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TV news during the elections: An exercise in passivity

Rodney Tiffen, associate Professor of Government at the University of Sidney, Australia reports on the Media Monitoring Project's study of political news on television in the run-up to the elections and concludes that TV news coverage of the election was passive and lacking in initiative.

The Media Monitoring Project carried out an extensive quantitative study of television political news during the election period. The primary aims of the study were to examine the way in which political stories were structured, and the attention and type of coverage given to different parties and groups, and to different issues and themes.

Sample and Procedures

In television, the study covered the main evening news bulletins for the major SABC channels, TV1, CCV Nguni and CCV Sotho, as well as the evening bulletin of Bophuthatswana TV and the first morning bulletin on Good Morning South Africa. These five programmes were studied every day from 18 March to 24 April. Altogether the sample for the television news coverage comprises almost 1,000 political news stories spread over more than 100 bulletins on four stations during 32 days.

The procedure in television was that monitors, a different one for each programme, would complete a form summarising the stories according to a structured format, after which coders would translate this information into the categories constructed for the study. The study for television involved the coding of up to 75 different variables for each political story. The great majority of these were to enable data to be coded on who appeared in what capacity in the news, allowing the presence of up to six people or groups to be coded in any story if necessary.

There are several gaps in the data due to problems in monitoring individual programs. The gaps are minor compared to the volume of data, and do not affect the total interpretation of the data in any significant way. But they do inhibit the capacity to make minute comparisons of particular stations or periods.

Amount and Type of Election Coverage

Coverage of political news during the election was extensive. TV1 morning news averaged 4.6 items per bulletin, Bop TV 4.3, TV1 evening news 5.0, CCV3 5.9, and CCV2 6.3. In all programmes political stories often took up more than half the bulletin during the election period.

Story Occasions

Overwhelmingly the grist for the news mill was

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provided by public occasions and the publicity seeking activities of political groups and institutions. Three major categories can be distinguished. The first, comprising almost half of the news occasions reported, involved deliberate publicity manoeuvres and public campaigning. This included the parties' election activities (ie rallies, leaders' visits to particular places etc) (21%) followed by press releases and public statements by parties (16%) and interest groups (6%) with press conferences and media interviews (5%) also prominent.

The second large group of news generating occasions were formal meetings and the proceedings of political institutions, totalling about 20% This included the issuing of official and non-governmental reports (8%), meetings of interim official bodies such as the TEC (4%), and formal negotiations between conflicting groups (5%). Here the media fed off the public and largely pre-scheduled activities of other institutions.

The third group of story occasions involved what can be broadly labelled disorder news. Incidents of group violence (4%), strikes (5%) and other protest activity (5%) were the staples of this coverage. The institutionalised activities and public statements of law enforcement and investigative agencies (8%) tended to cover similar story subjects as the disorder occasions.

The extent to which the media were reacting to what major sources did and what public events happened is shown by the rarity of reports based primarily on media enterprise. Only two stories were labelled as special media reports. None were specifically called leaks or special investigations.

Sources in the News
The coding of the political stories during the election period revealed 1177 quotes from representatives. However, only a much smaller group of individuals featured regularly in the news.

The two most visible and widely cited individuals unsurprisingly were FW De Klerk and Nelson Mandela, coincidentally both
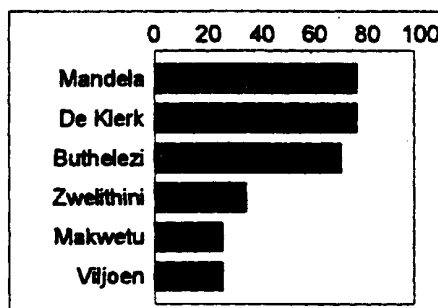

Table 1

mentioned in 78 stories in our sample. They both overshadowed all other members of their parties. De Klerk was mentioned about four times as often as the next two most quoted NP figures, Roelf Meyer (18) and Pik Botha (17), with no-one else mentioned more than six times (Danie Schutte and Hernus Kriel). For the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa was a clear second (26) and Thabo Mbeki third (9), with a wide spread after that. Similarly the other four most prominent leaders dominated coverage of their groups.

Table Two reflects the categorisation on which the next several tables are based. It gives the figures for the three largest parties first, then divides the minor parties into four groupings.
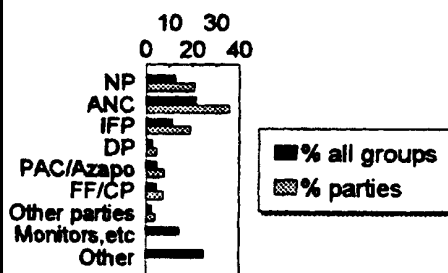

Table 2

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The last two categories are not parties. The first includes representatives from all independent and interim bodies monitoring or supervising aspects of the election (eg TEC, IEC, IMC, peace monitors, international observers). Of these the IEC and the TEC accounted for the majority of references. The final one includes representatives from a wide variety of groups: homeland governments, bureaucrats, police and military, interest groups like business and unions. No one of these receives sustained attention, although the police are the single most quoted group among this very scattered category.

The interpretation of the figures in Table Two must depend on v a r i o u s considerations which the observer brings to them: What does balance mean when the parties enjoyed such hugely differing amounts of support? when one party s e e m e d overwhelmingly likely to be the major party in the new government, when another party had been in office for all of living memory, when the parties differed so much in their organisational capacities, in their ability to generate news, in the size and enthusiasm of the rallies they held? Some have argued that in a multi-party system, groups should get coverage roughly proportional to their electoral support. However, one key to a democratic electoral system is that all major groups accept the legitimacy of the process and result and there is an argument therefore for minority groups to receive more air time than their numbers might strictly warrant. (Here and elsewhere it should be remembered that these figures cover only news programmes and not current affairs. It seemed, for example, that the

minor parties received proportionately more time in current affairs than in the news.)

Table Two shows that the ANC and its representatives were the most frequently quoted group, taking 21,6% of the total, and 35,7% of the parties quoted. The ANC received the single greatest coverage, but is the only party which received a lesser proportion of the coverage than its voting strength; the National Party received coverage roughly proportionate to its electoral support, while all other groups received a greater proportion of coverage than they received in votes.
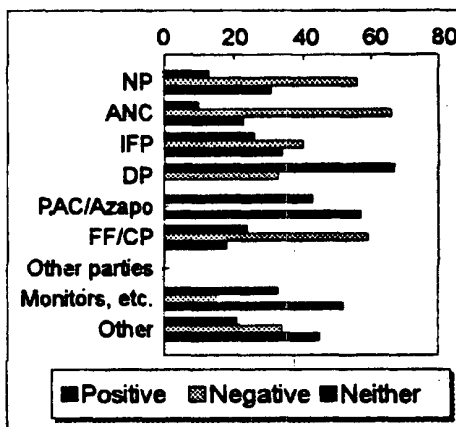
In the results for Table Three, it should be remembered that the percentages for the minor parties are based on very small numbers, because of the small number of times others referred to them. Of the groups with sizeable references from others, the references to monitors and interim bodies are mainly positive or neutral, while the final miscellaneous grouping also gets mixed references.

The major political parties predictably draw more negative than positive references from their opponents and others. More surprisingly, Inkatha gets a substantially more positive press from the other participants and the ANC draws the highest proportion of negative references. While critical surpass complimentary references to the ANC by 6:1, and to the Nationalists by 4:1, for Inkatha it is less than 2:1, with both more positive and fewer negative references than the other two large parties.

Table 3

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Table Four shows the pattern of references to others made by each group. While the single biggest category of references to other groups is negative (33%), about 20% of references were positive, and the rest (47%) balanced or mixed. This is perhaps a less critical and negative pattern of dialogue than one might expect in an election campaign. The monitors and interim bodies are the most conciliatory in their references.
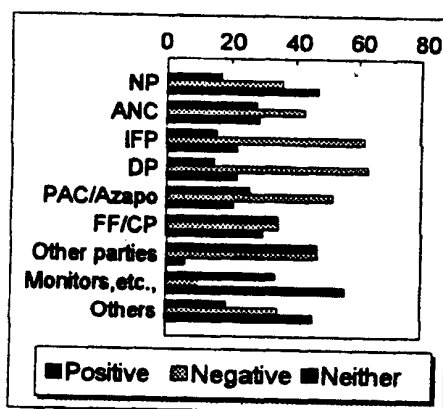

Table 4

Among the major political parties, Table Four shows the opposite pattern to Table Three In the ratio of complimentary to critical references about others, the ANC had a ratio of 1:1.5; the Nationalists 1:2.1 and Inkatha 1:3.9. Thus while Inkatha received a lower proportion of negative comments from other groups than the other major parties, it was by far the most critical of others in its own comments. In contrast, while the ANC had the highest ratio of critical to complimentary references, its comments about others were the most positive.

Equity and Balance
As pointed out above, whether any set of numbers constitutes balance or equity in representing the views of the different parties depends on criteria which the observer brings to them. However concluding the discussion of the representation of the different groups,

and the types of claims they were making, it is pertinent to observe that whether or not they constitute some sort of equitable balance between parties overall, balance was much more rarely achieved in particular stories. The primary reason for this was the simplicity of story formats.

In the majority of stories only one source was cited. Of stories where the views of at least one group were quoted, 66% had only one source, 27% had two, and only 8% had three or more. Moreover, this was the case whether or not the story involved conflict. It was judged that 36% of stories involved an important element of conflict, but that in 77% of these only one side was cited, not both sides.

These figures suggest the passivity of the media reporting of the campaign. Little effort was made to secure a response from the criticised party in the same story. Often of course 'balance' was achieved over time, but the immediate action-reaction pattern by which the media secure dialogue and rough accountability between the parties was at best slow and imperfect.

Themes and Issues
The dominant issues were very much ones to do with the political and electoral process itself. Only 38% of stories were deemed to have a clear reference to policy, and over 60% of these involved issues to do with the political process. Two broad themes dominated: constitutional and election arrangements comprised about 60% of stories on political processes, while the campaign environment, whether it was free and fair, issues of voter education etc, accounted for most of the remainder (30%).

The next highest group concerned issues of crime and internal control (about 14% of total policy references). Sometimes this merged into stories of political violence; sometimes it was more general policies. One in five (18%) of the political stories coded contained some

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substantial reference to political violence. These tended to be reported more prominently in the bulletin, 48% of them were one of the first three stories covered. They also tended to involve more rounded reporting: in stories with at least one source quoted, 54% of stories involving violence compared with 30% of stories without violence quoted two or more sources. The proportion of the parties in stories involving violence largely conformed to their coverage in stories without violence.

A third cluster of issues received less but still substantial coverage. Labour relations, welfare and other stories centred upon themes of re-distribution totalled nearly 12% of stories with some policy element. The major items here were about public servants' conditions, especially disputes because of insecurities that had arisen as a result of political change, and social welfare policies.

Relegated to virtual invisibility during the campaign were economic policy questions (about 1% of policy references) and questions to do with social policies and quality of life (health, education, environment, urban services etc) (about 20%).

The relative lack of policy emphasis and debate was unusual for coverage of an election campaign, but was less surprising in this particular election for two reasons. One was that many basic policy parameters to be followed by the Government of National Unity had already been agreed in multi-party negotiations and were not therefore to be decided by the election itself. The other was that in many ways the key issue in the election was South Africa's capacity to successfully hold a democratic election, and that this transcended all specific elements of policy. Nevertheless the emphasis has been criticised in so far as it reflected a tendency of the media to subordinate the other messages of speakers in favour of incidents of violence or the current state of negotiations.

CONCLUSION

The TV coverage of the election was extensive. In two important senses, however, these data also reveal a lack of initiative by the TV stations. Firstly, the stories concentrated overwhelmingly upon the public campaign occasions and the public statements of the parties, as well as the information releases surrounding the working of political institutions and formal negotiations. This is true to a large extent of all news reporting, but was particularly marked during this election campaign and suggests that the reporting was too passive. Secondly, there was a lack of editorial initiative in relating the claims of participants to each other, at least in the same story. Many stories had a simple source structure in which the political figures were able to put their views, without any counter-balancing even by those they were making claims about.

The figures on who appeared in the news do not present any gross departures from what might be expected given the electoral support and political resources of the major organisations. To the extent that groups talked about each other in the news, they tended to concentrate their attention on a narrower group of figures than the news cited and certainly not less diverse than, the perceptions of the political participants themselves.

The figures do reveal some interesting and subtle differences in the way the parties used their exposure. Notably Inkatha manifested a different pattern from the other two major parties. They made more references about themselves, and these had a very slightly higher proportion of positive references than the already predictably strong pattern of self-praise the others displayed. Moreover their references about other parties were more negative than the norm, and, perhaps more surprisingly, the comments by others about them less negative.

POST-ELECTION STATEMENT

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January 30, 1995

**Study and Research Group of Bangladesh (SRG)
Election Observation**

**Four Municipal Elections
Held on January 22, 1995**

SRG election teams were posted in the following manner --

Shibgonj -- Full-time observers, a Coordinator and three mobile observers monitored at the polling centers in the Shibgonj municipal election.

Sylhet -- Full-time observers along with a mobile observation team monitored forty-four polling centres of Sylhet out of fifty-six polling centres.

Chandpur -- Full-time [ ] observers with the feedback of three mobile observers and two ward Coordinators monitored all the polling centres of Chandpur municipal area.

Barisal -- Full-time observers, five ward Coordinators, and four mobile observers monitored forty-six polling centres in the Barisal municipal election out of forty-seven polling centres.

Generally, the municipal elections were held free and fair in Shibgonj, Barisal and Chandpur. Voters were enthusiastic. Election campaigning was widespread and effective. The candidates had no restrictions regarding election expenses. Polling agents were present at most of the polling centres . . . . The voter list was faulty to a certain extent. While in Barisal and Sylhet a few polling centres were [moved] even after the [official] publication of the [locations].

The election in Sylhet was generally held free, fair and peaceful except for some limited irregularities, (such as a few underage voting in different polling centres and a few cases of impersonation) but not on a massive scale. However, elections could not be held in seven polling centres because of hartal [national strikes] called by citizens of the area, who did not want their area to be a part of the Sylhet municipality. Some voters were present, but prevented from voting by pro-hartal elements. There was, however, no untoward incident.

Besides this, a ballot box was hijacked by some miscreants from Booth Number 1 of Polling Centre Number 13 of Ward Number 3. Voting was suspended here for sometime. However, the sealed ballot box was recovered with the help of the law enforcing agency within fifteen minutes of the hijacking. Balloting began as soon as the ballot box was brought back to the booth, where it belonged. Most of the candidates for Sylhet municipality election provided transport to carry the voters to the polling centres.

SRG will prepare [a] detailed election observation report covering these four municipality elections, which will be presented to the election commission in the near future.

Study and Research Group of Bangladesh (SRG) Election Observation
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Bangladesh