

LOADSHEDDING AND INFORMATION RIGHTS

Analysing media's coverage of loadshedding and whether the media protected or violated information rights

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1. INTRODUCTION



It is safe to assume that the majority of South Africans and all those who live in the country have heard of loadshedding. This is because the term has been the lived experience of many people as South Africa's electricity supply entity, Eskom has been implementing loadshedding since 2007.

Loadshedding is defined by Eskom as "a controlled process that responds to unplanned events in order to protect the electricity power system from a total blackout". Notable is the fact that on its own, this sentence as a definition gives little explanation as to what exactly loadshedding is. This definition comes way into the write-up titled, "What is load shedding?" on the entity's website. Prior to the paragraph where the actual definition is given, some information is given to contextualise loadshedding right before the definition is provided. Still, it is again safe to assume that everyone who has heard of the term, loadshedding knows to a certain degree what it means. Or do they?

Enter the media as a fourth estate mandated to provide information to the general public, among other mandates. The media's mandate coupled with the information rights of the general public means that the media are obliged to ensure that their coverage of loadshedding just as should be the case with whatever issue is being reported, protects and promotes the public's information rights.

Information rights are defined by AltAdvisory as rights relating to "protecting and promoting privacy, free speech, and access to information on- and offline".

To determine whether the media, in its coverage of loadshedding, protected and/or promoted the public's information rights, the rights to access to information and free speech will be used as a benchmark. This is because in coverage of an issue as important as loadshedding, an issue that has not only dominated media coverage but also adversely affected many South African businesses and livelihoods, the general public, as is their right, should have access to quality and credible information from the media and, be given opportunities to speak about this issue in media coverage.



Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) shares the view that for a democracy to thrive, the information which the general public has access to from the media should be adequately and properly unpacked in order for an ordinary citizen to understand the issue and make informed decisions. Additionally, MMA shares the view that these ordinary citizens should be given a platform in the media to speak about the issue especially when the issue is of national importance or is an issue that affects their daily lives. Well packaged information is information about a topic that has several elements including a properly explained issue and a diverse list of sources who include experts, ordinary citizens and those with the power and mandate to address it who in the case of loadshedding is the government.

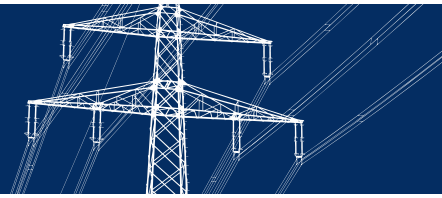
Access to information is the right of everyone and this is enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution in Section 32 as well as in the Promotion of Access to Information Act. In terms of the right to freedom of expression, this right is provided for in Section 16 of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution.

So, knowing all of this, how did the South African media report on loadshedding? Did the media protect and/or promote the information rights of the general public particularly the right to access to information and the right to free speech?

To determine this, MMA monitored and analysed media coverage of loadshedding from June, 2020 to June, 2023. The period was specifically selected for analysis due to the fact that 2020 was “seemingly the most intensive loadshedding year yet”, according to research conducted by the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research. Therefore, it is vital to analyse this year and the ensuing years to understand how the issue was reported, at a time when it also dominated media coverage the most.

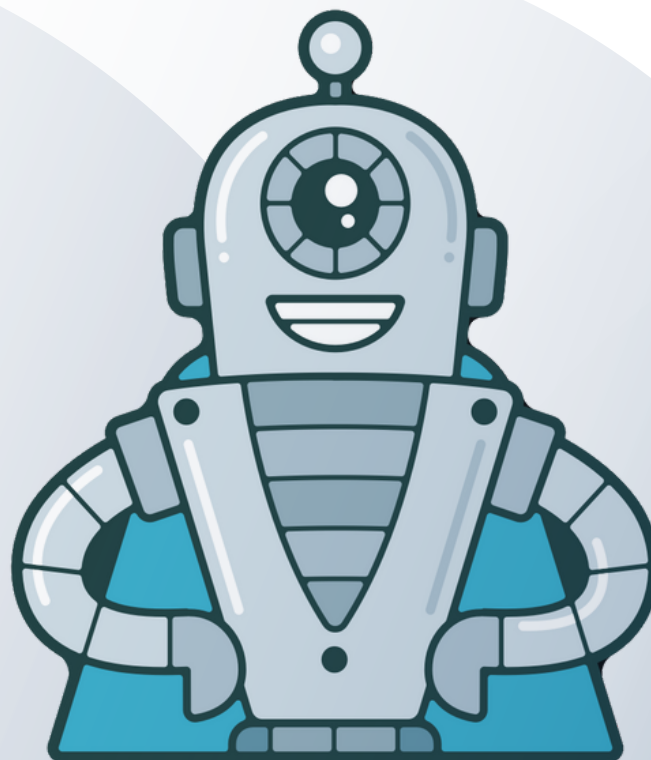
Further, to ascertain whether the media protected and/or promoted the public’s rights to access to information and to free speech in coverage of loadshedding, aspects such as what issues related to loadshedding dominated the list as well as how these issues were unpacked will be delved into. In addition, sources speaking the most in coverage will be analysed. The one question sought to be answered is whether the media protected or violated information rights in their coverage of loadshedding.

2. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS



Using Dexter, an in-house monitoring tool, news items reporting on loadshedding were scraped from 81[1] South African online and print media during the 3-year monitoring period. The keywords and phrases, electricity, Eskom, energy crisis and loadshedding were used to collect the articles. A total of 39, 521 news items were collected and using machine learning, were further analysed for aspects such as topics and sources, among others. Findings from this monitoring are being analysed in this report.

In terms of limitations, the major one was the inability to monitor and analyse content from broadcast media and this is because Dexter, the tool used to collect the data, can only currently scrape from online and print media. However, media such as SABC Online and eNCA Online were among those monitored.

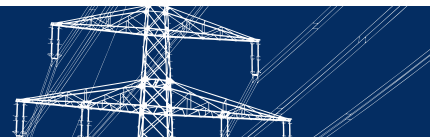


DEXTER

MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA INITIATIVE

[1] Some of the media monitored were Business Day, DispatchLIVE, Daily Maverick, City Press, Cape Argus, Cape Times, Daily Sun, Engineering News, IOL, GroundUp, News24, Mail & Guardian, Mining Weekly, Pretoria News, Saturday Star, SowetanLIVE, The Citizen, HeraldLIVE, TimesLIVE etc.

3. FINDINGS



3.1 ARTICLE COUNT OVER TIME

The article count gives an indication of how much priority was attached to loadshedding as an issue by the media during the monitoring period. All articles about or relating to electricity, Eskom, energy crisis and loadshedding were collected and analysed. Nine percent was dedicated to loadshedding coverage by the media during the entire period under analysis. This means that during the monitoring period, the media reported on loadshedding at 9% while the remaining 91% was dedicated to other issues.

For an issue that is reported to be causing a lot of damage to the economy thereby threatening the lives and livelihoods of South Africans, 9% coverage is minimal. “The full bench of the Gauteng High Court” heard in March, 2023 that loadshedding has cost the South African economy R1.2 trillion and that the figures for 2023 were yet to be added to that list. The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration released a labour market dashboard developed by Business Research Intelligence & Communications where the ripple effect of loadshedding on the agriculture sector, on small, medium, and micro-enterprises as well as on businesses and workers was discussed. Other than effects of loadshedding on the labour sector, other studies have reported effects of loadshedding on the health and the education sectors as well on security. Reports on impact of loadshedding on the environment have also been done. With all of this, the magnitude of the problem that is loadshedding cannot be overlooked. Further, the importance of the issue needing significant space in media coverage cannot be over-emphasised and 9% coverage share over a period of three years is indeed minimal.

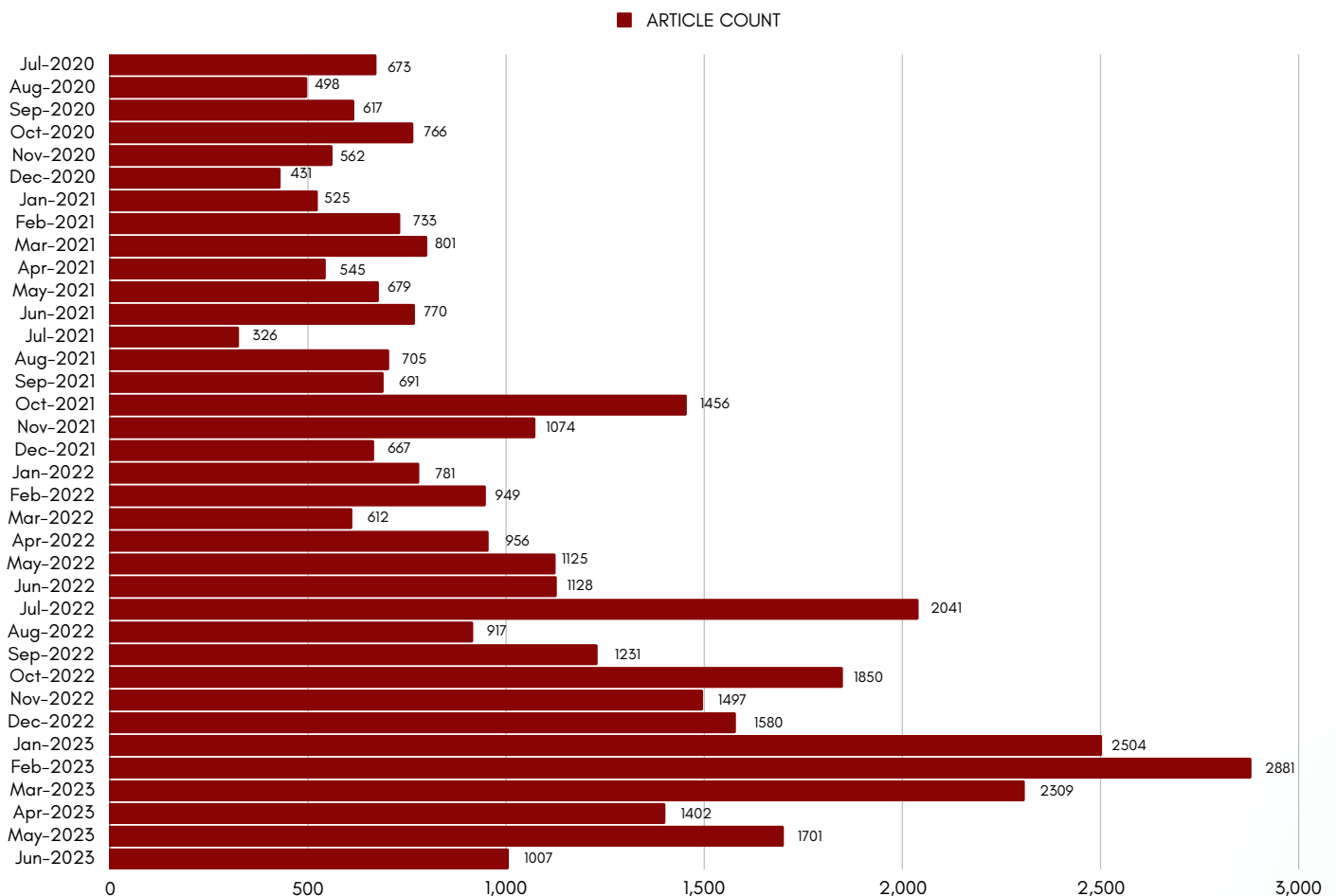
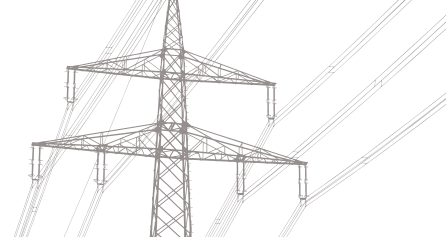


Figure 1: Article count of coverage over time



During the monitoring period, the first spike in coverage was in October of 2021 at 1, 456 articles on loadshedding in that period. A deeper analysis reveals that during this period, stories that dominated coverage were on the return of loadshedding as announced by Eskom and, the negotiations and subsequent signing of a memorandum of understanding between City of Johannesburg and Eskom for Soweto to get electricity directly from the City. Other stories were from the campaign trail where some politicians were talking about loadshedding and how they would address it if elected. The R11.5 million confiscated by the state from the bank account of a senior Eskom manager also dominated coverage during the period.

The highest spike at 2, 881 stories was in February of 2023 and as can be seen in the graph, the trajectory started climbing in the previous month at 2, 504 articles – the second biggest spike. Coverage in February was mostly around calls for President Cyril Ramaphosa to address the electricity crisis in his SONA, the state of disaster declared during SONA over the energy crisis, and the creation of the ministerial position for electricity as well as reactions to this. Calls for the president to address the electricity crisis in the country as well as views over the eminent declaration of a state disaster over the energy crisis were also dominant in January, the month of the second highest spike. It must be noted that during the two highest spikes and the period following, loadshedding became more rampant and would go up to stage 6 with some media reporting suspicious over the country having had already gone in stage 8 and, government bracing for stage 8.

While the stories dominating coverage listed above show some form of diversity in coverage of loadshedding during the highest spikes, it's only the topics lists in the section below in Figure 2 that will show the true picture of whether there was diversity in coverage of issues around loadshedding or not. The data in Figure 1 merely shows periods of heightened and reduced reporting on loadshedding. There are more periods when coverage of loadshedding was at less than 1000 stories per month and these periods of reduced coverage of loadshedding could have contributed significantly to having only 9% of coverage on loadshedding in the entire monitoring period.





Figure 2 below shows the top 5 topics in media coverage of loadshedding. These five topics were the most dominant out of the 17 coded topics on or related to loadshedding. The top five list garnered a combined coverage share of 81% leaving the 19% to be shared among the remaining 12 coded topics.

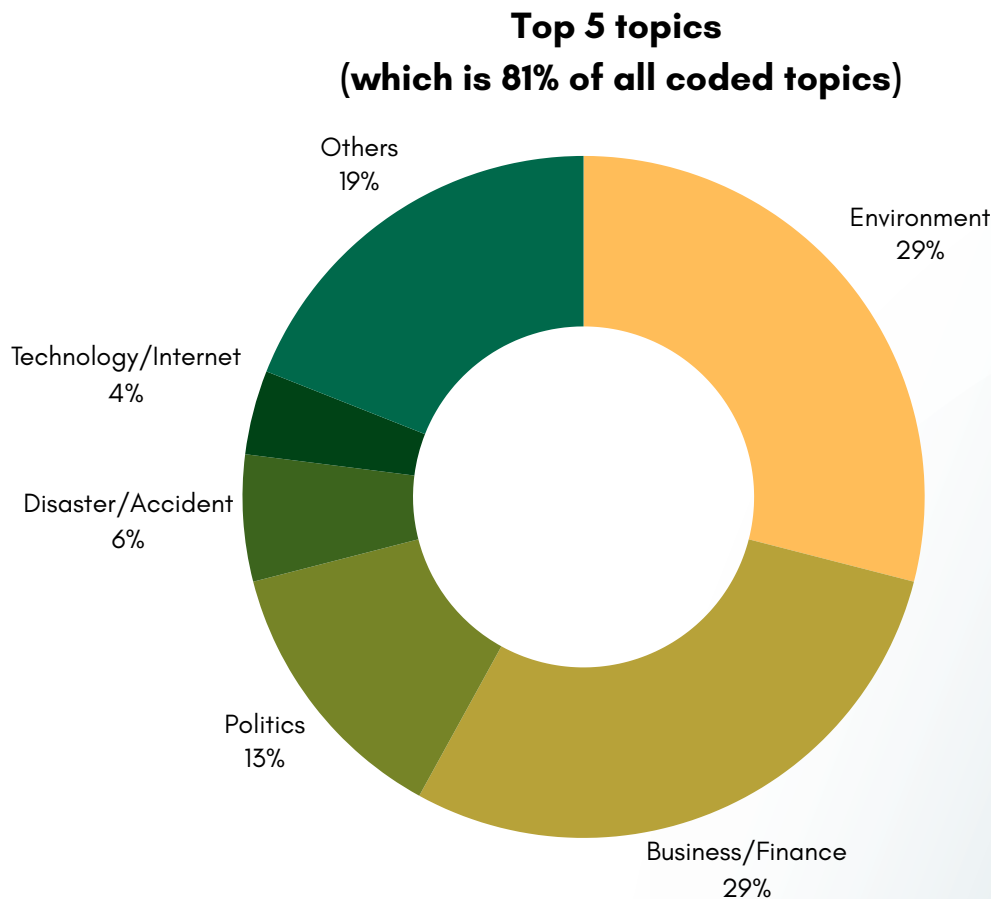
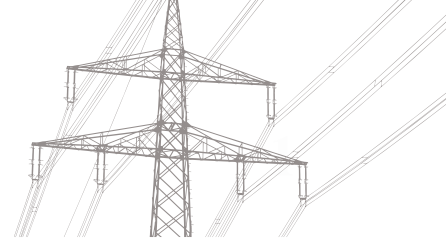


Figure 2: Top 5 topics in media coverage of loadshedding

As alluded to in the section above, one of the ways in which diversity in loadshedding coverage can be determined is by looking at the topics list and looking at Figure 2, one can deduce that the media did attempt to achieve some diversity in the issues they reported relating to loadshedding. Environment and Business/Finance topped the list at 29% each and rightly so because different stakeholders have come out stating that loadshedding has negatively impacted the economy by stalling and in some cases halting business activities and businesses entirely.

Further, the adverse effects caused by loadshedding as more and more households and businesses turn to diesel powered generators as alternative sources have also been reported. Therefore, it makes sense that Environment as a topic would top the list of topics. Eskom itself announced it would spend about R30 billion on diesel on mitigate loadshedding during winter.



The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air released a study in 2020 that highlighted a drop in sulphur dioxide in South Africa despite the gas emissions still being high. Loadshedding caused by loss in power generation from the coal fired power stations in Mpumalanga, reportedly the “largest SO₂ emission hotspot in Africa” was cited as a contributing factor to the drop in sulphur dioxide. Sadly, the study reveals that despite the drop in sulphur dioxide, the lives and health of South Africans were still at risk from the 12 coal-fired power stations in Mpumalanga located a few kilometres from Gauteng, a highly populated province.

Other stories reported that could have contributed to the topic, Environment topping the list were around environmental groups commenting on the impact of loadshedding on the environment and tasking the government to clean up the air, for instance.

In MMA’s monitoring of such issues of national importance, politics as a topic often tops the list of top topics. It is therefore encouraging that in coverage of loadshedding during the period under analysis, politics as a topic featured in third place at 13% and by less than half the percentage of the topic on top of the list. This shows that the media reported loadshedding, or strived to report loadshedding as an issue away from politics.

It is however unfortunate that health, education and crime for instance did not feature on the top 5 list especially that some reports suggest how these sectors have been negatively impacted by loadshedding. The three topics garnered a coverage share of 1%, 1% and 4% respectively.

In terms of achieving diversity in issues reported and, reporting loadshedding as an issue away from politics, the media did fair commendably. However, the story is quite different when it comes to educating and informing the public adequately especially in stories that contributed to the topics, Environment and Business/Finance topping the list. A deeper analysis of the articles under these topics revealed that the issues were not sufficiently unpacked for the easy comprehension of the general public. The language used in many of the articles was somewhat too technical for the easy comprehension of an ordinary citizen. To their credit, the media did try in some articles to explain using experts or reports to highlight what an incident could mean for the general public but such articles where the issues were adequately unpacked were few. If the media are to ensure that their audiences understand fully the issues they report and contribute to realising people’s information rights, then coverage of complex issues has to be properly unpacked and more experts can be used to simplify issues in coverage

TOP 10 SOURCES IN COVERAGE



Diversity in sources in media coverage of any issue or event is crucial to ensure that it is not only a select few who get to exercise their right to free speech as is outlined in Section 16 of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution. Further, diversity in sources is important as it benefits journalism in that coverage is enriched with different perspectives of different people – an element that is vital to a credible and trusted media. In an article titled, “[Why Diverse Newsrooms Are Important](#),” author, Rebecca Frank who is the Vice President of Research & Insights at the News Media Alliance notes, “Another important, often overlooked, form of diversity within news organizations is diversity of viewpoints. In an age of deep political polarization, which can directly impact media, publishing stories reflecting a range of beliefs and experiences may help expand reader trust.”

Figure 3 below shows the top 10 list of sources in coverage of loadshedding totalling a 27% voice share. A total of 4, 879 coded sources featured in coverage of loadshedding over the three-year monitoring period. That the top 10 account for over a quarter of the voice share can be deemed as problematic as it only leaves less than three quarters of the voice share for the over 4, 860 sources. Sources monitored and analysed in coverage of loadshedding are those quoted, mentioned, pictured or referenced to as well as the subjects of the stories.

Top 10 sources (which is 27% of all coded sources)

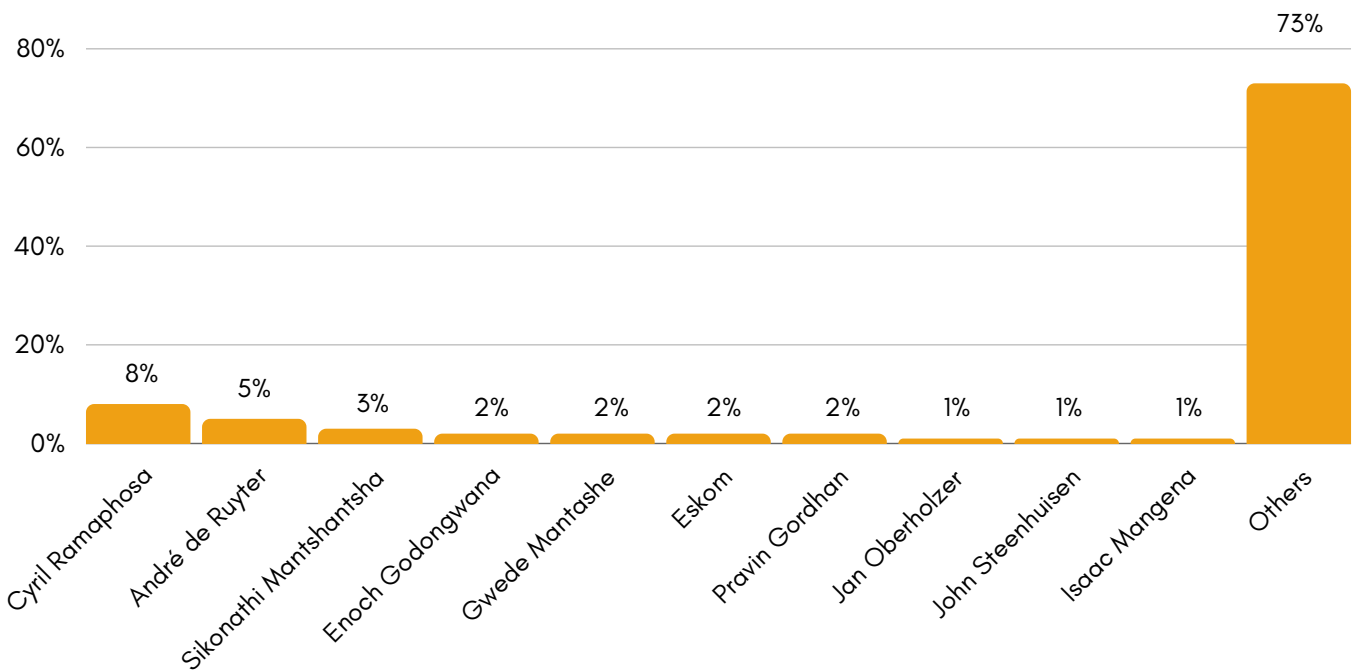
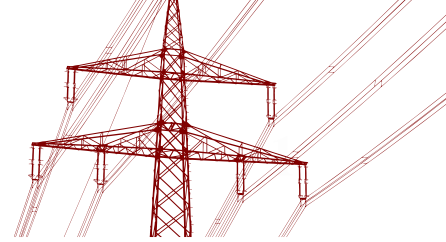


Figure 3: Top 10 sources in media coverage of loadshedding



As can be seen from Figure 3 above, President Cyril Ramaphosa featured the most as a source in coverage at 8% followed by Eskom's former Chief Executive Officer, Andre de Ruyter at 5%. In third place is former Eskom spokesperson and financial journalist, Sikonathi Mantshantsha.

To further determine how diversity was lacking in the sources shown in Figure 3 above, all one has to do is pay attention to the sources and their affiliation. All of the sources above save for a couple are either national government officials or affiliated to Eskom. This shows that coverage of loadshedding mostly accessed as sources government and Eskom officials. This, at the expense of the other over 4, 860 sources that were minimally accessed as well as the other entities and especially ordinary citizens who would have contributed to the loadshedding discourse.

A deeper analysis of the type of stories where the voices of individuals affiliated to the national government and Eskom were dominating reveals that these were mostly on government's plans to end loadshedding and, Eskom's institutional challenges and responses or plans to ease loadshedding respectively. Many other stories where Eskom personnel were dominating as sources were on announcements of shifts between loadshedding stages. While the top three voices as shown in Figure 3 correlates with the top 5 topics and affiliation of sources shown in Figures 2 and 4 respectively, it highlights the kind of perspective dominating the loadshedding discourse - that which prioritises the announcement of plans to address loadshedding minus a perspective that interrogates those plans in the form of experts or, a perspective that highlights the impact on the lives and livelihoods of ordinary citizens through the voice of ordinary citizens.

The dominance of government or political voices in issues and events of national importance is a trend observed by MMA in all of our research. It is known that the sources with the loudest voice in media coverage hold the most power. This then begs the question, shouldn't the media be deliberately diversifying voices in media coverage of loadshedding to ensure that it is not only government and Eskom officials that continuously hold this power but that other voices are amplified as should be the case in a democracy and indeed as one of the roles of the media?

AFFILIATION OF SOURCES



Figure 2 above showed us that politics as a topic did not top the list of top 5 topics in coverage of loadshedding and was actually recorded at 13%, less than half the percentage for the two top topics on the list. Yet, in Figure 4 below, political voices – the ANC and the DA are respectively topping the list and featuring third on the list of the top 10 loudest voices in coverage of loadshedding. This, however, is not surprising as many of the sources on even from the top 10 list of sources shown in Figure 3, were affiliated with the ANC during the monitoring period.

Monitoring affiliation of sources tells us which groups of sources are prioritised by the media in coverage and/or which sources set the agenda. In this case, the affiliation of sources was monitored to analyse who set the agenda in coverage of loadshedding, who contributed the most to the discourse and who, arguably had the most power judging by how much voice share they had in coverage.

Top 10 Affiliation of sources (which is 61% of all coded affiliations)

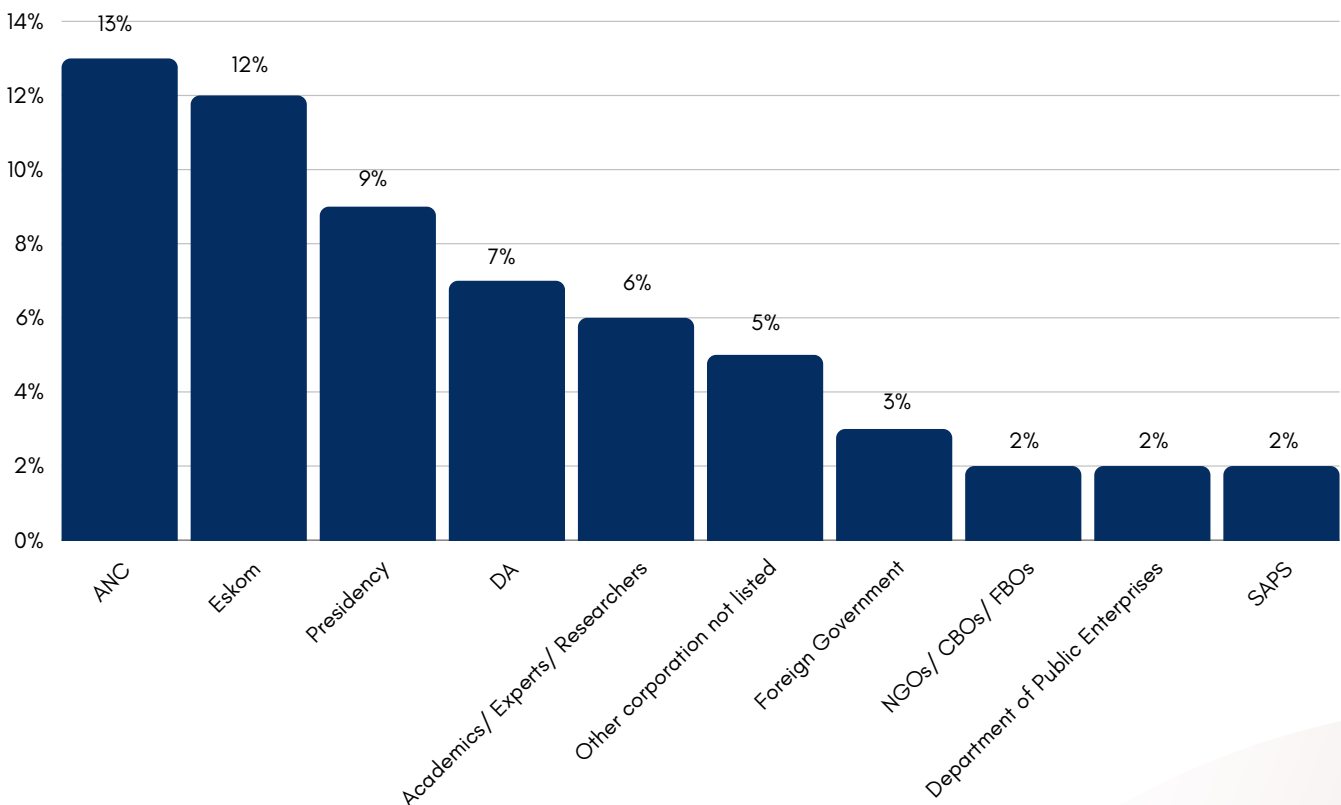
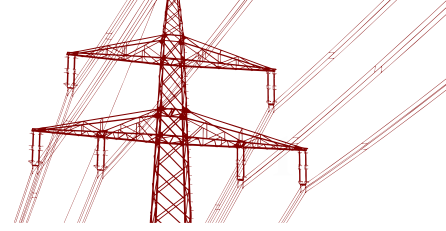


Figure 4: Top 10 affiliation of sources in media coverage of loadshedding



A total of 238 affiliations were coded for this analysis and the figure above shows the top 10 from those groups. The top 10 affiliations garnered a combined voice share of 61%, leaving only 39% to be shared among the 228 affiliations remaining. These remaining affiliations included those sectors reported to be hardest hit by loadshedding such as the mining sector, agriculture, manufacturing and health sectors, to name but a few. Other critical voices not prioritised in media coverage of loadshedding include ordinary citizens.

The marginalisation of ordinary citizens in coverage of loadshedding is unfortunate and a violation of their information rights especially the right to free speech and access to information. The former is the most violated information right when it comes to ordinary citizens in media coverage of any issue or event of national importance. MMA has found this to be the case in almost all of our media monitoring and analysis exercise where the voice of ordinary citizens hardly features on the list of top 10 affiliations and when it does feature, it's very minimal.

Coverage of an issue that is the everyday lived experience of many South Africans cannot continue to exclude them. This coverage cannot continue to be dominated by formal voices who are mostly from the ruling party, the entity responsible for electricity or the presidency. This not only violates the citizens information rights but also robs them of an opportunity to share views on how they have been affected and how they envision the powerful to address the issue. Critical challenges faced by a country need to have a human element lest those in power forget how exactly the issue affects the ordinary citizens – the very citizens who elect those in power and the very citizens whose lives those in power are supposed to strive to improve. This is what a real democracy looks like – giving the power to the ordinary citizens to interrogate those in power and hold them accountable or simply voice out how a certain issue dominating the fourth estate's coverage has impacted their lives.

This is not to say that there were no ordinary citizens' voices in media coverage of loadshedding. Some articles monitored and analysed did in fact include this critical voice but the voice share was not significant enough to make it to the top 10 or even top 20 list of affiliations accessed as sources in coverage of loadshedding. Among the few and indeed to illustrate how powerful coverage can be if it includes the voice of ordinary citizens, is an article by Mail & Guardian titled, "Load-shedding crisis: 'The power to change is in citizens' hands'" (30/01/2023) and written by Lesego Chepape, Mandisa Ndlovu, Sheree Bega and Anathi Madubela. This article is dominated by ordinary citizens who share their lived experience. Below are some of the many quotes in the article;

"Those people sitting there don't sit there by choice, there are no jobs, and it does not help that factories are either shutting down or retrenching their staff because of the ills of load-shedding."

“They just left the house complaining about the internet. Apparently when the lights go off, so does the network. They need the network to look for jobs and there is also the anxiety of them expecting calls that may not come through as a result of the network. Inzima le mpilo esiyiphilayo [the life we are living is very difficult].”

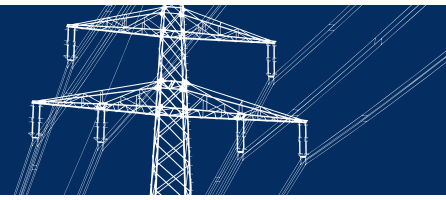
“On top of worrying about how load-shedding affects me and my family, I now have to take home the stress of whether the school will be in one piece when we return in the morning. We have computer labs, and other things that are vital for the education of our learners, so should thieves make their way into the school, what are the chances that our patrol guy will overcome them? It is a never-ending stress. We may never catch those thieves as our CCTV cameras don’t work when there is no electricity.”

“They recently shot a lady selling scones on that corner. Down there, they stabbed someone. All this during load-shedding because it gets so dark.”

“My fridge and TV no longer work because of load-shedding. I now go to the opposite house to catch up on the news...”

From Figure 4 above, it is notable and commendable that another voice that is usually marginalised in media coverage of critical issues is featuring on the top 10 list. This is the voice of academics, experts and researchers at 6%. This is encouraging and should be continued especially that this group adds valuable expertise to the discourse for ordinary citizens to make sense of what the issue is and for the powerful to have a plethora of ways to address the problem.





Gender representation of sources

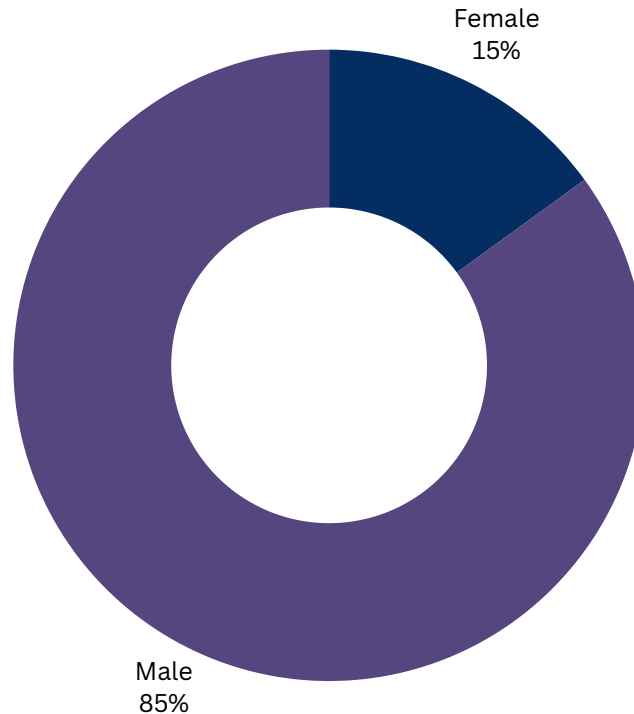


Figure 5: Gender representation of sources in coverage of loadshedding

Another voice that is always marginalised in media coverage of any issue or event of national importance is the voice of women. Almost, if not all of MMA's research reveals that women are often overlooked as sources in media coverage – be it coverage of issues said to mostly affect them or not.

Figure 5 shows that in coverage of loadshedding, women spoke as sources at only 15% and that the majority of the voice share at 85% belongs to male sources. This not only shows that male sources were preferred but also prioritised in coverage of loadshedding.

Marginalising women from contributing to a debate or discussion of any issue that also affects them as citizens disadvantages societies and the nation at large. Women add different perspectives to the discourse and when the women are given an equitable representation as sources in coverage, it enables an environment where institutional responses to challenges they face – challenges such as the impact of loadshedding in this case, are drawn up with their views included.

Further, it benefits journalism to speak to women as sources as the waning trust in the media deepens if the same voices continue to be neglected in coverage. In addition, the media cannot continue to marginalise women in coverage as doing so enables an environment where the media become an enabler of a system that suppresses women.



Race representation of sources

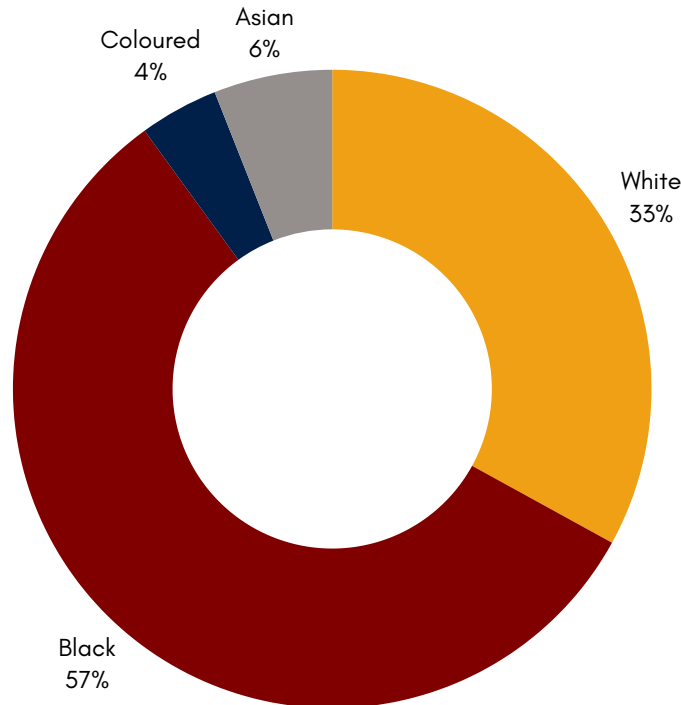


Figure 6: Race representation of sources in loadshedding coverage

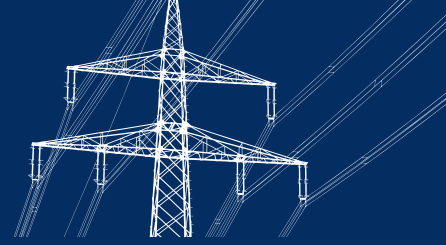
One of the major issues that South Africa grapples with is race and racism. It then becomes more important for the media in their coverage of any issue to aspire to achieve equitable representation of the different races so that no race is further marginalised.

Statistics South Africa places the different races at the following population percentages: Black: 80.9%, Coloured: 8.8%, White: 7.8%, Asian: 2.6%. Comparing these population percentages to the percentages in Figure 6 above showing race representation, it can be deduced that almost all races were equitably represented save for the Coloured race that was severely underrepresented in coverage at 4%. This trend has been observed in the majority of monitoring and research activities by MMA – where the Coloured race is underrepresented in media coverage.

Using the same measuring element, the white race was overrepresented in media coverage of loadshedding garnering a voice share of 33% when their population percentage is at 7.8.

The media are called upon to represent all races equitably in coverage to challenge marginalisation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



4. CONCLUSION

The analysis highlights several key areas where media coverage of loadshedding can be improved. There is a notable lack of attention during periods of reduced coverage, emphasising the need for increased awareness and comprehensive reporting on this critical issue. The media's commendable efforts for diversity in coverage, particularly on topics like Environment and Business/Finance, need improvement in unpacking complex issues for better public understanding.

Additionally, the analysis underscores the importance of diversifying sources to provide a more inclusive and comprehensive representation of the loadshedding discourse. While political voices, especially those affiliated with the ANC and the DA, dominate, there is a significant marginalisation of ordinary citizens, violating their information rights. Encouragingly, the inclusion of academics, experts, and researchers in media coverage is commendable, offering valuable expertise to the discourse.

The analysis also emphasizes the need for media organisations to actively address the gender disparity in sourcing by prioritising and amplifying the voices of women. Similarly, achieving equitable representation of all races in coverage is crucial, with a call for conscious efforts to seek out and amplify voices from underrepresented racial groups.

So, did the media promote or violate the general public's information rights in coverage of loadshedding between June, 2020 and June, 2023? A look at the topics list and how the issues were unpacked shows that while there were attempts to unpack the issue through experts, those incidences were few thereby leading us to the conclusion that the media did not protect the public's right to access to information. Further, the lack of diversity in sources and especially the inadequate inclusion of ordinary citizens as sources violated the general public's right to free speech. Therefore, while some aspects of the coverage on loadshedding were commendable, the media did in fact violate the public's information rights to access to information (inadequate and lack of properly unpacked information), and the right to free speech (inadequate inclusion of ordinary citizens as sources).

RECOMMENDATIONS:



- 1 Increased Awareness and Clear Communication:** Enhance public awareness by increasing media coverage and ensuring clear, accessible communication, especially on complex topics. Use experts to simplify technical aspects and thoroughly unpack the implications of loadshedding on various sectors.
- 2 Diversify Sources:** Actively seek out and amplify voices beyond government and Eskom officials. Include experts, community representatives, and ordinary citizens to provide a more nuanced understanding of the issue.
- 3 Prioritise Balanced Representation:** Ensure a balanced representation of voices, reflecting diverse experiences and opinions. This aligns with democratic principles and enhances the credibility of the media.
- 4 Amplify Ordinary Citizens' Voices:** Prioritise and amplify the voices of ordinary citizens, who are directly affected by loadshedding. This contributes to a more inclusive and informed public dialogue.
- 5 Address Gender Disparity:** Actively address the gender disparity in sourcing by prioritising and amplifying the voices of women. This fosters a more inclusive and democratic public dialogue.
- 6 Achieve Equitable Racial Representation:** Prioritise and actively work towards achieving equitable representation of all races in coverage, consciously seeking out and amplifying voices from underrepresented racial groups.
- 7 Challenge Stereotypes:** Journalists should be mindful of potential biases in their sourcing practices, challenging stereotypes, and promoting a more accurate portrayal of the complexities within society.

By implementing these recommendations, media organisations can fulfil their democratic responsibilities, contribute to informed public discourse, and foster a more inclusive and diverse representation of critical issues like loadshedding. Additionally, by reporting loadshedding in the manner suggested throughout this report, the media can ensure that the information rights of ordinary citizens, namely the rights to access to information and free speech are realised.

Please take note:

MMA conducts workshops specifically tailored to assist journalists in implementing these recommendations. These workshops focus on providing practical tools and insights to journalists, enabling them to navigate challenges related to representation in their reporting. By participating in these workshops, journalists can enhance their skills and contribute to fostering a more inclusive and representative media landscape.



ABOUT MMA

Media Monitoring Africa's vision is a responsible, quality media that enables an engaged and informed citizenry in Africa and across the world. MMA aims to promote the development of a free, fair, ethical and critical media culture in South Africa and the rest of the continent. To achieve MMA's vision, the three key areas that MMA seeks to address through a human rights-based approach are: media ethics, media quality and media freedom.

For more information about MMA, visit www.mediamonitoringafrika.org.za

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