

Millions of rands are being poured into costly voter education programmes, mostly for television. MOIRA LEVY examines the whole initiative and finds it less than adequate.

Band-Aid broadcasts coming unstuck



reflected in the quality or quantity of voter education material being produced: radio remains the stepchild of the media family in South Africa.

Relative neglect of radio in voter education initiatives has prompted SABC board member Ruth Tomaselli, a key figure on the Debi committee, to propose a special voter education unit. She cautions that not nearly enough effort has gone into using radio as a channel for voter education.

"Radio remains very worrying," she says. "Radio is the way to the majority of people, and that includes the poorer, illiterate and disenfranchised, the rural voters, the female voters."

Throughout the developing world it is a fact that those most in need of voter education are least likely to receive it. Radio is punted as the chief means of access to them.

Production for radio in South Africa remains an industry that has failed to develop independently of the SABC – compared to television, which has spawned any number of production companies which are now jockeying to deliver voter education material.

Certainly an audio-visual medium must be significantly more powerful than an aural one; a ballot paper you can see is far easier to understand than a talk show about a ballot paper.

Beatie Hofmeyr of the Voter Education and Elections Training Unit says much of the voter education material being produced for radio is "dry and too process-orientated", with an over-emphasis on talk shows. It requires a special kind of commitment and concentration to listen to it instead of tuning into one's favourite soap opera. "You can't bore people to death," says Hofmeyr. "Programmes need to be joyful and fun," she says.

'Powerful as they are, the electronic media do not reach into the nooks and crannies of rural South Africa'

What this means is that large radio listenership figures do not inevitably translate into large listenerships for voter education programmes. Champions of radio need to bear in mind that each television set may attract any number of viewers; listening to the radio is known to be a private activity while watching TV is a social form of media consumption.

A STICK person, looking like a smouldering cigarette stompie on two legs, cartwheels across your TV screen, spins smilingly to a firm halt and transforms itself into a cross, the kind you are soon to place on your ballot paper. It looks user-friendly and easy to apply.

Another cross fades into a small Band-Aid, like the ones mothers apply to grazed knees. This one is accompanied by the injunction: "Heal our land. Vote on 27 April." Again, it looks easy enough.

Except that this country needs more than a Band-Aid to heal its wounds, and would-be voters need more than a television campaign to learn what this healing would entail.

The Democracy Education Broadcasting Initiative (Debi), so named because its brief stretches beyond voter education, has a mammoth task. The experts, many involved in Debi, agree that the electronic media cannot single-handedly prepare South Africans sufficiently for the April poll.

By 27 April the average South African TV viewer should be convinced of the need to vote and the importance of voting. Even infrequent viewers should know whether or not they are eligible to vote and what documentation to take with them to the polls.

'Last year just under 40 percent of black homes in the country had television sets, while over 83 percent had radios'

Advertising agency J Walter Thompson, acting for Debi and its member organisations, is midway through a carefully projected four-phase media campaign. It takes its viewers through an initial "participation" phase aimed at motivating people to vote. This is followed by identity document information slots and leads on to "tolerance" advertisements aimed at raising awareness of individual differences and how these can co-exist.

The campaign, launched in November, will gain momentum as the poll date

approaches. According to account director Linda Radford, details on procedures, eligibility and documentation will be released as the campaign culminates in the final "reassurance" phase. At the end of the process, even first-time voters should have the information they need to equip them for the polls.

What is less certain, though, is exactly who these viewers are, and what proportion of the potential voting public they represent. It begs the question: should vast resources, including huge budgets, be allocated to television education campaigns?

Conventional wisdom throughout the developing world, and this must include South Africa, asserts that radio remains the chief means for reaching the mass of people in their lives and homes. For the huge impoverished, marginalised and non-urban sector, radio remains a vital link with the centre and a means to acquire empowering knowledge.

Certainly statistics from the South African Broadcasting Corporation bear this out. Consider that last year just under 40 percent of black homes in the country had television sets, while over 83 percent had radios.

Yet this pre-eminence of radio is not

As the election approaches, concern about voter education is mounting. Are there enough programmes? How effective are they? Are people bothering to consider the issues? **SOBANTU XAYIYA** took to the streets of Cape Town to get some views.

New voters call fo



RASHILENG: Great job.



MAKUBALO: Confident about broadcasts.

VOTER education programmes seem to have succeeded in reaching their audiences – very few people I spoke to had not had any exposure to the efforts of voter educators. Yet Capetonians of all races and walks of life complained about shortcomings in the voter education campaign.

Clearly these programmes have skimmed the surface very successfully, but have left many people ignorant about aspects of the forthcoming elections.

Certainly television, radio, workshops and the print media all seem to be doing something right and reaching an audience.

Of tertiary students interviewed, nearly a third said they had gleaned some voter education from television. A much smaller percentage of mostly African students named radio as their source of election information. About 10 percent of students spoken to either had not had access to voter education or could not follow the programme content.

But even those students who felt they were adequately exposed to voter education cited shortcomings in the television and radio programmes:

- The time slots are too limited to deal satisfactorily with the public's questions.

- The programmes are not detailed enough – for example, many said they were still not sure exactly what constituted a spoilt ballot paper.

- The campaign is too "slow". Some people felt that the education process should be more intense.

Mvuyisi Siwisa, 28, a final-year student at the University of the Western Cape, felt strongly that the government, in conjunction with the Independent Electoral Commission, should play a major role in facilitating voter education.

'Of tertiary students interviewed, nearly a third said they had gleaned some voter education from television'

"Many people will be sceptical of such a move, but the fact of the matter is that the government has the necessary infrastructure and resources to do it. I do feel, however, that the fewer people exposed the better for the government."

Some students also felt that the double ballot system would exacerbate an already complex election situation.

They said voter education should include school pupils as many of them were eligible to vote. Pupils would also be able to pass on information to their parents.

Voter educators received praise from University of Cape Town student Dumisani Rashileng, who said the structures were doing a great job in training trainers.

He suggested that a lack of resources and a weak infrastructure stood in the way of an expanded workshop programme in the townships.

Some students felt that the election would not present too much of a problem to them. Charles Hopkins, 18, and Paul Karbiner, 19, both from Rosebank House College, said

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It is trite to say that the number of paid-up television licenses does not accurately reflect the number of TV sets to be found running off car batteries in squatter camps and semi-rural shacks. Research by the Rhodes University Journalism Department reveals that in and around Grahamstown, one of South Africa's poorest regions, 66 percent of all households have a TV set, including a startling 37 percent of squatter households.

What this suggests is that debate among media theorists about the relative merits or

demerits of radio versus TV for voter education is inevitably inconclusive.

More important, it may deflect attention from a vital point: the smaller and further removed from the metropolis a community is, the less likely it is to have access to either radio or TV, according to research cited by Eurospace, a company producing voter education advertisements for radio.

In the smallest rural settlements, media penetration of all forms declines significantly. In settlements of less than 500 people,

only 15,5 percent of the community ever see any TV and barely half have access to radio.

Eurospace deputy managing director Lyndall Campher says: "All media consumption is low in the rural areas, even the penetration of radio. While radio is essential in reaching the rural market, it does need some form of complementary exposure of message which cannot be provided by the formal media."

The implications of this for voter education programmes are profound. Powerful as they are, the electronic media do not reach into the nooks and crannies of mainly rural South Africa; on its own an advertising campaign has limited effect.

workshops, increased air time



HOPKINS AND KARBINER: Don't need voter education.



SIWISA: State must play a role.

they had not had access to any form of voter education.

Both said they were regular watchers of M-Net's KTV and videos. They thought they could "handle" the forthcoming election without voter education.

Hostel dwellers interviewed confirmed that voter education workshops were being conducted - mostly in Xhosa and English - at their workplaces. While these workshops had helped to address some of their initial reservations about voting, most said they didn't know what the elections were about.

They pointed out that most of these workshops were organised by unions that followed a particular political line and that neutrality could thus not be ensured.

About half of township residents spoken to said they had not attended voter education

workshops. Many said the workshops would be very helpful to new voters and an important supplement to the media campaign.

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The view was also expressed that all political parties should volunteer staff for voter education and that they should distinguish between campaigning and voter education.

Residents said voter educators were lax about workshops and had left this task to political parties. Yet because the question of no-go areas had not yet been resolved, some felt certain parties were at a disadvantage in this regard.

Certain categories of employees who work awkward hours, for example restaurant workers, said they felt excluded from the campaign and suggested that their industry and voter educators should meet to address the problem.

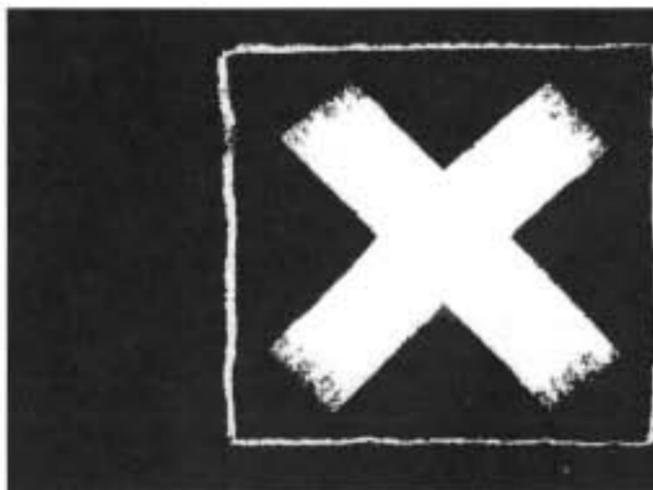
A member of Idasa's voter education radio project team, Mandla Makubalo, said he was confident that Idasa's programmes, which are broadcast mainly on Radio Xhosa, Radio Zulu and Radio Ciskei, were reaching the target. The radio project had received many "encouraging" letters from listeners, he said.

Makubalo gets correspondence from as far afield as the Orange Free State and Eastern Cape. However, he feels that in the Cape his programme misses many "literate" people because they listen mainly to English-language radio stations.

Sobantu Xayiya is a freelance journalist based in Cape Town.

While Debi can go some way towards reaching and enabling potential voters, the real work needs to be done through human contact, on the ground, in people's homes, in bus queues, at taxi ranks, out in the fields. The Black Sash, for example, conducts daily voter education programmes in the queues at its advice offices.

Teams of voter educators from organisations like the Matla Trust and Idasa are taking information about the election into the field. But, considering that over half the South African population is categorised as rural, and that over 70 percent have not voted before, the need to mend the holes in the voter education net is urgent.



INDEPENDENT FORUM FOR ELECTORAL EDUCATION

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