



CRITIQUE OF THE SABC'S PARLIAMENTARY COVERAGE.

presentation
by Adrian Hadland PhD

February 1 2008



SABC coverage

- Are you covering Parliament in a fair, in-depth and equitable way and what can you do to improve your coverage?
- Plus recent developments in the global media and policy environment

Current research from both media studies as well as from political science and policy studies; reflections on content

The News Cycle

- Old model: traditional media (print, radio and television) all break news with internal formats – documentaries, features – designed to provide more in-depth coverage
- New model: Traditional media no longer break news; this function is performed by internet, citizen journalism and by sms-cellphone technology
- New cycle: internet - traditional media - internet
- Developing country has its own challenges, but SA extremely high cellphone penetration and growing internet usage means we are not exempt

The internet challenge

- Contextual and nuanced reporting becomes increasingly important
- Many listeners/viewers will already know the headlines and will be looking for second level analysis: ie what stories mean – why rather than what, how rather than when
- Shortening attention spans: demand for impact design and packaging, graphics and super punchy intros which immediately locate listeners/viewers; rapid fire single topic items with depth rather than mish-mash buffet; high conflict reporting
- Interactivity, reflect audience
- relevance

The political challenge

- Serious problems with design of the electoral and political system (see recommendations of Van Zyl commission)
- Lack of accountability; complacency of ruling party; growing power of executive; diminishing of parliamentary oversight function; party-state.
- Change in electoral participation: alienation of the youth; decreasing numbers of voters; rapid rise of undecided voters (2nd largest group after the ANC);
- Changing nature of the ANC post-Polokwane (Home Affairs, energy crisis, new officials, lameduck president).

Media versus State

- In new democracies, esp where one political party is dominant, growing pressure on media autonomy.
- SA no exception, and public broadcaster esp vulnerable
- Many examples of 'direct' state intervention: FP Bill; public interest v national interest; libel and privacy court cases and interdicts; Media Tribunal (ANC resolutions); general confusion over state role in promoting diversity
- 'Indirect': Advertising (SA govt 6th biggest) and advertorial, Community media, media-state hostility
- In spite of Constitutional provisions protecting media freedoms, clear indications of state encroachment

The assumption challenge

Common trend that false or incorrect 'assumptions' are made about stories or events ('framing')

- Privatisation; child maltreatment, race, Polokwane
- Most common cause: lack of information, inadequate research, reliance on most recent story/intepretation, failure to engage with relevant people or groups
- Gevisser (Dream Deferred), William Mervyn Gumede (Soul of the ANC), Mac Maharaj, Anthony Butler (Cyril), Andrew Feinstein (Party's over), Ronald Suresh Roberts Calland (Anatomy of Power)
- No substitute for personal interaction

Notes on Parly coverage

Variety and volume of outputs, NB, general

Uneven: Preparation and planning (eg Mondays)

Thin on Context/explanation: research (post-Polokwane)

In(experts): wrong people commenting (party leaders)

Focus too broad and complicated, often starting off with procedural lead/intro – what, instead of why. Keep it simple, logical and well illustrated

Don't forget the Big Picture (trends, how fits in with other key political/social/global developments)

Challenges

- Extra pressure to look beyond formal political structures, to reflect change, to serve as 'watchdog' and hold the executive accountable at a time when the state expects greater subservience
- Provide answers, as well as questions
- Internet: demand for more analysis, context and understanding of the Big Picture; also for more graphics, less waffling and for more focused reporting
- Question assumptions
- Expand knowledge (person-to-person, published work)

THANK YOU!

