CHAPTER 4

Watching the Watchers: The Role of the Media

We quickly became aware that the South African media, and particularly the huge state-owned broadcast media, had undergone considerable change. During the election period, not only was it subject to an unprecedented degree of scrutiny and regulation, but it undertook with enthusiasm a creative and highly constructive role in facilitating free political debate, promoting voter education, and encouraging democratic freedoms, including a sense of fair play among the various parties.

This was in striking contrast to the decades when apartheid had been at its most oppressive. Then the media had often been used as a willing tool of the state. The pro-government bias of the state-funded South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) had proved to be an instrument for the propagation of apartheid ideology. SABC policy had even been announced as one 'linked to national policy' and ministerial statements and explanations were expected to be regarded as factual news.

The print media, while always having among its members some who had challenged apartheid, by and large failed to reflect the nature and diversity of South African society. In any case, newspapers faced severe limitations. The Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group, which visited South Africa in 1986, noted that newspapers were effectively debarred from covering certain topics, such as news of detained or banned persons. The ability of journalists to report on areas of unrest and disturbance was curtailed, the threat to withdraw advertising always held over newspapers, and those who defied the law risked prosecution and imprisonment.

Criticism of the media was slow to fade with the dismantling of apartheid. Well in advance of the elections, NGOs, in particular the Broadcast Monitoring Project (BMP), the Campaign for Open Media, the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and the Public Broadcasting Initiative, had pressed for the introduction of measures that would ensure fair and equitable access to the media for all political parties and an assurance that the various issues would be treated in an impartial way.

The Broadcast Media

Anxiety over the crucial role that the SABC would play in the run-up to the elections sprang from recognition of the near-monopoly it had over broad-

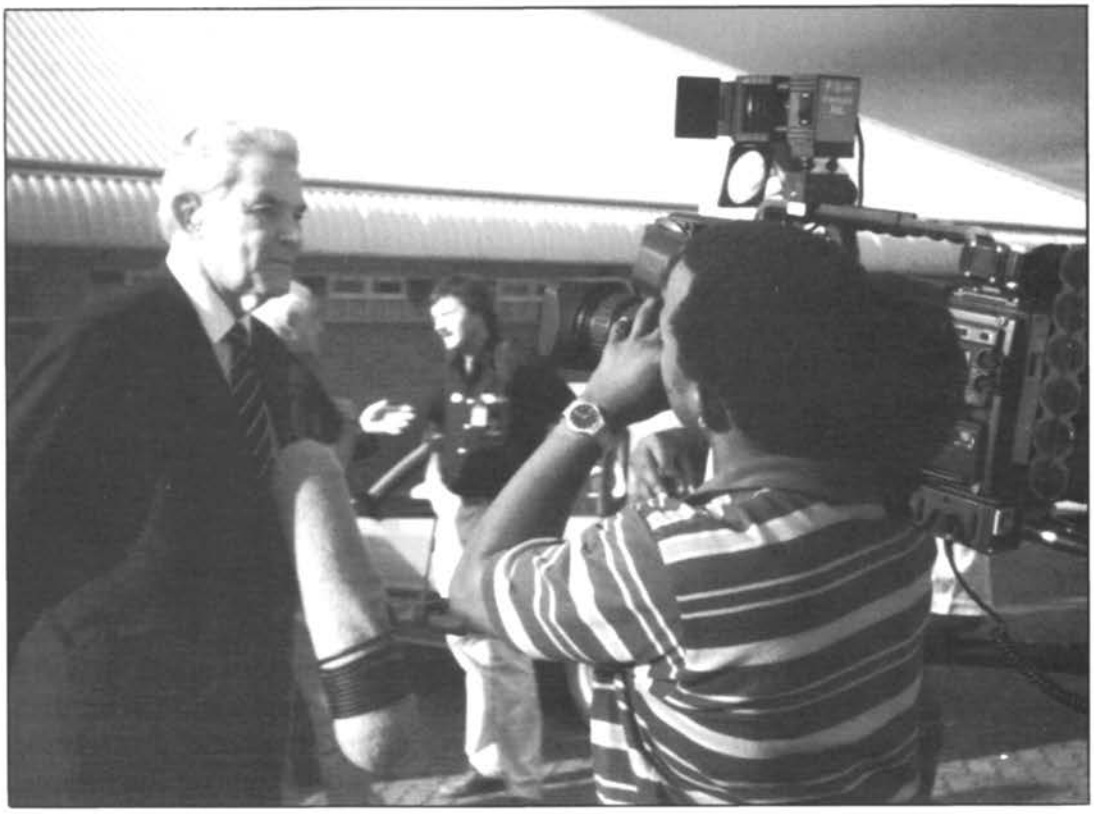
casting and the fact that for millions of South Africans it was their sole source of information. The SABC has three TV channels and 22 radio stations and reaches almost 25 million listeners and viewers each day, a significant figure in a country where many are still illiterate. According to the IMC, radio broadcasts reach 80 per cent of the country, compared with 20 per cent for television and 15 to 20 per cent for the print media.

Radio stations broadcast in all the predominant African languages, and are therefore the sole source of news for people who only understand these languages. The African language stations attract about 12 million listeners daily – about 2.9 million daily to Radio Zulu, 1.3 million to Radio Xhosa and about 1.16 million to Radio Sesotho. In comparison, Radio South Africa (broadcasting in English) reaches only 440,000 listeners and Afrikaans Stereo reaches 660,000 listeners.

Despite their relatively smaller numbers of listeners, only Radio South Africa and Afrikaans Stereo broadcast nationally. A BMP report of December 1993 concluded at that time that they continued to retain a largely white, pro-establishment character in both the selection and portrayal of news. In addition, each major centre also has a regional radio station broadcasting in English and Afrikaans. African language radio stations, on the other hand, are defined as regional broadcasters and their news coverage concentrates on the regions identified by apartheid policies where people of a particular language group originate. Radio Zulu therefore broadcasts issues more relevant to those in KwaZulu/Natal and Radio Xhosa concentrates on events in Ciskei, Transkei and to a lesser extent the Eastern Cape. Because this policy has defined regions largely according to the old 'homeland' structures, the heavily populated PWV province has no African language station which focuses specifically on issues in that region.

Television channels are also divided along language lines which continue to reflect the divisions intrinsic to apartheid. TV1, which broadcasts in English and Afrikaans, has always been largely white and establishment-oriented in character. Of its 5.4 million viewers, 2.9 million are white. CCV, on the other hand, is watched by 7.6 million South Africans, 5.7 million of whom are black. The third channel carries educational programmes. Several 'pirate' radio stations, some run by right-wing groups, also exist. The best known was 'Radio Pretoria' which transmitted from a farm heavily defended by armed guards, barricades and watch towers, and which reluctantly closed down on a court order. There is one private television station, Bophuthatswana TV (BOP-TV), from the former 'homeland' which reaches viewers in other areas of the country and some private radio stations, including the Johannesburg-based Radio 702 which has a reputation for being thought-provoking and even-handed.

The effect of this fragmentation has been that South Africans living in one region are often unable to obtain news on issues happening in another region unless they have major national significance. The isolation has been com-



The Commonwealth Observers attracted media attention wherever they went. Chairman Michael Manley (left), on a visit to townships outside Durban was interviewed and filmed by television journalists.

South African radio and television made great efforts to be as even-handed as possible in their handling of news and views of different political parties. Here, a television cameraman films singers and dancers at an Inkatha Freedom Party rally in Soweto.

pounded by the absence of international news stories in African-language news bulletins.

Change in the SABC

Most of the former management structures and personnel of the 'old' SABC remain in place, thus making the necessary psychological and attitudinal changes difficult. The changes in programming, particularly in news and current affairs, testify to the distance some of these managers have travelled, and to the removal of the SABC from the direct control of the government.

Under the new Independent Board of Directors, a Code of Conduct for editorial staff had been released which began with the following statement: 'We shall report, contextualise and present news honestly by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts, or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.' Training programmes for editors, journalists, producers and technicians were organised and, with the assistance of international advisers, an Elections Unit was also set up specially to oversee coverage of the campaign and the elections.

It has been obvious to us that considerable effort has been made to rectify the imbalance of views in the SABC's news and current affairs programmes. Newsreaders, presenters and reporters on discussion panels now reflect a far better balance of racial groupings and great pains have been taken to allow all political parties time on SABC talk programmes. While some local TV critics felt that the format for these programmes made for dull viewing, the ability for the first time to put a range of alternative views on television and radio must have been exhilarating for those parties which had long been shut out of broadcasting. In our opinion, the overall effect has been that a greater diversity of views than ever before has been presented in an even-handed way to millions of South Africans for the first time, which augurs well for the future of the SABC as a responsible public broadcasting institution.

This new openness culminated in televised debates between leaders of the different parties, the highlight of which was the 14 April 1994 debate between State President de Klerk, leader of the NP, and Nelson Mandela, President of the ANC. Some of us felt that it was a model of even-handedness to be commended to other countries. Both leaders answered questions from a panel of journalists within a strictly observed time period: each was given two minutes to answer a question, and a further minute after that for a final response. They were then given three minutes each for a closing statement. The de Klerk-Mandela debate was one of the most watched televised programmes of the entire campaign, surpassed only by the extensive Election Watch put on by the SABC at the beginning of the counting process.

The two main television channels broadcast in Zulu, Xhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, Afrikaans, Sepedi and English in order to reach a broader audience. SABC Radio presented the largest election programming in South

African history, with all African language stations running programmes for the first time as extensive as those on Radio South Africa and Afrikaans Stereo.

The Print Media

South African newspapers reach an extremely narrow segment of society and, with only very minor exceptions, are not published in the African languages. The result is that despite the country's large population (and partly because of the high rate of illiteracy), only 1.5 million newspapers are sold every day, with weekend circulation at 2.2 million, although their readership is much more widespread among different groups. These newspapers, in English and Afrikaans, have traditionally been aimed at white, middle-class readers even though a recent All Media and Product Survey done by the South African Advertising Research Foundation reported that some newspapers – the Johannesburg-based *Star*, for example, or the *Daily Despatch* in Eastern Cape – had more black readers than readers from all other races put together.

The *Sowetan*, with a national readership of 1.5 million black South Africans daily, attempts to reflect the political views and aspirations of the majority black population. Many other newspapers, however, are beginning to give more space to issues affecting black and coloured communities and are on the whole beginning to take more black journalists on their staff. Some provincial newspapers continued to reflect a narrow, parochial outlook.

Criticism of the print media has also centred around the fact that ownership is highly concentrated, with four media conglomerates controlling almost 90 per cent of the country's daily newspaper production and almost all weekend circulation. Possibly as a result of the caution of the apartheid era, many newspapers continue to suffer from being hesitant to criticise and probe state institutions such as the police, army and some political parties. On the other hand, many newspapers boldly backed parties on the eve of the elections and their analyses of the policies of, or prospects for, the contending parties were refreshingly open. We particularly noticed that to facilitate media coverage of the elections, the IEC relaxed restrictions and allowed journalists and photographers to enter voting stations under certain conditions.

We were able to glean from newspapers a fairly wide range of political opinion and a comprehensive idea of the main political and related events. We quickly learned to treat some articles with caution as not all stories were checked with the rigour which they merited. One such article, claiming that an Embassy was standing by to evacuate hundreds of thousands of its citizens in case of widespread violence, caused some amusement. A radio report on the first day of the elections claiming erroneously that a bomb had exploded in a Johannesburg suburb was far less amusing. We do not believe that these reports were motivated by malice. We believe they sprang from lack of professional care.

The Regulation of the Media

In response to NGO and other pressure to ensure the even-handedness of the media, particularly in the campaign period, politicians engaged in the multi-party negotiations process asked that two bodies, the IBA and the IMC, be created by Acts of Parliament. The focus of work of both these institutions was primarily the state-owned electronic media. The privately-owned print media was left to regulate itself through its own established bodies, including the Press Council.

The IBA was established as the regulator of the electronic media and its powers may well have far-reaching effects on the future of broadcasting. It will issue licences, have the power to mete out punishment to transgressors of its legal provisions and will have the power to guard against the concentration of ownership and cross-media ownership. Over time, the SABC's near-monopoly of the airwaves is expected to be broken. The life of the IMC, on the other hand, began with the election campaign and ended with the dissolution of the IEC. It was headed by a Judge of the Supreme Court, Mr Justice R N Leon, and comprised six other Commissioners.

The Work of the Independent Media Commission

The IMC was both watchdog and regulator and was described to us by one of its Commissioners as 'being rather like a policeman on the beat whose main function is to prevent crime rather than to catch criminals.' It was charged with two main responsibilities: monitoring public broadcasting and any other source broadcasting election topics with a view to ensuring equitable access; and monitoring state-financed publications and communications services so that these were not used to the advantage of any particular party.

The IMC also drew up guidelines for broadcasters (*Annex XIII*) which included, among other things, that all parties be treated equitably with regard to free Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) and political advertising. It also obliged broadcasting licensees and state information services to give reasonable opportunity to political parties to respond to criticism.

As an extension of its monitoring work, however, the IMC had the authority to take action, which included imposing fines, against any broadcaster or information service which contravened the provisions of the IMC Act, or recommend that the IEC take action. The IMC received a number of complaints, some of which went to public hearings.

For the most part, however, the IMC's monitoring of broadcast and state publications services was a behind-the-scenes affair drawing on the analytical services of the Media Monitoring Project, an NGO, to augment its own work and preferring to use a well-placed quiet word with broadcasters to achieve its purposes. Broadcasters themselves also exercised considerable judgment in this matter, though their sometimes excessive caution may not have been

warranted. On the eve of the poll, the SABC cancelled the telecast of a political satire, *One Man, One Volt*, on the grounds that it was 'politically incorrect' and that it might transgress election laws.

The more difficult problem of determining how much time parties were allowed for PEBs over radio was finally determined by the extent to which each party was participating in the elections at national and provincial levels, and an element of 'gut feel' on the popularity of each party. Total time allocation spread through all stations for the NP and ANC was 945 minutes each, decreasing to 51 minutes for the South African Women's Party. The broadcasts started on 26 March 1994 and ended on 23 April 1994. No PEBs were allowed over TV. We heard of no complaints about airtime.

It is our view that the IMC played a considerable part in ensuring that media coverage of the issues and the elections was more even-handed than ever before, although the SABC still has considerable work to do if it is to finally throw off all of the habits of the apartheid regime.

Conclusion

These were the most watched elections we have attended. Aside from the thousands of local and international observers, hundreds of journalists from all over the world spread out over South Africa to cover what we felt was one of the most significant events of the century. Television reports on South Africa beamed back via satellite were closely followed by South Africans. At one point a strongly worded editorial by *The Sunday Times* (of London), suggesting among other things that the election date be postponed, was quoted extensively by Chief Buthelezi in a statement issued by him on 8 February 1994 and became the subject for lively discussion in local newspaper columns.

In contrast to elements of the foreign media, the local media were completely supportive of the elections and devoted much space and time to voter education (even though some of it was paid for), and explaining the process to readers. Voter education advertisements were also broadcast on television and radio.

The Commonwealth and other observer groups made a special effort to publicise awareness of their activities. Advertisements and handbills were prepared in English, Afrikaans and the African languages (*Annex XIV*) and distributed especially in areas such as Bophuthatswana where voter education began late.

A major point to make is that throughout the election period, the media generally supported the democratic process and we noted the very considerable progress the South African media has made from the days of apartheid and the access political parties had to the media, particularly the broadcasting media.