-of-gender-issues-during-elections-was-not-on-their-agenda