

# Media Monitoring

## A Necessary Part of the Vibrant Media

By William Bird

**S**peaking at the launch of the South African report of the Global Media Monitoring Project in March this year, the Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa, Ms Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, said the four words that media monitors the world over thrill to hear, “Never stop media monitoring!”

That the deputy president of a country should make such a clear statement begins to shed some light as to the value and importance of media monitoring. There are some people who believe that media monitoring changes lives; I am one of those people, and I therefore make no apology for the pro-media monitoring position taken in this article. Before I can support the claim that media monitoring changes lives, it is essential to explain what media monitoring is.

In simple terms, media monitoring can be understood to be a standardised method of gathering data from a range of different media, or taking newspapers, radio and/or television programming and breaking the content up into understandable and measurable pieces of information. While this provides almost limitless delight for methodology *fundis*, the excitement and exceptional power of media monitoring lie in its diversity of applications. Before examining these in more detail, it is also necessary to consider some of the key assumptions of media monitoring as well as a few of the reasons why people monitor the media.

Key assumptions in the Media Monitoring Project’s approach to undertaking media monitoring include the desire to build and promote an open democratic society that respects and promotes human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, dignity, privacy and equality. The MMP also supports the development of informed and critical citizens and media consumers. The organisation holds the view that media monitoring is in

itself, an inherently positive exercise, in that it entails – in the MMP’s experience – mostly ordinary citizens actively engaging with the content of the media, coding and capturing the information, analysing the results and then taking action based on the trends and findings identified, in an effort to build an open, diverse, democratic, human rights based society.

### Media in Southern Africa

A brief analysis of the Southern African region shows that while there are many positive trends pointing towards such a society, there remain many substantial challenges. Some of these challenges include the eradication of poverty, combating HIV and AIDS, preventing gender-based violence, child abuse and discrimination. As watchdogs of those tasked with addressing these challenges (usually the governments in each country), one of the key responsibilities is to hold those in power accountable for their actions. In addition to this, it is also the responsibility of the media to track progress in how those in power deal with the challenges being faced by Africa and Southern Africa and then to outline and explain those related policies and actions.

Given the scope and complexity of challenges being faced in Southern Africa and Africa more broadly, not only is the importance of the role of the media in reporting these challenges clear, but also that the media have an incredibly difficult task to perform. The task is made even more difficult when the conditions that many journalists and media houses operate under are considered as these often include, significant levels of stress, inadequate resources, the “juniorisation” of newsrooms, as well as state and commercial interference.

The responsibility placed on the media’s shoulders is made even greater if it is assumed that in most instances people rely on the media as their key source of information on what is happening in their worlds. This element is critical as it is often the case that the issues that are covered by the media are the ones that are also commonly seen to be of greatest importance, and in most instances the issues that governments tend to act on, formulate policy on and address. The suggestion that the media does not tell people what to think but rather what to think about is crucial; for the converse also applies. It is often the case that those issues, or people or groups of people that are seldom covered or addressed are often regarded as being of lesser importance, and are also less likely to be the focus of government policy and activities. The result is that in many instances these needs are inadequately addressed. What the media covers and does not cover are vital indicators, not only of the media, but also of what issues and which people are considered to be most important and prioritised.

One of the best and most efficient ways of finding out what the media covers and does not cover is to monitor it.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples can be seen by looking at who speaks in the media. A simple breakdown of people who speak in the news by sex shows that globally, in spite of women making up 52 percent of the world population, they make up only 21 percent of the voices, according to the results of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), organised by the World Association of Christian Communication, with the results produced by the MMP and analysed by Margaret Gallagher in 2005. Regionally, the GMMP shows that women account for 19 percent of the voices, with men making up 81 percent. There are numerous reasons for the inequality of representation, but this finding (supported by several other research projects) serves to highlight that there is a clear gender inequality in the media's coverage.

### **The Value of media monitoring**

One of the key advantages of media monitoring is that it enables vast amounts of data to be coded and analysed, and the media produce staggering amounts of information. To use print as a rudimentary example; a newspaper in Southern Africa will have on average approximately 45 stories in each edition. Multiplied over a week and then across four more newspapers for a sample of five, there will be 900 news stories in one week. If this is then multiplied by 10 countries in the region it takes the number to 9 000 stories in one week. Media monitoring enables samples of hundreds of media over weeks to be coded and analysed.

The value of being able to make sense of vast amounts of data is emphasised by understanding that the challenges faced by the media – and those perpetuated by the media – are seldom the result of one-off difficulties. If media were monitored on International Women's day for example it is highly probable that there will be more stories and women speaking in the news than on any other day. It is most often the case that in order to get a fair picture of which issues the media cover and which receive less coverage, it is necessary to monitor over a period of time. Thus, it is through monitoring the media over a month for example that trends emerge as to what and who makes the news and what and who do not. In addition, media monitoring frequently also enables these trends to be quantified.

Monitoring over time has another distinct advantage; it enables time periods and trends to be compared and analysed. In 1999, the MMP monitored the coverage of South Africa's second democratic national election across print, radio and television, which covered more than 7 000 news items. The number of women who spoke in the news comprised a mere 10 percent of the total.

In 2004, the MMP monitored the coverage of the national elections, again focusing on print and broadcast media, on just over 6 000 news items. This time, female sources comprised 23 percent of the total number of people who spoke in the news. While the number of female

sources is still low, it indicates a more than double increase in the number of women speaking in the news, over a five-year period. This is a positive trend that could not have been tracked without media monitoring. Media monitoring can thus provide accurate, fair and quantifiable evidence of how the media covers a range of issues over time, enabling trends and projections to be tracked.

Not only does media-monitoring highlight the amount of coverage, it is also able to provide insight into how issues, people and countries are represented. There may for example, be a relatively high number of stories about Africa in Southern African media but, research undertaken by the MMP and others has shown that often coverage of Africa perpetuates negative stereotypes; portraying Africa and its people as perpetual victims of disease, poverty, war, corruption, famine and helplessness. This is not to suggest that the media should not report these key issues, but that there is a pattern of coverage that serves, over time, to perpetuate negative stereotypes.

In addition to the quantitative data that can be presented, media monitoring also enables more qualitative elements including fairness, ethics and stereotypes to be coded and analysed. At this point a question that may be asked is: "What is done with the monitoring results that are produced?"

Media monitoring results can be used in many different ways and for different purposes. Internationally, regulatory bodies often monitor the media to assess compliance with licence conditions. Where these conditions are clearly set out and do not negatively infringe on the editorial independence of the media, such monitoring can be extremely valuable and assist in developing vibrant and effective media. Two examples are the Independent Communications Authority in South Africa (ICASA) as well as the Rwandan Media Monitoring team in Rwanda.

Media monitoring can also play a key role in the run-up to elections. Monitoring media during an election period is not only an invaluable form of assessment of media performance, but it also fulfils an essential democratic function of assessing whether the media's coverage has been free and fair. The numerous media monitoring projects that have taken place in the Southern African region in election periods again serve to highlight the contribution of media monitoring to democracy.

In addition to these functions, by highlighting the trends in media coverage, both positive and negative, media monitoring can also be used in the following ways: to help protect and respect human rights in the media;

- to unpack and challenge the perpetuation of negative stereotypes;
- as the basis for developing new policy;
- for developing training for media professionals as well as providing numerous examples;

- as an integrated component of comprehensive media focused strategies;
- to benchmark media houses, as well as to offer comparisons between media in different countries.

To assist this process the MMP developed a first for South Africa where media houses were rated against each other based on the monitoring, thereby offering an effective means of encouraging healthy competition and benchmarking of media houses. The ratings were well received and similar rating systems were designed for coverage of gender and these too proved successful. It is anticipated that similar ratings will be used in the next regional project the MMP undertakes. Each of these activities can be used to help build a more vibrant and effective media, and with additional spin-offs directly impacting on the people involved. This means that not only can media monitoring help build the media but also more vibrant and effective people who work in and with the media. How is this achieved?

### **Tools and resources for monitoring**

In order to undertake media monitoring it is important that people are able to analyse and code the media content. To do this, media monitors require critical media literacy skills. These skills are acquired during media monitoring training and are then enhanced as they are practised. Once the monitoring has been completed and results presented, groups are then able to present these to the media and in so doing empower themselves and their organisation. Monitoring also works to unite people along common human rights focused principles. A clear example of this was the GMMP where members of civil society in 76 countries around the world all united to monitor gender in the media. In doing so, not only were all these groups united in wanting to address the representation of gender in the media but it was also a positive demonstration of the collective power of civil society.

What makes the GMMP stand out even more is that all the organisations that undertook the monitoring did so on a voluntary basis. A quick look at the overall breakdown of participating countries shows that there was a significantly high level of participation in the Southern African region. There are numerous reasons for this, but one of the most significant ones is that a host of NGOs have developed working partnerships in the region, a feature that is both enhanced and supported by media monitoring.

### **Partnerships as a strategy**

In 2003 Gender Links and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) together with the technical support of the MMP, undertook the first regional media monitoring project of its kind in Southern Africa, the Gender and Media baseline Study (GMBS). The project analysed over 100 media

over one month, across 13 countries covering over 25 000 news stories. Using a standardised monitoring methodology as well as databases specially designed by the MMP, partners in each country undertook the monitoring. Each completed database was then submitted to the MMP and then combined into one database from which over 1 500 separate graphs were produced. The GMBS results were then written up into separate country reports. The GMBS gave gender and media organisations substantial information about how gender was covered in each country, and the information was then utilised by the various partners for advocacy, training and policy development purposes.

In addition, the GMBS also provided comparisons of media houses within each country, as well as comparisons of how each country's media performed against the overall region. Media monitoring thus enabled media houses to compare their performance against their competitors and colleagues. The impact of the GMBS, while difficult to measure directly, made a significant impact not just among the NGOs that participated in the project, but also on the media, and was certainly one of a combination of factors that led to gender and media issues being placed on the agendas of media houses throughout the region. The GMBS very clearly highlighted the power of collective action.

Another key example of successful partnerships in the region is the concerted effort to address the representation of HIV and AIDS and gender in the media through the Media Action Plan (MAP). The MAP on HIV and AIDS and gender is a collaborative effort by the Southern Africa Editors Forum (SAEF) and NGO partners to improve coverage of HIV and AIDS and gender, as well as mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the media industry. SAEF, which comprises representatives from the national editors' forums of countries in the SADC region, is the overall co-ordinator of MAP. Lead agencies coordinate the work of the different sub-sectors, including raising funds for, and managing activities. The sub-sectors and lead agencies are, newsroom policies coordinated by Gender Links and GEMSA; ethics, coordinated by MISA; training, coordinated by PANOS; research and monitoring, coordinated by the MMP; and information and resources, coordinated by SAFAIDS.

Some of the key findings of the MAP baseline monitoring project undertaken by the MMP and Gender Links were that in spite of Southern Africa having the highest HIV prevalence rate, HIV coverage accounted for only three percent of all news coverage in the region and people directly affected by HIV make up only four percent of the voices. A more positive trend in the results was the finding that women account for 39 percent of all voices in the news (a significantly higher level than the GMMP), but male voices still dominate.

The MAP partnership highlights the value of a concerted effort driven by media professionals, and supported by NGOs and international organisations. It also serves to

highlight the power and importance of media monitoring when used to support the policy development process and training. It has also been used as a baseline so that it can be repeated to assess, not only the media's performance but also the impact of the MAP activities.

The approaches adopted in the projects outlined have also drawn on the capability of media monitoring to open up lines of discussion and communication with the media about their performance, which has in turn facilitated policy developments.

### Challenges and prospects for the future

While media monitoring offers almost limitless capabilities, empowers citizens and encourages collective action, its limitations also need to be acknowledged. It requires substantial human and other resources as well as rigorous standardised methods and accuracy and attention to detail by monitors. When monitoring is undertaken on a regional scale, each of the components requires greater resources to be devoted to ensure that the results are fair and accurate. In addition, media monitoring opens up a host of possibilities for training, policy development, best practice and media support, but for these possibilities to be successfully utilised, they often require area specialists to carry them out.

The issue of the sustainability of media monitoring projects is also often raised as a challenge. On the surface it would seem that media monitoring is not in fact sustainable. Undertaking regional projects requires substantial human and financial resources, long term commitment (for indeed much of the value of media monitoring is that it allows us to see trends over time) and if the projects are human rights focused, they will not make any money. Indeed, if successful, spin-offs of monitoring projects usually require even more resources to be devoted to policy development training, support etc.

However, a closer examination of the sustainability of media monitoring shows that it is not only sustainable, but also lends itself to replication, development and growth. The MMP has been operating since 1993, which in addition to the wealth of monitoring expertise, it has also accumulated points to monitoring projects being sustainable. One of the outcomes of the regional monitoring projects such as the GMMP, combined with a growing desire by members of civil society to "watch the watchdogs", is the growth of media monitoring projects in the region and around the world. In addition to key organisations like the MMP Zimbabwe, there are monitoring organisations in Rwanda, Zambia, Mauritius and Swaziland, and more NGOs are gearing up to start new ones.

There are other issues that need to be taken into consideration when assessing the sustainability of media monitoring. If the skills development and empowerment of each person participating in media monitoring, as well

as the training and benefits derived by media organisations and NGOs are translated into monetary terms, then it is clear that monitoring projects are indeed sustainable. Given the range and diversity of activities and functions media monitoring fulfils, it is clear that not only are they sustainable; they are also essential for the growth and development of media in democracies. Furthermore, it is imperative that in addition to being sustainable, media monitoring, and monitoring projects need to be sustained in the long-term.

Going into the future, it is clear that there are a number of challenges ahead. In addition to working regionally, with high travel and communication costs, media monitoring in the region has faced many challenges. Monitoring the media is a skill which, once learned, can be easily adapted, and is often not a problem for NGOs who are not monitoring experts. Difficulties often arise however, when it comes to producing results, as this often requires a different set of skills of data analysis, as well as a knowledge of different programmes and statistics. In addition, the process often takes a great deal of time and effort and it is often the case that results of media monitoring projects are only available many months after the monitoring has been completed. The time lag between monitoring and results can be frustrating for all concerned, particularly in the media environment where news is mostly time-bound and tends to rely on recent events. Also, it is often the case that smaller community-based media fall outside of media to be monitored in regional projects, often as a result of limited resources. Overcoming these challenges in the past has been difficult.

For the last three years, the MMP has been working on addressing these particular challenges and thanks to the support of OSISA, the MMP has developed a tool, which is expected to radically reduce, if not completely remove, the challenges identified above. The MMP has just released its first version of the Monitoring Made Easy for Gender tool or MME:G. In essence, the tool enables any group to monitor any media they choose on an ongoing, *ad hoc* or project-specific basis, capture the data and then instantly produce their own results. As such, there will be a minimal time lag between monitoring the media and producing the results. Currently, the tool is focused on monitoring gender in the media, but tools for HIV, children and democracy are already in development.

In the ideal world of a media monitor, any member of civil society will be able to monitor the media on a sustainable and sustained basis, and on the basis of the monitoring, inform their advocacy campaigns as well as help focus the areas of support necessary for the media, thus helping to build democracy. The MME:G cannot claim to make such a world a reality, but the numerous NGOs and tireless members of civil society throughout the region probably can. 🗣️

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