Exploring new terrain – tackling a tri-media approach to the 1999 election.

An analysis of online coverage of elections by media organisations in their respective countries and recommendations for multi-platform publishing within the South African Broadcasting Corporation to cover the national election.

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Abstract

This study attempts to analyse the way foreign media organisations have used the Internet to inform, educate and mobilise citizens for participation in their national election. These foreign experiences provide a framework with which to analyse the implications for the SABC as a public broadcaster of the next elections in South Africa.

The research was informed by theories of media and democracy. One of the most powerful features of the new technology is its technical ability to facilitate an interactive flow of information. This research examines the concept of cyberdemocracy and the implications for the SABC, especially as it is planning on launching an online election strategy. The democratic roles of journalism and the implications for the SABC are also discussed. As a public service broadcaster, the SABC is bound to educate, inform, and mobilise voters for participation, build community and national identity and scrutinise the poll in the interests of transparency, accountability and fair play. International journalists are advocating a new type of journalism, called public or civic journalism, which combines these roles.

This research draws primarily on qualitative research methods, using a case study methodology. It draws upon direct observation and interview methodology in the fieldwork. However, it also uses some quantitative methods in the analysis of the websites and the SABC research.

Finally, the research analyses the situation at the SABC and provides recommendations for the election website within this context.

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Introduction

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has adopted a bi-media approach to covering the 1999 election. This approach means that the corporation will establish synergies in the deployment of its resources and in its editorial approach from both radio and television. An election task team has been established to oversee the preparations. The SABC is considering adopting a tri-media approach to the coverage of the election. A tri-media approach includes Internet publishing. Internet publishing will add another step to tri-media publishing by also utilising content generated for both radio and television. Tri-media assumes that the SABC generate content per se, in a co-ordinated and integrated way, which arises from, and is distributed across, all three media. Publishing the coverage of the election online is part of a broader attempt to establish online publishing at the SABC.

This research analysed coverage of elections by media organisations online in order to make recommendations to the SABC for a tri-media approach to the coverage of the South African election. It examines how foreign media organisations have used the Internet to inform, educate and mobilise citizens for participation in their national election. It also draws upon research on the way that political candidates used the web and news organisations which showed that they used the medium for different reasons. The news media used the Web to "enhance their role as forums for information and opinion" while political parties used it to market their candidates. "The difference between the two strategies suggests the narrowest and broadest possibilities for the Web's

place in a democracy" (Hall, 1997). This thesis therefore uses these experiences to analyse the implications for the SABC as a public broadcaster for the next election. As discussed later, I also conducted fieldwork research at the SABC itself.

My research is informed by theories of media and democracy. Modern democracies suffer from inactivity and non-participation by the average citizen. Participation is required for the effective functioning of a democracy as it ensures the protection of individuals and minorities from "arbitrary decisions by the elected leaders" (Pateman, 1970:11). According to Habermas (1962) a "public sphere" for democratic discourse allows "citizens to interact, study and debate on the public issues of the day" and thus the "town hall" metaphor for the media is often used to describe this (quoted in McChesney, 1997:10). However, these are largely first world experiences of the media and democracy. How relevant is this to South Africa? South Africa can be regarded as a developing nation with a new democracy. South Africa has institutions of representative democracy and a strong community tradition of participative politics, but relative inexperience of a democratic culture and participation in a conventional democratic setting. Media can play an important role here. An additional role of the media in developing countries is to aid development and this applies to South Africa. Elections are a key moment in an ongoing democratic process as they provide citizens with an opportunity to re-elect their political representatives giving them greater control over the governing process. Elections also have profound bearing on electoral processes and subsequent participation from citizens. These political contexts also form the contextual background to the study.

As a public service broadcaster in South Africa's democratic conditions, the SABC is bound to educate, inform, and mobilise voters for participation, build community and national identity and also entertain the citizens. There is a new type of journalism emerging internationally that combines some of these roles. International journalists are advocating a new type of journalism that will empower citizens and give voice to their concerns, called public or civic journalism (Bales, 1997; The Poynter Institute, 1997; Gartner, 1997; Hume, 1996). "Public journalism is a new way of covering the world that contributes to a 'better, richer political dialogue" (Bales, 1997:170). The relevance of public journalism contributing to participatory democracy in South Africa, within the context of the SABC's online coverage of the election, is the critical context for my research.

New technologies now make it possible for participatory democracy to occur in complex modern societies. "Direct popular participation in debate and voting is rendered not just possible, but easy, by the electronic media" (Budge, 1997:28). This applies most fully to the Internet. One of the most powerful features of the new technology is its technical ability to facilitate an interactive flow of information. Previous communication structures offered only a one-way flow of information. Dellinger argues that: "our societies are in the midst of a communications revolution in which the 'audience' has been empowered to talk back" (http://lingua.kie.utu.fi/crossmedia/push.htm). Although this is largely a First World phenomenon, it is important not to completely dismiss it as the new communication technologies are also impacting locally. Advocates of cyberdemocracy argue that the Internet is a new medium that can facilitate interaction

and multiple information flows as compared to the previous one-way flow of information. South Africa and the SABC operate in a context where the appropriateness of these First World possibilities needs to be investigated.

This research was largely based on qualitative research methods as discussed in depth in chapter one. However, it also utilised quantitative methods in the survey of election sites online and in some aspects of the SABC research. I spent time gathering data on the Internet from election websites to determine how various international news organisations covered their national elections online. The research was based on case study methodology, using the SABC as a case study.

As a direct observer, I spent a week with the SABC in November 1998 observing the staff, their relationships and the way the corporation functions with specific reference to the Internet planning and operations. Together with the direct observation, I also conducted interviews with relevant members of staff on their view of the SABC's democratic-electoral roles and their vision for the election broadcasting. The SABC was chosen because it is the media organisation with a special mandate to contribute to the concept of democracy in South Africa, i.e. its programming must educate, inform, entertain, build national identity and mobilise citizens for participation. The research was endorsed as valuable to the corporation. The costs of the research were carried by the SABC and a contract was drawn up to the effect that the sponsor would not unreasonably restrict the dissemination of the research.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one provides greater detail of the context of the study and discusses the scope and methods used in the thesis. Chapter two examines theories of media and democracy providing theoretical background to the study and explores the possibility of the Internet fostering a new type of democracy - cyberdemocracy. Chapter three examines the different types of journalism and their relationship to the concept of media and democracy and examines the implications of online journalism. Chapter four is an analysis of the international election websites and provides a background to the recommendations made to the SABC election website in chapter six. Chapter five details the research findings from the SABC and contextualises the situation at the corporation. Chapter six provides recommendations for the election website within the context of the SABC. Finally, chapter seven reviews the major issues raised in the study, considers the relevance of this case study to the theoretical understanding of media and democracy and explores the implications for the SABC.

Chapter One
Theoretical framework and methodology

1.1   Introduction

This chapter contextualises the research within a theoretical framework and examines the research methodologies that were used and some of their related problems. This is all examined within the broader context of media and democracy and democratic journalism as explained in chapters two and three.

1.2   Research methodology

This research uses qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative research is a holistic approach to research (Patton, 1990:52). In order to understand the online publishing of the SABC, this research was located within the broader context of the corporation as a multi-platform publisher. For qualitative research to be meaningful, the role of the SABC as a public service broadcaster in South Africa also had to be examined. Within the qualitative approach, history is also crucial. The current conditions, relationships and the corporate culture at the SABC can only be understood within the context of the history of the corporation. With the SABC, my research was framed within the context of the planning for the coverage of the 1999 national election.

Qualitative research methods permit the researcher to study issues in depth and detail without being constrained to categorising issues and experiences as in the case of quantitative research. The statistical methods used in quantitative research make it possible to measure the reactions of large numbers of people according to a limited set of

pre-determined questions, which facilitates comparison and generalisation. "By contrast, qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases the understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalisability" (Patton, 1990:15). However, generalisations, even though they maybe statistically meaningful, have no automatic applicability to the individual case. Human behaviour cannot be understood in terms of statistics, "without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities" (Lincoln and Guba, 1994:106). Hence, this study uses primarily qualitative research. In qualitative inquiry the researcher is the instrument. Lincoln and Guba (in Patton, 1990:15) argue that this allows for "flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument." Qualitative research assumes that knowledge of reality is constructed by the individual's involvement in the research situation, where multiple realities exist (Creswell, 1994:6). It is context specific where the researcher tries to give meaning and attempts to understand reality within a particular context.

However, quantitative research is not without merit. Qualitative and quantitative research methods involve different strengths and weaknesses and thus constitute alternative, rather than mutually exclusive, research strategies. "Both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected in the same study" (Patton, 1990:14). This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods because of these reasons. The analysis of websites and the survey questionnaire quantified data in order to make qualitative analyses of this data. Some quantitative assessment is also made of the SABC study, in

terms of the staff who view the online medium as valuable and the role of the SABC as a public service broadcaster.

Fien and Hillcoat (1996:26) say that the paradigm upon which a research methodology is based is very important because "research methodologies are very much a puppet of their underlying assumption." Research paradigms determine whether the research assists in maintaining the status quo or in transforming the dominant social paradigm. My research is framed within the critical theory paradigm. Critical theory has three objectives – understanding, social critique and social transformation. The research process is a collaborative exercise between the researcher and the research object (Fien and Hillcoat, 1996:29). Critical theorists assert that meaning is not only internally constructed but social forces also play a large role in influencing the construction of meaning. Critical researchers are aware of their subjectivities and enter into an investigation after having revealed their position, "so no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them" (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994:140). I entered the research fully acknowledging my stance on the importance of encouraging citizen participation and the role of the media in a democracy. I am also very pro-technology. I view both technology and change positively and my enthusiasm for cyberdemocracy and the role of the media in contributing to this may have been influenced by these personal stances. "The critical perspective entails a commitment to socially transformative research for the common good of individuals within society" (Fien and Hillcoat, 1996:28). From a personal perspective, I do believe that an online election site for the SABC can contribute to participatory democracy in South Africa.

Critical theory assumes that facts are not isolated from social circumstances, they are influenced by ideologies, historical and social circumstances (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994:140). This ontological position asserts that knowledge of reality is shaped by a collection of social, political, cultural and economic factors that have crystallised into a series of structures because of historical circumstance (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:110). This is particularly pertinent to the SABC, which is steeped in South Africa's political history and still carries some of the political baggage from the past. Thus the knowledge of staff at the SABC that was collected as data must be viewed within this context. Any research at this organisation needs to take into account its role in South Africa's apartheid history as it has impacted on the corporation and still bears the scars from the past.

This research was commissioned and sponsored by the SABC for the elections online. A contract was drawn up to the effect that the sponsor would not unreasonably restrict the dissemination of the research. I was fully aware of the sponsorship together with the potential problem of the sponsor interfering in the research process, thus affecting the outcome of the research. This did not happen. The brief from the SABC was to investigate election websites online, in terms of their content and structure. This thesis goes beyond that as it uses this information within the context of the SABC and examines the broader implications for cyberjournalism and participatory democracy. The brief also included investigating possible alliances and revenue streams which are not discussed in the thesis.

1.3   Research process

In order to determine what other media organisations were doing online with specific reference to their election websites, I analysed 32 media organisations in the United Kingdom and the United States to give me some background knowledge on which to base my observations and recommendations. However, it must be noted that these were context specific sites and I was sensitive to the problems of transferability of the research, i.e., the extent to which this research is transferable to other studies. This part of the research looked specifically at the online content rather than the factors influencing the content. Logistically, it would have been too difficult to analyse the structure of all these organisations and the factors influencing the content. I also sent questionnaires to the webmasters of the websites that I surveyed and to carr-l and online news mailing list. I sent 37 questionnaires and 10 were returned.

Before the fieldwork part of the study began, certain preliminary steps were taken. These included familiarisation with the SABC's public website, plus an initial visit to the corporation to gain an understanding of the size and structures within the SABC, as well as speaking to a few of the relevant members of the corporation to identify the people and structures involved. This was followed up with telephonic and e-mail conversations to gain access to employees.

Research data was collected by participant observation and in-depth interviews with relevant members of staff. These staff were identified as having some connection with the elections and/or with the online election project. I spent a week at the company

interviewing these members of the organisation, observing and evaluating the procedures and structures. I also attended a three-day bosberaad[1] that discussed planning for the coverage of the elections. All the key members of the election task team were present. The bosberaad was held away from the normal working environment and participants stayed over for two nights.

1.3.1   Sampling and transferability of findings

Fieldwork research data has been collected specifically from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The SABC was chosen because it is the media organisation with a special mandate for promoting democracy in South Africa together with other public service obligations like being a neutral forum for discussion, providing impartial news and information for citizens and mobilising citizens for participation. This research was endorsed as valuable to the corporation. It is also the only public broadcaster and reaches the widest possible segment of the South African population as compared to any other broadcaster in the country. According to the July-December 1997 Amps figures, the total number of SABC TV viewers were 23 013 000 as compared to M-Net which has 3 139 000 viewers. The SABC radio listeners were 29 234 000. The SABC is the only media organisation that broadcasts in all 11 official languages and this has the widest implications for participatory democracy.

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[1] bosberaad - [Afrikaans., bos bush + beraad deliberation, consultation.] A 'bush summit', a meeting of leaders at a retreat which is remote from urban centres, intended to provide participants with the chance to focus on difficult issues undisturbed.

Sampling was also a factor in my websites review. This research was not meant to be an exhaustive list of all the media organisations online but to represent a sample that would give the researcher an idea of what the other major organisations were doing with their election websites. I chose these websites because they were online and had covered recent elections in their respective countries. These were also established websites that have been publishing online for some time. These countries were also established democracies in First World countries. Although there are Third World democracies, none of these had media organisations with election websites with the exception of India where the *Economic Times* online site was no longer up.

The experiences and insights gained from here could be valuable to a developing country bearing in mind the question of transferability. The chapter dealing with analysis of election websites and questionnaires includes discussion of the limits to which generalisations can be made. A sensitivity to the limits of transferability and the determinacy of the context was also required in order to avoid eclectic or illegitimate comparisons. The specificity of online media makes generalisation very difficult. However, it did emerge that media organisations planning an online venture seem to have adapted the process to exploit the strengths and absorb the weaknesses of the organisation.

1.3.2 Case Study

Stake (1987:32) has argued that good case studies can "provide more valid portrayals, better bases for personal understanding of what is going on and solid grounds

for considering action". Given the unique nature of media organisations, the research can best be understood within its specific context. "The case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 1984:14; see also Patton, 1990; Robson, 1993). Online publishing is context specific and the SABC online election project examines specifically the election. One of the criticisms of case study research is that it provides little basis for generalisation (Yin, 1984:21). However, in this case, the purpose is not to generalise from the SABC's situation. "The real business of case study is particularisation, not generalisation. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how different it is from others but what it is, what it does. There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself" (Stake, 1995:8).

1.3.3   Direct observation

"The primary purpose of participant-observation research, accordingly, is to describe in fundamental terms various events, situations and actions that occur in a particular social setting" (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991:61). The researcher serves as the primary instrument of inquiry. Patton (1990:202) says that direct observation allows researchers to understand the context within which a programme operates. "Understanding the programme context is essential to a holistic perspective." Direct observation also allows the researcher the opportunity to see routine things that may escape the awareness of staff and to observe things that staff may be unwilling to talk about at an interview. "Observations permit the evaluator to move beyond the selective

perceptions of others" (Patton, 1990:205). Discussions among staff at the bosberaad and during breaks provided valuable insights on the relationships between staff and their views on the role of the SABC and the media.

I spent a week with the SABC observing their systems of work and how information flows. Denzin and Lincoln (1994:367) say that researchers should decide how they would present themselves in the field. I did not hide the nature of my presence and introduced myself as a researcher observing work procedures at the SABC. I mimicked the dress code of the employees so that I did not stand out by being too casual or too formal and was accepted as part of the group. Adler and Adler (1994:380) indicate that there is a trend for direct observers to adopt membership roles and become involved with their subjects. The peripheral membership role entails that an insider's view is vital to forming an accurate appraisal of human group life, so the researcher should observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership. This describes my role as the researcher at the corporation. The core issues observed were:

- the employees' daily interaction with each other

- employees at work and listening to their dialogue with others

- the SABC's planning and thinking on the coverage of the elections.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994:368) also identify that gaining trust is essential to a researcher's success. This proved quite difficult. I had to constantly reassure employees that I was an independent researcher and not a mouthpiece of the SABC management. I

did this by introducing myself as a university representative. I was open about my presence at the corporation and at the bosberaad and informed the relevant people about my research. Employees were at all times aware of the reasons for my presence.

1.3.4 Interviews

Kvale (1995:126) says "the conversation in a research interview is not the reciprocal interaction of two equal partners." I was very much aware of the asymmetry of power in which the process of the interview is controlled by the interviewer. "The interview as such is neither an objective nor a subjective method – its essence is intersubjective interaction" (Kvale, 1996:66). Interviewing may not always be a neutral tool (Benny and Hughes, 1956:142). It can be influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer and this includes factors like race, class and gender. I do not think that these factors necessarily influenced my interviews. The staff that I did interview were progressive thinking members of the corporation and we shared similar views on factors like race and gender. I used the semi-structured and unstructured interview formats allowing information to emerge from the discussion. Patton (1990:278) explains that the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to "access the perspectives of the persons being interviewed" and to find out from them those things that cannot be directly observed. I interviewed the heads of television and radio election task team, the online co-ordinator and the special projects co-ordinator. These people are currently involved in the planning of the election coverage. The interviews were to determine their vision of the role of the corporation in the forthcoming elections and to gauge how this would fit into an online publishing strategy and its contribution to democracy.

1.3.5 Unstructured conversations and informal discussions

Merely watching employees participate in their daily routines and doing formal interviews would have been insufficient to determine their vision for the role of the SABC in the election. I also collected data during informal discussions with employees. I found that the employees were more relaxed without the obtrusive notebook and tape recorder. They were more forthcoming on their personal feelings toward the corporation and their jobs. Also, discussions during tea, lunch, drinks and dinner among staff members at the bosberaad revealed information on the corporate culture of the corporation that I would otherwise not have had access to.

1.3.6 Other

I e-mailed questionnaires to the webmasters of sites surveyed and the online news and carr-l mailing lists to gain greater insight into the online management of the elections. I mailed 37 questionnaires to webmasters and 10 were returned. Even though I mailed follow-up questionnaires, it was to be expected that some responses would not be forthcoming because some election websites function for a specific period and are then archived. Unfortunately there was no way to determine if the websites were defunct and the webmasters moved on or if they were simply not responding to the questionnaire.

1.4 Data Analysis

1.4.1 Triangulation of methods

"Using a combination of data types increases validity as the strengths of one approach can compensate for the weaknesses of another approach" (Marshall and

Rossman quoted in Patton, 1990:244). My use of multiple methods was to ensure the validity and reliability of data collected. The importance of this is evident in the weakness of individual approaches. Direct observation can be limiting in that the presence of the observer may make the staff behave in an atypical manner. The research is also limited to obtaining data that is only observable. In a similar manner, interviews also have their limitations – they are limited to the perceptions and perspectives of the interviewees and can be affected by the emotional state of the interviewees. "Perspectives and perceptions are subject to distortions due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics and simple lack of awareness" (Patton, 1990:245). I knew that political persuasions were a sensitive issue here and I was aware of this in my interviews. I also tried not to influence the interviewee with my perceptions of the organisation or my political persuasion by allowing them to speak expressing their views. I used different interviews to check that the employees were either confirming or contradicting each other. Observations and interviews were complemented by informal discussions, and all the data gained here was also assessed in terms of statistical information from the SABC's websites. In the case of the SABC Newsnet, I had access to the data from the premises. It did not provide any indication of how people were using the data and how valuable it was. However, it did help to provide first hand experience of how this project was managed allowing me some idea of the scope of the website and how this will be managed. I was also allowed access to internal policy documents on their Internet access policy and the e-mail policy that the corporation has developed.

"By using a variety of sources and resources, the evaluation-observer can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimising the weaknesses of any single approach. A multi-method, triangulation approach to fieldwork increases both the validity and the reliability to evaluation data" (Patton, 1990:245). As evidenced above, I utilised just such a multi-method approach in my fieldwork. Further, I was able to check for reliability in my other research where I supplemented the website review with questionnaires to webmasters.

1.5   Conclusion

This chapter has sought to highlight the theoretical assumptions that framed my research based on the critical theory perspective and to provide some detail on how the research was conducted. It also demonstrates the way in which the research and its analysis were informed by theory drawn from others in the field.

Chapter Two
Democracy and the media

2.1   Introduction

This chapter covers theories of participatory democracy, the role of the media in a democracy and Habermas's concept of the public sphere. It examines contemporary theories of cyberdemocracy and whether the Internet could possibly create a new electronic public sphere.

2.2   Participatory Democracy

This research focuses on theories of participatory democracy in order to analyse the Internet's potential to extend participation and hence democracy. However, at the outset it is important to define democracy. Arblaster (1994:9) defines democracy as a concept and at the root of the concept:

> lies the idea of popular power, of a situation in which power, and perhaps authority too, rests with the people. That power or authority is usually thought of as being political, and it often therefore takes the form of an idea of popular sovereignty – the people as the ultimate political authority. But it need not be exclusively political. Democracy is not always taken to signify only a form of government, or of choosing a government: it may be a term applied to a whole society.

Democracy encompasses participation in issues to do with power, control, resources and socially-impacting decisions. In many democracies, the state has been replaced as a single source of power, with the emergence of a new democracy encompassing many interacting levels and sites of power, e.g. gender, race, economic, etc. At the same time, the state remains a critical and central locus of power, and the question of who governs is an open-ended one (at least in theory) in a democratic state.

Representative government calls for the periodic voting of citizens to appoint elected representatives to govern. Elections are an important part of representative democracy. As Mill argued, they allow citizens the power to dismiss corrupt or inept leaders. This ensures that elected representatives act in the general interest rather than self-interest (Ryan, 1983:43). Thus the strength of representative democracy depends on an informed electorate, which in turn is dependent on the media for much of its information.

Barnett (1997:193) identifies four constitutive elements that are important for strong representative democracies. Firstly, information and knowledge is vital to enhancing the quality of political debate and decision-making. He states that any increase in the level of political awareness or knowledge would clearly be a positive benefit for democracy. Pateman (1970) and Held (1997) also view information as important for decision making. Secondly, rational critical debate is an essential pre-condition for good citizenship. This view, that the notion of an informed public sphere remains central to discussions of a properly functioning democracy, parallels Habermas's work on the public sphere. Thirdly, participation and representation is viewed as important because of its educative possibilities. Education, however, is just one democratic value to be gained by participation. Lastly, representation and accountability are important components of a healthy democracy. What efforts do elected officials make to stay in touch with the interests, concerns and opinions of their constituents and electors, and how are these then incorporated within the policy-making process? "Meaningful interaction, which can serve to inform and educate the electorate about

evolving government policy as well as provide a conduit for holding elected representatives to account, is another vital ingredient of good citizenship" (Barnett, 1997:198). The media serve an important function in these constituent elements of democracies by providing the necessary information for citizens, providing a platform for debate and discussion and monitoring elected representatives.

Participatory democratic theorists argue that periodic voting is not enough for a strong democracy. Hacker (1996:229) argues that "democracy can be enhanced by increased political participation, active input into decision-making, interactivity among all levels of the political system, and channels for those who normally do not have significant avenues of discussing political matters." Participationists look for changes in the structures of politics to widen citizen involvement. "People would not only go to the polls but would also attend party meetings, take part in referendums and even participate in the executive arm of government and the workplace. The process of taking part becomes integral to democracy" (Parry and Moyser, 1994:46).

Further justification for participatory democracy is based on the following:

> An equal right to liberty and self-development can only be achieved in a 'participatory society', a society which fosters a sense of political efficacy, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a sustained interest in the governing process (Held, 1997:271).

This research examines the key features of participatory democracy and the conditions that are necessary to facilitate this type of democracy. Many theories of democracy do not focus on the "operation of the democratic political system as a whole",

but are often limited to citizens voting at periodic elections for national leaders (Pateman, 1970:14). Representative democracy should be more than this.

> The existence of a participatory society would mean that (the ordinary person) was better able to assess the performance of representatives at the national level, better equipped to take decisions of national scope when the opportunity arose to do so (Pateman,1970:43).

Greater involvement in political affairs aids the community as it gives citizens the opportunity to practice and enhance their participatory skills. Participation trains citizens to become better at determining public interests. Potter (1997:6) says that participation helps citizens to become more responsible for their political actions and the consequences. "Their self-interested desires will tend increasingly to be tempered by moral concern for the well-being of others, not to mention a heightened awareness of their own true interests." Barber (1984:8) says that participation enhances the power of communities and thus enlarges their scope of action.

Participation also deepens democracy by involving the majority of people in political life. When "people become actively involved in the process of government, they will be motivated to obtain more, better, and more coherent information on public affairs" (Potter 1997:6). This increased participation by citizens can act as a check against governmental power as citizens can monitor their elected representatives and actively contribute to the decision-making process. Barber (1984:152) argues that "civic activity educates individuals how to think publicly as citizens."

Liberal theorists like Mill and Rousseau advocated participation in democracy because they viewed its educative impact as important to sustaining a democracy. In

their view, the truth will emerge from participation in debate. Participation in debate ensures that political equality is made effective in the decision-making process as all stakeholders would have been able to voice their opinions. Kelley and Donway (1990:81) regard participation from citizens as crucial: "The free flow of information, open and robust debate and the multiplicity of voices" are necessary conditions for "winnowing truth from error and for democracy to function."

The argument for truth, its definition and relation to democracy are rather complex philosophical issues which merit attention in a different study. Some theorists like Mill argue that truth can emerge from unrestrained public debate and discussion from citizens because no single person can know the entire truth. Keane (1991:19) explains the reasons why Mill thought that the circulation of ideas through the press is essential. Even though a government might think an opinion is false, this opinion may actually prove to be true after rigorous debate. However, some governments may reject true ideas anyway. This was aptly displayed in the continuance of South Africa's system of apartheid for many years. Some truths may also be controversial for the time and place that they are being discussed. The "truth" about gender and homosexuality did not emerge for many decades. Nonetheless, liberal theorists also suggest that the full truth can emerge by confronting it with other contrary opinions, and that this pluralism of ideas is critical to democracy.

2.3 Media and Democracy

Participatory democracy has received criticism for being ambitious and impractical. The scale and nature of modern society makes it difficult to involve everyone in the decision-making process. Apart from the time constraints, the large number of different interest groups and minority interests would make it difficult to obtain a majority decision. Participatory democracy calls for the constant meeting and discussing of ideas and issues – a kind of direct, rather than representative, governance. However, especially in modern society, this is very difficult as people have other commitments.

It is also difficult to reach majority decisions because of the differing views in a society and it becomes very easy to overlook or subdue minority interests and voices by the tyranny of the majority. The smaller and more specialised the view, the more likely these views will clash with others (Pennock, 1979:456-463). This is where the role of the media becomes important. In modern democracies, media serve a number of purposes. Some of these include acting as a conduit of information between citizens and public institutions, serving as a "marketplace of ideas" to engage citizens in debate and acting as a check on government.

This idea of the media as a "marketplace of ideas" is relevant to the notion of democratic participation. Elite pluralist theories of the media and democracy tend to reflect on the opinions of the competing elites and parties. Grassroots participatory pluralism is about introducing alternatives to the dominant elite voices. The media

cannot be identified as solely liberal pluralist or participatory pluralist. It is potentially a combination of these functions. At different times, it serves different roles and audience needs. The next section examines the concept of the media as a marketplace of ideas or a public sphere.

2.3.1 The public sphere

The concept of the public sphere can be traced back to ancient Greek civilisation where the citizens gathered to discuss issues of the day. According to classical liberal theory, the public sphere is "the space between government and society, in which private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state" (Curran 1991:29).

Sociologist Jurgen Habermas refers to the "concept of the bourgeois public sphere as a specific social space which arose under the development of capitalism in Western Europe." The public sphere consisted of the educated elite and "operated via such media as intellectual journals, pamphlets and newspapers" and in the coffeehouses, clubs and salons of Europe (Dahlgren, 1995:8). Habermas says that a public sphere adequate to a democratic polity depends upon both the quality of discourse and quantity of participation. His conception of the classical bourgeois public sphere was based on the quality of debate and not the status or merits of the arguer.

For Habermas the bourgeois public sphere allowed citizens to publicly discuss and debate issues of the state that were directly relevant to them. According to Dahlgren (1995:7), Habermas conceptualises the public sphere as:

that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed. The public sphere 'takes place' when citizens, exercising the rights of assembly and association gather as public bodies to discuss issues of the day, specifically those of political concern.

2.3.2 Criticism of the public sphere

Habermas's original conception of the bourgeois public sphere has received criticism: he did not recognise the bourgeois public sphere as elitist in its time and did not include alternative media forms and discourses; Alongside the bourgeois public sphere, a vibrant proletarian public sphere also developed. However, his conception of the public sphere still has its merits. The idea of a public sphere gained popularity because it identified a space that allowed citizens to debate and discuss issues of the day. Habermas's public sphere was a space independent from state and business control permitting elite citizens to interact, study and debate the public issues (McChesney, 1997:10). This independence gave them the freedom to discuss issues and contest ideas. The public sphere concept fits into the participatory democracy perspective. However, the scale of modern society and increased pressures on private time make direct participation even by elites in the public sphere untenable. Dahlgren and Sparks (1991:8) urge the importance of changing thinking on the concept of the public sphere:

> The romantic notion of a public sphere composed of individuals speaking face to face or communicating via a small-circulation print media is not of much utility. We live in the age of electronic media and mass publics and cannot turn back the historical clock, we can only go forward.

The media in modern society serve as this "public sphere" where citizens can debate on the issues of the day. "The mass media have become the chief institutions of the public sphere" (Dahlgren, 1995:8). Like participatory democratic theorists, Dahlgren also advocates debate among citizens as this "provides 'training grounds' for anchoring

democracy in the experiences of lived reality". He adds that this socio-cultural

dimension "which encompasses values and a sense of identity as a citizen", is important

for "both the vitality of democracy as a system and the dynamics of the public sphere"

(1995:4).

2.4   Cyberdemocracy

New interactive media technologies constituting the Internet have given audiences

options to participate in democratic society like receiving and imparting news and

information, educating, informing and mobilising citizens for participation. Clift (1997)

identifies cyberdemocracy as part of real democracy. He offers the following definition

for cyberdemocracy:

> Citizen-based electronic democracy is about creating the online public spaces for
> interaction among citizens and organised interests. In a simple sense, we are creating an
> open and on-going town hall meeting where ideas, agendas, personalities, interests, and
> beliefs may mix dynamically. We are creating an arena for public expression,
> development of opinion, and accountability.

The Internet can also contribute to a culture of democratic participation during the

election period and between elections. Clift (1997) adds that the Internet also:

> holds the potential to raise awareness about elections and candidate positions, but the
> ultimate benefit will be a more democratic society. A society where more people are able
> to hear and listen to each other, have a public voice in agenda setting, and have an
> increased ability to contribute toward the resolution of public problems.

The Internet can contribute to a culture of participation and cyberdemocracy by

facilitating interactive communication between citizens and elected representatives, by

allowing citizens to practise democratic communication within chat groups, news groups

and mailing lists and by taking part in online polling.

The information superhighway enables the rapid free flow of information between people, corporations, non-governmental bodies, political institutions, etc. The number of citizens embracing the Internet as a source of information exceeded the expectations of publishers, as the Freedom Forum's Digital Democracy project on the 1996 American elections online found (Powell, 1996). This experience is paralleled by media theorists proposing the Internet as the new medium to facilitate democracy and citizen participation (Dellinger, nd; Rheingold, nd; Poster, nd).

Hacker (1996:226) identifies four theories of democracy which may inform debates about electronic democratisation. Classical democratic theory is based on the ancient Greek ideals of direct participation in speech and debate. Classic pluralism assumes that everyone in a democratic society is represented by spokespeople, thus making direct messages to the centres of power unnecessary. Elite pluralism is based on the assumption that there are defined interest groups in society which compete for power in a democracy. It also assumes lower socio-economic groups do not have enough knowledge or concern to become involved in political processes and are thus irrelevant to the political process because their leaders will advocate on their behalf. Lastly, critical pluralism assumes that capitalist societies work against large segments of the population and new communication technologies favour those with capital. "Working with a critical pluralist theory of democracy mandates that we be vigilant in attempting to empower the disempowered, extend the boundaries of political debate, make enfranchisement into the systems of political discourse easier, make political discourse more rational and

informative, and bring citizens close to interaction with centres of power" (Hacker, 1996:227).

The media serve an important function in these constituent elements of democracy by providing the necessary information for citizens, giving them a public sphere to interact with, thus, among their other functions, serving as the fourth estate. Online media can serve all of these functions and more, like providing interactivity and participation. However, while the latter stress on online grassroots participatory journalism may work in richer, First World countries, this is not possible for cyberspace in South Africa as the Internet is still an elitist medium. Although Hacker (1996) identifies four distinctive theories of the media, the emergence of cyberspace has created a blending between the participatory role of the media and the neo-liberal Habermasian position of elites participating in discussion.

2.4.1   Examining the potential for electronic democratisation

The technical capabilities of the new media - its ability to store a near infinite volume of information, interactivity and accessibility to information, people and data on demand - have definite implications for democracy.

Previously, space constraints impacted on the amount of information available. Barnett, as discussed on page 20, identified the need for information in a democracy: the technology allows for this publishing of unlimited information. This means that any information that citizens need to participate in a democracy should be put online and

accessed by people through superior search technologies rather than sifting through all the available information. The technology allows for information on demand, meaning that citizens can access this as and when necessary. Theoretically, citizens can access the full-text of government documents and policy proposals, if they desire, to make informed decisions. The near limitless space of the digital environment allows users to choose the amount of information they require. Media companies can now publish the full text articles, reader responses and original documentation or links to it. This also facilitates more balanced coverage as rebuttals and reactions can be published in full.

These information-linked features of the Internet allow for stronger democracies. The Internet allows for a lot more too. It enhances participatory democracy by facilitating interactive communication, mobilising citizens and in some instances educating them. The concepts of interactivity and community deserve further elaboration and will be examined in the subsection below.

2.4.2   New ways of interaction and community building

The Internet provides new ways of interaction for citizens: "The various kinds of cyberspace on the Internet, meeting places, work areas and electronic cafes in which this vast transmission of images and words become places of communicative relation" (Poster, 1995:26). The virtual communities that the Internet has fostered, where groups of people meet only in cyberspace and manage to carry on a lively political life, provides a new public sphere that facilitates democratic participation in politics (Fisher, Margolis and Resnick, 1994). Commenting on the importance of participation in democracy,

Dahlgren (1995:4) says that the socio-cultural dimension that participation adds is important for the system and the dynamics of the public sphere as it gives citizens a sense of identity. New technological innovations make this form of direct participation increasingly viable. "The age of the public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse" (Poster, 1995). Technological advances now allow citizens to be involved in debate and discussion on political affairs. Direct democracy was dismissed as unfeasible because it took too much time and was constrained to a physical locale. This need not be – citizens (at least the 'wired' elite) can now debate and discuss issues at their convenience in the privacy of their own home and this would still be participation in the public sphere, even if it is still, generally speaking, a bourgeois one and especially in Third World countries.

One illustration of citizens participating at a local level is the Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica (PEN). This network was established to serve as a communication channel and a forum for debate between the local citizens and political figures in the area. Residents can log onto the public conferences, which take place on a regular basis and discuss issues of concern. "Soon after the establishment of PEN, 12 February 1989, a group of citizens began talking online about the problem of homelessness. The discussions were notable for their inclusion of some homeless people, who participated through public terminals at locations such as city libraries." This resulted in a $150 000 programme from the city council for the homeless (http://www-leland.stanford.edu/~tbaker/paper.html).

The interactive capabilities of the technology enable citizens to have greater control over the flow of information. They can enter into dialogue with both journalists and other citizens in the online community. Archiving capabilities allow users and journalists to access information on demand. This also gives users the opportunity to seek further background information if they so desire. Online databases of government information, policy documents and white papers allow citizens to monitor the performance of elected representatives. Participatory democracy advocates that citizens be sufficiently informed to participate in democratic processes. The technology provides the means to allow them to be informed and to use this information to conduct debate and discussion in online forums.

2.4.3   New communication structures

Previous communication structures could be described as vertical communications between citizens and political institutions. Although letters to editors, "voxpops" and talk radio allowed some two-way communication, this was still limited and often had to be edited due to space/time constraints. Liberal theorists conceive the media as primarily "vertical channels of communication between private citizens and government: they inform individual choice at election time and they influence governments by articulating the collective view of private citizens" (Curran, 1991:29). This does not amount to interactive communication as such, nor involve citizens as active participants but rather passive observers. Old communications technologies like television and radio have been criticised for their one-way flow of information. Michael Bauwens (1996) argues that the Internet has a tremendous democratic potential as it

allows for horizontal communication between citizens and thus "diminishes the need for bureaucracy. Hence, the Internet will favour the abandonment of the bureaucratic model, which is based on information control, for the cyberocratic model which is based on the free flow of information" (Poster, 1995). The Internet allows for the flow of information to originate from any source. "It would seem, therefore, that our societies are in the midst of a communications revolution in which 'the audience' has been empowered to talk back" (Dellinger, nd).

2.5   Criticisms of cyberdemocracy and responses to these

2.5.1.1 Criticism: An elitist medium

Cyberdemocracy critics believe that current trends with Internet usage show that it will reflect some of the problems of the old communications structures. Participation requires education and a certain degree of technical skills to be able to participate, which is alienating. Participation also requires economic resources and thus "virtual communities may reflect the biases that favour the richer and better educated." Access is expensive and mostly limited to those connected with educational institutions, research organisations, governmental units and businesses that are able to pay for it. "These participants tend to be better off and better educated than the average citizen" (Fisher, Margolis and Resnick, 1994).

The Internet is currently an elitist medium reflecting the ideas and opinions of the richer sector of the population who can afford it. An equal exchange of ideas is impossible with only a limited sector of the population. Old media structures currently

produce and disseminate political messages within economic, political and cultural subsystems, "which exert 'pressure' on the media to select certain issues rather than others as subjects for public attention" (Fisher, Margolis and Resnick, 1994). Stories in the media are often framed according to favoured scenarios and to give the views of certain groups and individuals privileged treatment and heightened exposure (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990:275). Can the Internet lead to a new type of information poverty where only a limited sector of the population have access and can participate? This criticism of the Internet is dealt with in the next section from insight derived from communication patterns as discussed below.

2.5.1.2 Response: Introducing alternative voices and communication patterns

The Internet is moving from elite to mass medium, but the fact that it still tilts towards the elite is not an argument for rejecting its democratic potential. Elites are also part of democracy, and a very influential stratum too. In some ways, the Internet is less elitist than television or radio. Start up costs for prior technologies were prohibitively expensive encouraging the conglomeration of the media. Publishing online is easier and cheaper, thus allowing a multiplicity of voices into the public sphere. There is an increasing use of the medium by alternative organisations and community groups that were previously excluded from the public arena either because of financial constraints or a blackout by the mass media. Unlike previous communications technologies where citizens had very little control over what was aired or published, they now have a choice of alternative voices and information.

While the media occupy a large space in the public sphere and are imperative to it, the space of the public sphere is larger than this. It also includes the socio-cultural dimension. Research by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (cited in Lenart, 1994:5) on the impact of interpersonal communication found that "the ties between individuals and to networks of chosen and predetermined referent and social groupings, carry inescapable attitude and opinion cues for the individual citizen." People learn, discuss and take their political cues from other people as well as from the major news media. Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980 cited in Lenart, 1994:41) found that informal communication has two dimensions – a social and an individual one. In the social sense it may strengthen or block the impact of news media content, depending on the social environments. At the individual level, "it opens an alternative channel of information which may reinforce or dissipate the impact of new media content depending on the similarity of messages."

In a study of voting decisions in an Ohio community (1954) it was found that the effect of the mass media is small compared to the role of personal influences. "Voters made up their minds in such a way that, in the end, they conformed closely to the political climate of their social environment" (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1995:3). The media does not directly impact on elites, leaders or anyone else. It reaches many citizens indirectly via elites, leaders, opinion formers, etc..

In addition to this, the two-step flow of communication is based on the assumption that "ideas, often, seem to flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population" (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1995:33).

Thus, people serve as the intervening factors between the stimuli of the media and the resultant opinions, decisions and actions. Research in rural communication found that structures of interpersonal relation are also important for channeling the flow of influence. The mass media are not directly effective as mass communicators, but rather assume prominence after the message has been adopted and disseminated and legitimized by local initiators and leaders (Katz, 1964:110-115). Although the Katz and Lazarsfeld research is dated, there is still value in it, in that it demonstrates that media impacts beyond its immediate recipients/participants, albeit in mediated ways.

A refinement of the Katz and Lazarsfeld two-step flow of information model is the multi-step flow of information model which contends that there are several ways in which messages can be transmitted from a source to an audience. It further argues that some people will receive messages from the traditional mass media or the source while others will receive the message through other means. Transmission of a message depends on the availability of relaying mechanisms. In a local study on the role of communication for development it was found that issues in the media are often the springboard for discussion about political and social issues. The media carries the most valuable information but the search for information is channeled through educated leaders of the community or tribal authority figures. Thus both the role of the media and the tribal authority figures were important for information dissemination (Burton, 1996:170). In a country with limited technological resources and high rates of illiteracy, this research has important implications. Current discussions on the Internet can be compared to the bourgeois public sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

where the elite took part in discussions, which later reached the media and thus the larger public for critical discussion. The current social structure of the Internet makes it more comparable to the elitist public sphere of Habermas, but its potential accessibility and sensitivity to new social issues has implications for new communication structures and information flows (Brants et al, 1996:246).

Writing in 1966, before the advent of the Internet, Somerblad saw the media in developing countries as providing the two-way flow of information and opinion, regarding this as crucial to democracy. In the nineties, the issues are still the same, but new information technologies have the potential to allow for better flow of communication and access to communication by the marginalised in developing countries. Information is the new resource of the century and current technologies allow for greater empowerment because of their two-way information flow.

2.5.2.1 Criticism: The Internet fosters narrow private interests

Just as the Internet can be a public sphere for private individuals to meet and discuss issues, the technology also allows for highly stratified interest groups to gather independently without any of them ever meeting together. Resolutions were reached in traditional democratic politics through a combination of pressure groups, bargaining and compromise. However, like-minded citizens in cyberspace may develop a new type of civic life that may involve little or no exchange with citizens of differing views and opinions (Fisher, Margolis and Resnick, 1994).

Poster (nd) argues that the public sphere of old was a place where "people could talk as equals. Status differences did not include frank discussion. Rational argument prevailed, and the goal was consensus." Following Usenet threads on the Internet shows that this is not the case online. The goal of the discussion is not to reach consensus and rational argument rarely prevails. Dissent on the Internet merely leads to a proliferation of views, as there are no conditions present that might encourage compromise (Underwood, nd).

Online technologies allow people to define their own identities. "Traditionally, a person's identity is defined by contact. Identity is rooted in the physical body. This stability forces individuals to be accountable for their positions and allows trust to be built up between people." (Poster, nd). Cyberdemocracy critics have expressed concern about the fluid identities of cyberspace. They question the extent to which relationships and commitments as they are understood in the real world can hold in the virtual world (Fisher, Margolis and Resnick, 1994; Poster, nd; Rheingold, nd). The response to these criticisms will be dealt with in the next section.

2.5.2.2 Response: Using old models for new technology

The criticisms cited above are based on Habermas's historical model of the public sphere. However, Habermas's public sphere has been criticised for being idealized. Underwood (nd) says that Habermas failed to account for the extent to which the public sphere was a constant struggle for hegemony by the different groups. He also failed "to consider the possibility that there might be several overlapping and interacting public

spheres." Following the development of interactions in cyberspace, there are multiple mini public spheres that overlap and interact. Although Underwood's criticism of Habermas' public sphere is valid, it is not particularly important as people do not only exist in cyberspace nor are they entirely self-enclosed. Interactions in everyday life provide other insights that are also ported to the online environment.

In a sociological study on cyberspace use for public life, Fisher et al (1996 cited in Dahlgren, 1997:67) distinguished several types of civic interaction on the Internet. Some of these were communitarian, which emphasised the ideal of participatory democracy and mutuality. Democratic mobilisation was another form of civic interaction where activist groups used the Internet to organise themselves and discussions between citizens who shared a similiar point of view (Dahlgren, 1997:69).

Reaching consensus in online discussion is not the most important factor. It is the fact that the technology provides citizens with a new platform to practise interactive community building via these discussion groups. It is also a new arena to practise democratic citizenship. While citizens were largely rooted to a special time and physical space previously, this is not true for the nineties. Online users are connected via common goals, ideas and concerns rather than being connected through physical proximity. Thus while democratic citizenship of old was rooted to a time and space, the new democracy is about dealing with issues like power, control and discussing ideas and solutions for these. It is, rather, an attempt at understanding other citizens and allowing for divergent views and opinions.

Habermas's public sphere can be modified to accommodate its relevance to cyberspace. The new electronic public sphere has the potential to be multiple spheres of interactions with an encompassing political public. As discussed on page 19, these interacting levels and sites of power can also be found online where citizens can practise democratic roles.

The technology also allows for the electronic public sphere to be participatory. Thus the Internet is a new medium that provides a viable option for elite citizens to participate in democracy. As Underwood (nd) says: "cyberspace is a massive construction project" that is developing as people learn the potentials and limitations of the new medium. Citizens are using the Internet to communicate for a number of reasons:

> It is clear from many discussions that one very prominent reason is that users have picked up on the Internet's democratising potential, the many-to-many nature of democratic Internet communication as a counterbalance to the one-to-many totalitarianism of the media corporations (Underwood, nd).

2.5.3.1 Criticism: The Internet as another entertainment medium?

At the outset the Internet looked like becoming an open public communications medium. However, this now looks like it is in danger of being usurped by media moguls and advertising interests. Today's mass media have largely limited their public affairs coverage, increased entertainment and imposed format rigidities on public affairs coverage. The Internet was initially populated by alternative groupings of people, academics and technologists. However, with its rise in popularity with mainstream audiences all the major media conglomerates have also made inroads online. They have the budgets to buy the expertise, hardware and software capabilities for highly

entertaining sites. The online environment is becoming increasingly commercialised (Hazen, 1996:5). The conglomeration of media and concentration of ownership are some of the problems facing traditional media and which currently threaten the Internet as well.

> The principle mass media openings for political information are molded into standardised formats and conventions, which control what journalists can do in conveying ideas to the audience, while at the same time reflecting how much time and space media organisations consider they can afford to devote to the examination of social and political issues (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990:283).

Mitch Kapor of the Electronic Frontiers Foundation describes the Internet model where citizens could have "decentralised, distributed, direct control over when, what, why and with whom they exchange information. This model seems to breed critical thinking, activism, democracy, and quality" (Dellinger, nd). However, this model is threatened by an ideology consumed with the drive to market more and more goods to more and more people. Dellinger questions if the medium will be allowed to realise its full potential representing openness, freedom, and diversity or if it will simply become another entertainment medium. A model that fosters "addiction to a new generation of useless electronic narcotics (glitzy, interactive multimedia successors to Nintendo and MTV), and encouraging instant gratification through sex and violence" (Dellinger, nd).

2.5.3.2 Response: The Internet as more than an entertainment medium

Criticisms of the Internet as another entertainment medium are based on the assumption that "commercialisation"is antithetical to democracy. This is not necessarily so. CNN has numerous e-mail "phone-ins" so that citizens can participate. The political content on the site is significant. Other newspapers and broadcasters include chat forums

and newsgroups on their website so that the journalist can engage with the citizen. Search engines can sift the democratically relevant content from the trivia.

The Internet serves as a uniting force between particular strata of society previously segmented by the traditional media. "While the public is becoming increasingly dispersed and segmented – we are no longer only united by the media but increasingly also divided by them – cyberspace is becoming a vital link and meeting ground for a particular strata of the public: those who are civically engaged and politically mobilised" (Dahlgren, 1997:69).

Together with online citizen engagement and participation, the Internet has also become an arena for participation by non-governmental organisations, lobby groups and other activists. This has created a culture of information sharing that bypasses the traditional gatekeepers. "The hierarchical, top-down mass communication model of journalism is being challenged in this new media environment" (Dahlgren, 1997:70).

2.6   Conclusion

This chapter connects theories of democracy and theories of communication in order to examine the potential of new communication technologies to contribute to the expansion of democracy and the empowerment of citizens. It also examines contemporary theories of cyberdemocracy and assessed the criticisms of these. Even though the Internet has the potential to become another entertainment medium, the proliferation of community media and non-governmental organisations online illustrates that there are alternative voices. It

also has the potential to develop as an alternative public sphere to Habermas's based on the concept of mini-multiple spheres that interact in cyberspace. Considering the constraints that the new technology operates within, a stronger representative democracy and increased citizen participation is still increasingly possible with this technology. Citizens can choose their information source and the type of information they require. In addition, as Barlow (quoted in Kennedy, 1996:10) says, the Internet is an interactive medium that encourages questions about the source and allows citizens to conduct a conversation with the source. The proliferation of views and information online also allows citizens the opportunity to determine the validity of a story. Schwartmann (quoted in Kennedy, 1996:11) offers an important insight on the potential of the Internet as a democratising medium, "Technology doesn't operate by itself". It operates in a social and political environment. The new technology offers new opportunities for participatory democracy and democratically relevant journalism, but whether these are realised will depend on the way it is utilised in society.

Chapter Three
Democracy and the role of the journalist

3.1   Introduction

This chapter outlines the features of democratic journalism. Advocates of public journalism argue that the mass media is failing to serve its core function and that is to engage and inform citizens on civic affairs so that these citizens can effectively participate in governance. Proponents of cyberjournalism argue that the Internet adds another dimension to journalism and redefines the role of the journalist as an information broker.

3.2   The role of journalists in a democracy

The media plays a number of roles in modern democracies, some of which include acting as a conduit of information between the citizens and public institutions, educating and mobilising citizens for participation. Journalists are the actors in the media who serve as the link between the media and democracy. Medsger (1996:6) and Berger (1998) conceptualise journalism as an intellectual activity that is central to the functioning of a democracy. Journalism is separated from other information gathering activities like corporate communications, public relations and advertising because it is characterised by the independent gathering of news and information for public interest. Online journalism also includes providing a platform for debate and discussion, facilitating interactivity, mobilising citizens for participation, educating citizens, etc.. Friedland (1996:220) argues that democratic life is shaped through open spheres of communication "directed toward the discovery of public rather than private interests, and

driven by the force of argumentation, not power." It is the role of the journalist to provide this discourse and debate. These definitions assume that journalists are central figures in a democracy with a definite role to play.

Berger (1998) identifies four normative positions of journalism that are of particular significance to democratic journalism – liberal, neoliberal, social democratic and participatory. Liberal views of journalism encompass the classic watchdog role of the journalist in a democracy. Journalists are separate from public life, standing in an antagonistic relationship with public institutions. The neo-liberal view encompasses Habermas's concept of the public sphere. This view suggests that pluralism is an important goal in reflecting the struggle between private and government interests. The journalist is removed from public life and acts as a commentator. However, this view is also exclusive and elitist. Journalists have also been criticised for losing contact with communities.

The social democratic position views the journalist as a guide educating citizens. The emphasis is placed on the media's framing of citizenship and its servicing of a democratic culture especially by public broadcasters. This stresses the importance of the media as a forum, an educator and a guide of the masses rather than a champion for democracy. Closely aligned with participatory democracy is the participatory view of journalism and the media. This view encompasses the broader citizenry and has gained currency with the public journalism movement. The public journalism view asserts that journalism is communication about and for citizens with the journalists as active

participants in society. Proponents of this view assert that the role of the journalist is participatory. The participative role of the media has been seen most strongly in recent times in regard to the notion of cyberdemocracy.

This research assumes the participatory role of the media because of its potential for engaging citizens in civic processes and mobilising them for participation (cf chapter two). Reflecting on the culture of the Internet, proponents of the Internet as a democratising medium argue that it is a mass medium that allows for participation, interactivity and community on an unparalleled scale. However, in cyberspace, this model blurs into the neo-liberal Habermasian elitist participatory one because the Internet does not yet incorporate many grassroots voices.

3.3   Exploring developmental and democratic journalism

Maleke (1996:25) defines development as a participatory process of social change that is intended to bring about social and material advancement. He asserts that development and communication are participatory processes. It is argued that, together with the media, journalists in developing countries have an additional role to play – to contribute to the development of the country. In another view, De Beer and Steyn (1996:215) argue that the media are crucial in a country's development towards democracy. Participatory democracy focuses on equal access to and participation in decision-making despite issues like class, gender, race and division of labour distorting communication and information. Development, on the other hand, operates in a complex social environment. The media "as it relates to the developmental process, is a rather

complex social system consisting of actions carried out within the context of the internal and external social conditions of the community and society in which it operates" (De Beer and Steyn, 1996:218). Thus while developmental journalism is dependent on a number of inter-connecting variables like economic, political, socio-cultural variables and technological factors, democratic journalism has far reaching consequences and in terms of participatory democratic theory, the media are:

> The main channels by means of which citizens can be informed about the world and the problems and choices facing their government and in which they can find reasoned discussion of alternative policies and possibilities (Sparks in de Beer and Steyn, 1996:214).

Democratic journalism involves covering initiatives by government and the communities that will keep citizens in contact with each other and share experiences. It involves engaging the citizenry in debate and discussion and mobilising citizens for participation. It also implies that journalism provides the "same quality and variety of information that will stimulate debate among all citizens in society equally" (de Beer and Steyn, 1996:218).

While there is a place for development in journalism, and journalism can be about development, democracy is a separate issue and encompasses a greater arena than development alone. Democratic journalism is about mobilising citizens for participation, informing, monitoring the performance of government, providing a platform for citizens and educating citizens, while developmental journalism does not necessarily cover all of these functions. Developmental journalism is also often an agent of the government, serving to underscore developmental agendas and efforts by governments while democratic issues serve a larger agenda (cf chapter two).

Both the development role of the media and the democratic roles have much in common with participatory democracy. Both involve engaging citizens, getting involved in the community and reporting from the perspectives of citizens. The developmental role is also congruent with the social democratic role. In the local context, the SABC can fulfill these roles by facilitating interactions between government and citizens and engaging citizens in discussion with each other.

3.4 Public Journalism

As discussed earlier, public journalism accords with a view of journalism having a role regarding participation in democracy. Advocates of public journalism argue that citizens need information to participate in a democracy which modern journalism is increasingly failing to provide. Public journalism "presumes a democracy in decay and posits a role for the press based, empirically and normatively, on what journalism can do to enrich a public discourse that has long been in decline" (Glasser and Craft, 1998:9). The media should create a forum for citizens to become actively involved in debate and discussion of public affairs but it has largely reduced citizens to "spectators" (Rosen, 1996; Bales, 1996). Public journalism calls for a shift in thinking from journalism as providing information to journalism that facilitates deliberation and dialogue. While South Africa may not be a democracy in decay, it is a new democracy emerging from an era of censorship, secrecy and misinformation. The role of a journalist here is arguably to keep it from decaying, and to go further and help provide and enrich democratic discourse.

According to classical liberal theory, journalists are separate from society and merely comment on the world they live in. Public journalism changes this thinking and view journalists as members of the society they inhabit. Journalists have a responsibility to make public life go well. It places a journalist within the community with a stake in public life:

> Public journalism expects the press to participate in, and not remain detached from, efforts to improve the quality of public discourse. It calls on the press to broaden its conception of politics by understanding democracy as a way of life and not merely as a form of government (Glasser and Craft, 1998:11).

Public journalism posits the role of the press as a "democratic means and not ends" (Merritt quoted in Glasser and Craft, 1998:12). Traditionally, much of the USA's print media assumed a political position and framed their stories accordingly, presenting readers with an either/or choice. Public journalism disregards this position and calls for the press as a facilitator of democracy by providing opportunities for debate and discussion. Public journalism is based on one of the same premises that participatory democracy posits. Truth emerges from public debate and citizens learn and become better citizens sharing the community's experiences and interests. Journalists become the agents of this type of democracy.

> It (public journalism) encourages journalists to appreciate the press as an agency not only *of* but also *for* communication, a medium through which citizens can inform themselves *and* through which they can discover their common values and shared interests. (Glasser and Craft, 1998:12).

For public journalism this means framing a story so that it contributes to democracy and public discourse. By selecting or omitting a voice from a story, journalists also have the power to determine the shape of discourse for citizens. Healthy public debate is stimulated by bringing divergent views into the public sphere. Finally,

public journalism is about viewing citizens as stakeholders with a personal interest, a deliberative body, potential participants in public affairs and as unique contributors to public life (Bales, 1996:109). The interactive features of the Internet facilitate the type of journalism that the public journalism movement advocates. These features allow journalists and citizens to engage in discussion with each other and with fellow citizens.

3.5   The online world and cyberjournalism

Classical theories of journalism are based on traditional liberal ideals of democracy and citizenship. This paradigm claims that citizens use the media as a resource for participation in society and as a forum for debate. Dahlgren (1997) argues that this classical paradigm is on the wane. Technological advances and changes in communications technology have had an important effect on journalism:

> The democratic context in which journalism is to operate is evolving historically and geographically. Journalism is in the process of repositioning itself in a more fractured society, and perhaps establishing new kinds of relationships with its publics (Dahlgren, 1997:63).

Online journalism offers context, depth, interactivity and searchability. For journalists, the technical capabilities of the Internet provide an additional opportunity to add context to their stories and connect users with more information if they desired. "Providing context and continuity to complex stories is something the Internet can do better than any other medium" (Cohen, 1995:43; also Berger, 1996; cf chapter two).

Previously, journalists connected people to information, but the new technological capabilities have added to this. Using the public journalism paradigm of the media as facilitators of democracy, journalists can now do more than just frame their story – they

can also provide links to online communities. These virtual communities are becoming increasingly popular. People conduct business transactions, friendships and love affairs in these virtual communities. The new journalism is about connecting people to these people and this has democratic potential as new relations are formed online. Online communities are not per se democratically relevant, but there are some online communities that are democratically relevant sites of political, gender or economic power, etc. (cf chapter two). However, while the technology offers near limitless depth to information and the ability to connect citizens without journalists as the intermediary, online journalism still has value, perhaps more so now because of these factors. The value of journalists in the information age and their contribution to cyberdemocracy will be explored in detail in subsequent sections.

3.6   Journalist as information broker

New technologies are beginning to play an increasingly central role in the mediation of social networks. "As we move from a model of public life grounded in discourse toward one that expands to include greater emphasis on social networks, the role of knowledge brokers within the communications system becomes more central" (Friedland, 1996:189). Media not only provide information but they guide users to the relevant material and help them make sense of the information. Garnham (quoted in Friedland, 1996:190) recognises the role of journalists as knowledge brokers proposing that in order to ensure that high quality information online is not abused for private good, organisations should hire journalists to "clarify current issues for the general public." The vastness of the Internet makes it intimidating for users, and its lack of context often

leads to a lack of credibility. Hausman (quoted in Kleiner, 1994) attributes the lack of

credibility for online information to the fact that information is anonymous or supplied by

small publishers or entrepreneurs who have little at stake. Journalists are trained to sort

and filter information to help readers interpret the facts.

Although the Internet has the potential to offer near limitless information, people

do not have spare time or inclination to sift through this to find the tiny nuggets of

information that may or may not be there. The traditional role of the journalist was to

filter raw data that flow into newsrooms from hundreds of sources and funnel only the

most useful, important information to the public. Commenting on the information

explosion, Neil Postman argues that journalists have not adapted to the world they have

helped to create:

> In the nineteenth century, the problem journalism solved was the scarcity of information;
> in the late twentieth century the problem has become information glut. The problem isn't
> getting more diverse forms of information quicker. The problem is how to decide what is
> significant, relevant information, how to get rid of unwanted information (Fulton, 1996).

Audiences still require journalists to identify credible information and process it

for them. Unlimited access to information is worthless unless it is contextualised.

Contextualising information, providing depth and background – sorting the wheat from

the chaff – is journalism's skill that will be most needed in the information era

(Dahlgren, 1997; Berger, 1996). The new role of the journalist in the information age is

to give guidance to the reader in a context of information overload and to act as a

facilitator of conversations between journalism and its publics. The need for information

brokers, directors and conductors of the social debate is immense. The gatekeeping role

of the journalist is thus being redefined.

3.7   Conclusion

This chapter dealt with features of democratic journalism and the different demands that the online media make on the traditional journalist. It covered the features of online journalism and the possibilities for the future. Journalism is about facilitating democracy and online journalism is about enhancing participatory democracy. While public journalism does have its value, there is no one specific role and function of the media that can be identified as the most important. In cyberspace, there is a blurring of the distinction between the neo-liberal Habermasian elitist model and the participatory one and this study will concentrate on this model of cyberjournalism. "The advent of cyberspace will inevitably impact on the factors which shape how journalism gets done and may well even colour how we define what journalism is" (Dahlgren, 1997:56). There is no doubt that, as the information continues to expand, journalists who stand at the interface between the media and its publics will have an increasingly important role to play in its dissemination and in democratic discourse. "Journalism is not in danger of becoming superfluous, but it will have to position itself in new ways in a changing media environment" (Dahlgren, 1997:70).

Chapter Four
Elections online

4.1   Introduction

This chapter examines the use of the Internet for the elections by the traditional media organisations in other countries, concentrating specifically on the United Kingdom and the mid-term congressional elections in the United States. It seeks to explore the coverage of the elections in terms of its contribution to furthering the concept of participatory democracy by looking at the type of content online and the features of election sites. It also examines design and publishing issues like the structuring of content, advertising on the sites, the use of radio and television, design and archiving. The information is drawn from website analysis and responses to questionnaires sent to webmasters.

4.2   Encouraging a culture of participation

The Internet can contribute to citizens making an informed decision on election day by providing information on the political parties and the process of governance (cf chapter 2). Online journalism can also assume the various roles of democratic journalism as outlined in chapter three and further contribute to a culture of interaction and participation. The discussion on the analysis of the websites will examine how these websites contributed to cyberdemocracy and assumed roles of democratic journalism.

4.3   The Internet as a source of political information

Experience in the presidential elections (1996) in the United States showed that more users are beginning to use the Internet as a source of political information

and interaction. "Any question of acceptance of the Internet as a source of political information was resolved on election night, when so many news-hungry Web users were online trying to get election returns that the entire computer network was swamped" (Powell, 1996). Network congestion was also reported by some of the other major news organisations – AllPolitics, hosted by CNN and Time magazine, CBS news, MSNBC. Two years later more major news organisations are publishing online.

4.4   Broadcast organisations publishing online

This next section concentrates on specific news organisations online and their transition to the online medium. It illustrates the differences in the approaches to online publishing and the variance in the goals for these organisations online. Later in the chapter I look at their specifically online election sites.

4.4.1   CNN online – http://www.cnn.com

"According to Jeff Garrard, executive producer of CNN online, the creators of the site knew from the beginning that they were not doing television, and they were not going to mimic TV as they built the site" (Garcia, 1997:159). The most important criteria for CNN online included making it as easily accessible as possible from anywhere in the world in terms of speed. This meant that everything on the site had to be kept as simple as possible. "When cnn.com first appeared, it included subjects that are covered by CNN but not titled according to shows" (Garcia, 1997:160). The online site also included two key added features that were not as pronounced in their television coverage. One was adding the weather and a science and technology section. The benefit of an organisation the scale of CNN going online

is that they have access to information from bureaus around the world and the online edition takes advantage of that. News on the CNN site is updated as it happens and because of the frequency of updates online as compared to the frequencies of broadcasts, the online edition sometimes scoops the broadcast edition.

4.4.2   The BBC online – http://www.bbc.co.uk

The BBC online consists of 70 journalists together with technical staff and graphic designers (Perrone, 1998). Like cnn.com, the BBC relies on its vast output of news material from the various branches of the BBC for its online version. BBC news online used the popular idea of a bulletin board where users can express their opinions on specific topics. Software was developed in-house in consultation with journalists producing the stories so that they understood the system and did not have to concern themselves too much with the technical aspects and could concentrate on getting the job done. They also have access to all the corporation's multimedia resources – audio, text, video and pictures. It is important to note that although the BBC only launched in November 1997, very late as compared to other media organisations, especially in the United States (cnn.com was launched in 1995), it has quickly become the biggest content site in Europe in terms of data resources (Perrone, 1998). The site also does not rely on any advertising but is funded by television license fees. Online staff work closely with broadcast staff to collect material for the site. Mike Smartt, editor of BBC news online commented: "We are learning the interactive skills of the future. We as broadcasters are used to just broadcasting to people 'here is the news', but broadcasters of the future have to be able to handle two-way business. We will then move inexorably toward convergence" (in Thurman, 1998).

4.4.3   Microsoft and NBC online – http://www.msnbc.com

When the largest software manufacturer in the world, Microsoft, partnered with a news organisation, NBC News, there were concerns about editorial autonomy and mixing journalism with corporate interests. Almost two years after its inception, MSNBC.com has been rated, by the PC Meter company, as the number one general news website for audience reach and gross audience on the web (http://olj.usc.edu/sections/features/98_stories/qanda_brown.htm). MSNBC.com has only a small number of its own reporters filing original stories and relies heavily on the wires for the rest. They also have agreements with The Wall Street Journal and other news services, together with access to material by NBC television reporters. In addition, the site also has staff that work to integrate Web content into NBC shows. Like CNN and the BBC, MSNBC also publishes 24 hours a day. Editor of MSNBC, Merrill Brown comments that the web is about multi-media dimensionality and engaging people in the news. "There's a dynamic relationship between broadcast and cable television and the Internet that we're really beginning to marshal. Our ongoing work with NBC News, MSNBC cable and CNBC demonstrates that people like using the capabilities of the medium and that's reassuring about the inevitability of convergence" (Brown, 1998).

These three traditionally broadcast organisations have assumed a new role online as content providers. However, their websites generate more than news and information as they attract communities of interested groups participating in the news. These sites fulfil various roles of the media. Of special interest to this study is the participatory role these sites fulfil.

4.5   Features of cyberdemocracy

Chapters two and three examined the conditions necessary for participatory democracy. Participation of citizens in society, access to information for rational critical debate, an educated citizenry to ensure informed decisions and a sense of community are all important conditions for participatory democracy. This section examines the key features of the online website that contribute to: interactive community building; informing; educating and mobilising citizens for participation; monitoring elected representatives. All can contribute to democratising cyberspace and to enhancing cyberspace's role in democracy. Participatory democratic theorists highlight the significance of community participation and interaction. The online media, through its journalism, can fulfil this participatory role and mobilise citizens for participation and facilitate interactions between communities. However, none of the roles of the media discussed below can be distinctly classified. A feature on a website can contribute to a number of different democratic functions as well as a number of journalistic roles. For example, while the online polls serve a social democratic function by educating citizens on how to participate in elections, they also serve a participatory one by creating a sense of community among users. Similiarly, the social democratic emphasis of the media servicing a democratic culture by educating and guiding citizens is highlighted in cyberspace by news organisations publishing both educational material as well as news and information for citizens.

4.5.1   Democratic community building

News organisations used the web to run a chat forum in conjunction with, or after, a major television broadcast. The interactive features of the website also allowed citizens to connect with each other in order to participate in debate and

discussion, together with other journalists acting as guides in the discussion process. The media facilitating participatory conversations between elites in the public sphere blurs the role of the media with both the neo-liberal and participatory roles of journalism. The major news organisations further realised the community building capacity of the Internet by hosting newsgroups allowing users to discuss politically relevant issues. From the websites analysed, 66% (see Table I, Graph 2) had interactive features like newsgroups and chat forums. The Washington Post extended their print edition by hosting the newspaper's former managing editor as the online anchor in the live chat forum on election day, election night and the following day. He and his guests answered the questions that were submitted by the readers. Some of the websites also added an e-mail address or other contact details so that they could receive feedback from users. Responding to my question on the level of participation on their chat forums and newsgroups, the webmasters were very positive about this feature. According to the Online Magic webmaster, the chat forums were so popular that they have continued for eighteen months after the election.

4.5.2   Facilitating participation and interaction

Apart from creating a virtual community of participants online, the Internet also allows for interactivity between journalists and their audiences. Also, if there are chat forums or newsgroups, there have to be policy decisions on the position that journalists assume online – is it their personal opinion or the view of the news organisation? Reporters from the New York Times online hesitated to participate in online forums. "They were reluctant to express views that could be interpreted as editorial opinions. Others declined to take part because they did not value the Internet medium" (Fowler in Powell, 1996). However, it not only opens new communication

channels between journalists and their audience but also connects citizens with each

other allowing them to participate in political discussion. Commenting on the level of

discourse in the *New York Times* 1996 election website, producer Chris Fowler said:

"*Times* editors may also have had low expectations of live chat. It was just amazing,

it was so intelligent." Michael Riley from AllPolitic*s* echoed this saying they were

also surprised by the level of the discourse and the popularity of the bulletin boards

(Powell, 1996). Both the *New York Times* online and AllPolitics said they found that

people entered the forums armed with information from the traditional media to share

their political views and opinions.

This interactivity allows for direct participation between voters and their

elected representative and/or prospective representatives.

Although I did not find any websites that actually hosted a candidate on a chat

forum, there were a few websites that published articles on the sites written by the

political candidates. CBS news used the Web in an innovative way for the

presidential campaign. Their television segments covered ninety minutes of the

political conventions while they ran the full-text together with audio and video on the

Internet. The transcript is fully searchable by database, making it a very valuable

reference tool for future use.

Online polling can, among other things, allow citizens to practise democratic

voting. Sixty-six percent of websites included interactive features like online polling.

Visitors could either vote for their positions on national issues or for a candidate.

However, polls are problematic. Technological limitations make it difficult to verify

or monitor organised campaigns to deliberately bombard a website which can skew

polls. Meredith Stark, who helped direct the CBS presidential election site, said they

had a document by the Libertarian party – a small liberal party in the United States -

which showed that they planned to used the Internet as the medium to publish and

popularise their political agenda (Powell, 1996). Organised campaigns like these can

also involve citizens who vote repeatedly in an online poll to deliberately skew the

results. However, online polls are valuable to a website as they give users a sense of

ownership and control in the electoral process. They highlight the participatory role

of the media by giving citizens a sense of belonging to a community.

4.5.3   Monitoring elected representatives

Several sites enabled visitors to keep politicians accountable. Citizens are

given a sense of ownership and control over the political process by allowing them to

monitor their political representatives. The PoliticsNow website featured petitions,

which were later forwarded to the commission on presidential debates. Evans Witt,

executive editor of PoliticsNow said the petitions helped "the users feel a sense of

community" together with playing an active role in the process of governance

(Powell, 1996). Apart from newsgroups and chat forums, some news organisations

also included election games like dressing up the candidates. The BBC website hosted

live forums with journalists and ministers answering voters' questions and discussing

the issues (http://www.bbc.co.uk/election97/framedir/newsframe.htm).

Some of the election websites enabled users to check on a politician's record

while in office on their websites. The American sites did this particularly well in the

mid-term congressional elections. Users could type in their zip code and the software

would provide a detailed report of their record in office. Some sites featured a map of

the country and users could click on the map to obtain the information. However, this was not unique to the American websites. The British websites also had these features. Some of the sites also provided e-mail addresses of the representatives so users could mail them.

4.5.4   Extending the fourth estate

These functions that the websites offered are congruent with liberal views of the media as the watchdog of society. In addition to the traditional watchdog role of the media, the technology extends this function to citizens as well by allowing them to sound the alarm or report (alleged) abuses of power. In terms of participatory democracy, this technology opens up new possibilities that were previously unheard of.

4.5.5   Educating citizens

Democratic theorists advocate an educated citizenry to participate in debate and discussion. The interactive nature of the Internet facilitates voter education, but other educational contributors were evident in the research as discussed under 4.5.2.. Election websites also took advantage of the limitless depth to publishing and played a large role in voter education. The sites had very good coverage and analysis of the campaign information. Eighty-eight percent of websites broke down the issues that are pertinent to citizens like education, health care and tax and reported the different parties' stances on these issues and how they would affect citizens (see table 1, graph 2, page 74). CBS television news created a fictitious character, a teenager named Phoebe, to educate (and mobilise) teenagers. She was disappointed in the current political process and decided to run for president. Phoebe commented daily on the

election process and how it would affect teenagers. This allowed another voice to bring election issues to the fore and addressed these issues in an interesting way to appeal to a younger audience.

The BBC extended its social democratic role as a public service broadcaster to another medium by encouraging voter education with interactive features like "how to become a minister". They informed citizens on the criteria for becoming a minister. The site also included a virtual election simulation and featured a quiz on the election. *GE '97* hosted by Online Magic, probably one of the most comprehensive sites for the British election, adopted the FAQ style from newsgroups for any voter education queries (http://www.ge97.co.uk/). Some of the questions covered very basic issues that voters might have been too embarrassed to ask for fear of showing their ignorance like: Who is eligible to vote in the General Election?; What do you need to provide as proof of your identity?; Is the Electoral Registration used for anything else than registering your right to vote?; What are the opening hours of the polling stations on election day? Information online also has potential for future use and historical significance as the information can be archived.

4.5.6   Providing news and information

Participatory democratic theorists recognise the media as the means by which citizens can be informed about the government. Ninety-one percent of web sites had a news section which covered only politically-related and election-related information. Together with this, 88 percent of the sites surveyed (see table I, graph 2, page 74) included an analysis of the party positions. This is congruent with the liberal pluralist view of the media as providing a forum for elites. The Sunday Times and the

Times of London linked their online coverage with their print product by extending their analysis to the online site. Multi-media information is also possible. The New York Times added colour photographs, audio clips, background articles and other links. AllPolitics did the same on their site.

One of the major criticisms of the United States election coverage in the traditional media is that news organisations tend to concentrate on the polls and cover the elections in terms of a race spectacle (Hacker, 1996). They ignore the detailed coverage and analysis of the issues. However, the analysis shows that online organisations covered issues in-depth and (as shown in 4.4 above) allowed citizens to participate in the process. My research data also shows that media organisations took advantage of the immediacy that the technology offers by publishing election news as it broke on their website.

On election day, media organisations used the technology for the real-time coverage of the results. However, the use of the technology is still subject to human control and as a result mistakes can occur. This was illustrated by *ABC* news putting up the results of the election a day before the polls opened. Apparently, they had had templates made so that the results could be posted as soon as they came in but somebody had uploaded the dummy files.

One of the features of the online environment that differs from traditional media was the online sharing that seemed to occur between the different web sites. News organisations compiled lists of jumpsites to other political sites of interest. This translated to sending a user to a competitor, but Chris Fowler, webmaster of the New

York Times online, said that information sharing is what the web is all about, "Clicking and pointing and sharing information. Instead of serving as a section of an 'information highway,' the most successful sites are valued as 'information intersections,' places where people can find signposts to other places of interest" (Powell, 1996). For the British elections, both AllPolitics and the Washington Post ran articles on the elections but provided direct links to other British sites for those readers that required more detail. This offers users greater context and depth to information, if they require it. It also connects users to a multiplicty of voices in the public sphere.

The near infinite space available has definite implications for the online edition. "The bottomless news hole of the Web also means we could cover more races than there was room for in the print edition" (Stencel, Washington Post Politics online editor). Respondents to the survey said that they did not hire a separate news team for the online edition, but rather used content from their core news producing outlets. This implies there has to be specific provision made for any extra material covered online. However, they had appointed a separate web team responsible for adding/repurposing content, design of the site and managing the overall web operation. This did not mean they hired extra people for the online edition but moved existing staff to the online section.

Most online editors said they wished that they had constructed better databases for users and better access to information on previous elections. Background, depth and context helps citizens make better decisions based on this knowledge. Using the South African example, if there were comprehensive media databases on the election

promises of the National Party of old, citizens would be better informed and could thus make voting decisions based on this information. Comprehensive databases also allow citizens to access the performance of government based on their election promises and mandates.

4.6   Locating form and function – how funding, design and structure of the websites facilitated cyberdemocracy.

4.6.1   Generating income for the site

Publishing does not exist in a vacuum. The Web is not a major revenue generating medium as compared to traditional media. Online sites need to generate revenue in order to be viable. Cyberdemocracy needs to be paid for somehow. However, the generation of income impacts on the size of the publishing venture and this can sometimes influence the type of content on a website. Publishers are still trying to find the ideal option to make any online venture profitable. In terms of income generation for election websites, four revenue models seem to have emerged – subscription, advertising, sponsorship and partnership. The subscription model is based on the traditional print model where the users pay for access to the site. However, this concept will only work if the publication/news organisation has exceptionally strong branding and users are willing to pay for their specific content. There are numerous options for obtaining information in the online world and another information source is simply a click away.

With the advertising model, the site is subsidised by income from advertising. This may be obtained specifically for the web site or in conjunction with a traditional news product. Thus advertisers will pay the standard rates and perhaps extra for the

online version as well. There is no agreed standard for this and news organisations

are using the method that works best for them. Like sponsored television

programmes, radio or print segments, the election part of the website can be

sponsored by another organisation. Some organisations surveyed have decided that

the project is too large and as a result partnered with other news organisations. This

strategy does have its advantages, especially if the organisations also share content.

Other sites, instead of selling advertising, collaborated with other media organisations

to form a single website. The CNN and Time, AllPolitics, website is one example of

such collaboration. Chris Fowler, online editor of the *New York Times,* said they

relied solely on advertising and the reaction was positive, in fact they did not have

"enough inventory to put the advertising on." Fowler predicted that in the future,

news organisations will experiment with different kinds of advertising and

relationships with advertisers (Powell, 1996). One of the criticisms on the potential

of the Internet as a democratising medium was its increasing commercialisation (cf

chapter 2).

Other online sites (CBS and General Motors) brokered deals where they

advertised in the print/TV version and also appeared on the web site. The depth of

information and interactivity on the CNN and Time Warner, AllPolitics websites

makes a strong argument for partnering: ABC news combined with the *Washington

Post* to form PoliticsNow. In another development online, NBC news decided to

partner with Microsoft – a computer software company that is not associated with the

media or journalism – to form MSNBC news. This partnership was not specifically

for the election but rather their online operations. However, if commercialisation

becomes the major priority and this interferes with the integrity of news and

information in facilitating online democracy, then this will hinder the potential of the Internet as a democratising medium.

From my online survey, different news organisations used different methods for earning income. However, all agreed that at the start of the venture, the primary aim was not to generate funds. Some opted for sole revenue from advertising.

There appeared to be divisions on whether to partner or to publish independently. Companies like the *New York Times* and CBS decided to use the election as an opportunity to establish an online brand. The creative director of Online Magic, probably one of the most comprehensive sites on the United Kingdom election, gave this advice: "Partner with as many organisations and companies as possible. Don't try and do it all yourself. Think about what you are trying to do – expand democracy – and design according to that so that as many people as possible can reach the site." For cyberdemocracy, expanding access to a greater number of citizens through partnering can only aid the process. However, there is only one certainty that these different opinions and different models of income generation have proved - the online medium is still uncharted territory and there is no set way of doing things. Each organisation seems to have mapped a strategy that would suit their resources to cover the elections.

4.6.2 Design and informational structure

Most of the sites had created a special election site separate from the normal web sites, with a link to the election edition. Some of the sites chose to cover a specific issue daily or weekly. It was interesting to note the difference in the use of

colour and fonts between the British and the American web sites. The British web sites tended to be more conservative in their use of colour and fonts and the Americans were a lot louder and capitalised on the red, white and blue of their national flag illustrating American patriotic culture and mobilising function (cf chapter 6). Almost half of the sites surveyed, 44%, offered downloadable TV and video clips from their TV/radio archives for users (see table 1, graph 3, page 75). Some also offered clips of the candidates' speeches. This illustrates the function of the website in mobilising citizens and creating a sense of national identity.

From the online investigations, it is clear that all of the producers spent a great deal of time planning the venture, no matter what the size of the site. Before anything was launched online, executives at Time Warner and CNN (AllPolitics) spent eight months just discussing the site, which was then created in eight weeks. Alistair Jeffs from Online Magic said they planned the venture for about four months before going online. Perhaps the most telling comment on the importance of planning and the increasing importance of the Internet as an information resource, was from Mark Stencel from the *Washington Post* online. He said: "Start planning sooner. We've already had our first meeting on the 2000 elections." Cyberjournalism requires careful thought and planning to achieve the optimum democratic role.

4.7   Contribution of the website to the election and cyberdemocracy

All of the webmasters surveyed agreed their website made a valuable contribution to the elections by encouraging citizens to participate and by assisting in educating citizens. Mark Stencel said the *Washington Post* website complemented their print coverage by adding depth to their coverage and examining issues that could

not have been given the same space in the print edition because of space constraints. Saritha Rai, the online editor for Economic Times Online (India), said she was astonished at the response online. "We had live updates of results, as close to real-time announcements of results as possible. The response to this was amazing." India is a developing country similar to South Africa and it is valuable to note that the rise of the popularity of the Internet is not simply a First World phenomenon. All of the respondents to the survey said that, when compared to normal periods, there were traffic increases to their site as a result of their election website. Apart from adding depth and interactivity and fulfilling various other functions, there is another dimension to the Internet: it transcends boundaries thus allowing expatriates to feel like they are involved in the political process. Alistair Jeffs (Online Magic) commented that the website was a "democratically led resource for every political persuasion out there and it also gave people from the United Kingdom in other countries the chance to feel like they were part of the election atmosphere by providing the interactive elements."

4.8   Conclusion

This study has shown that news organisations are still experimenting online. There is no set formula for instant success, but it is rather a matter of trial and error to find an appropriate method of publishing. However, news organisations with a reputation for producing news and information will find it easier to attract users to their online information. The three broadcast organisations examined earlier in this section show that they are very varied in their size and the nature of web operations. However, it is evident that there is no set method to publishing online and each organisation finds the method that suits their resources and personnel available. Experience in the

American elections has shown that online users look to the medium for news, information and education and democratic participation. The interactive features of the Internet can be used to create cyberdemocracy. These conclusions are general enough for transferability even if South Africa is less cyber developed. It also illustrates the potential for cyberdemocracy here.

Table 1

Analysing the websites

The analyis of the 32 sites was done according to the following criteria:

E-news

This refers to the number of organisations that published current news on their websites. The news covered specifically election related news.

Issues

This refers to the number of websites that broke down the electoral issues like health, tax, employment that were pertinent to the election and provided an analysis of these issues.

Interactivity

Interactivity was defined as the sites that offered newsgroups, irc chat sessions and e-mail contact addresses so that users could engage in conversation concerning election related news and issues.

Radio, television and multi-media

This referred to the number of websites that offered real audio on their sites. Television covered the websites that included video clips online and multi-media included both television and radio together with other multi-media devices like java and shockwave.

Chapter Five

Conditions at the SABC that inhibit/promote the use of online technology

5.1   Introduction

This chapter looks at the current processes at the SABC. The culture and corporate

structure at any organisation play a large part in the success or failure of an online

venture. This chapter discusses these conditions and the implications for the SABC when

adopting a tri-media approach for coverage of the elections. I concentrate specifically on

the factors that promote participatory democracy and democratic journalism as discussed

in chapters two and three respectively.

5.2   Background of the SABC

The South African broadcasting corporation was a state broadcaster prior to 1994.

It was a mouthpiece of the apartheid government and enjoyed little credibility with the

majority of the South African population. This excerpt from an article in the *Mail and*

Guardian (24 February 1995) sums up the SABC of old:

> *The old SABC left no established editorial values, because they only formally accepted*
> *that the role of the public broadcasting service was to shine the torch of truth. A critical*
> *and independent broadcasting culture was not in the interests of their political masters*
> *and they ensured, by appointing to every leading position people with the same political*
> *loyalty as themselves, that the torch remained unlit.* Colin Jackson, principal announcer
> – Channel Africa.

The corporation was restructured and became a public service broadcaster funded by

government just prior to the first democratic elections in 1994. As a public service

broadcaster, the SABC has an obligation to provide current news and information for an

informed electorate. This is one of their roles that has been outlined by the Independent

Broadcasting Authority (IBA):

> It is only through a massive programming of public provision that the majority of South Africans will gain access to the broad range of programming and information necessary for effective citizenship (http://www.sn.apc.org/iba/chap08a.htm).

The IBA also sets out the following principles for public service broadcasting by the

SABC: accessibility to all South Africans, promoting a national culture and identity,

offering diversity and choice and displaying quality in programming. It also recognises

the following role for broadcasters in South Africa:

> In this regard the Authority expects the public broadcasting services to provide viewers and listeners with access to regular and accurate news and information. From the reporting of daily news to the examination of current concerns local and nationally, the public broadcasting services must play a central role in providing South Africans with relevant information necessary in a democracy (http://www.sn.apc.org/iba/chap08a.htm)[1].

The Broadcasting Bill (1998) sets out the objectives of the corporation as – inter alia – to

provide programming that informs, educates and entertains, and also to develop and

extend the services of the corporation beyond the borders of South Africa. It also

acknowledges the need for impartial journalism.

> The programming provided by the South African broadcasting system must –
> - be varied and offer a wide range of South African content and analysis from a South African perspective
> - provide a reasonable, balanced opportunity for the public to receive a variety of points of view on matters of public concern.

Head of the election task team, Solly Mokoetle, outlined the objective of the SABC's

coverage of the election:

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[1] Independent Broadcasting Authority report on the protection and viability of public service broadcasting (http://www.sn.apc.org/iba/toc.htm).

We want to provide the electorate with the necessary information to assist them to make informed choices when they go to elections in 1999. That is the objective of the SABC (Kojoana, 1998).

These points all promote a multiplex role for the SABC and democracy in general and elections in particular. However, translating these into reality is more difficult. It is important to note that the corporation still suffers from the legacy of the past. It is struggling to deal with the inherited structures, management practices and in some instances staff who do not value the democratic change in the country as positive. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) media report identified the strict governmental control and the rigid laws imposed on the SABC. It also identified the racism that the corporation supported amongst its employees.

Regulations controlled every aspect of the lives of black staff. Under Section 14 of the Staff Code, a member of staff could be fired without being given a reason or explanation, as long as the manager suspected that his or her ideological convictions were not in line with the government of the day. Any white person at the SABC had the right to fire any black person who was hardegat (intransigent). Workers received severe reprimands for looking at white women and had to give way in the passages (TRC media report, 1998)[2]

Even though there is a new management, the prevalence of authoritarianism can still be seen permeating the corporation. There have been turbulent changes and power struggles in leadership at different levels in the corporation. Added to this, the media hints at the struggles as being politically motivated, giving the impression that the SABC management is either government aligned or is attempting to portray the government in a favourable light. According to Jackson (1995), "the new management has invested great energy in exploring alternative styles of management. It has stated its commitment to informing and educating the public in an unbiased way, and to achieving this through the

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[2] The Truth and Reconciliation final report on the media, volume 4, chapter 6, October 29, 1998.

agency of talented people". However, this has not always worked. Currently the
organisation is still struggling to find itself in a new environment and to reconcile the
various members of staff from different political, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

In one development when I was completing research at the corporation, there was
a clash between the editor of national news and current affairs for radio and the head of
the corporation's election coverage. The dispute was over coverage of the results of an
opinion poll sponsored by three organisations – the SABC, Idasa and Markinor. This was
the first survey in a series of opinion polls that will be conducted in the run-up to the
1999 general election. The polls are aimed at monitoring people's attitudes towards the
coming election, identifying concerns and issues that will influence their political choices
and tracking support for political parties. The group chief executive of special projects
does not normally attend the line-talk but made an unscheduled appearance to publicly
object to the national radio editor's angle on the results of the Opinion '99 poll (*Mail and
Guardian*, 20 November 1998). This resulted in many of the editorial staff resenting
management interference in editorial content and insisting on editorial autonomy, thus
causing further rifts. This is one instance of management confusing their roles. This
caused simmering tensions between the editorial and the management staff and concerns
for the former's autonomy. The issue of editorial autonomy from management was
constantly brought up in my interviews, observations and informal discussions. In an
article on the local government elections of 1995, the head of publicity at the SABC said:

> *One of the differences between last year's election coverage and this year's, is that this
> year our executive producers were given a large degree of editorial independence. They
> could deploy task teams into the different regions and cover the background issues they
> deemed important without a specific brief from management* (Friedman, *Mail and
> Guardian*, 1995).

This struggle for editorial autonomy has been an issue previously. In another article, the SABC management was criticised for not having a clear concept of the public interest.

> *Senior management has no clear concept of what acting in the public interest means for the corporation. Although there has been a laudable attempt to be fair to the different political parties to fulfil the declared obligation of being "unbiased", it should be obvious that quoting different political parties equally is not enough.* (Jackson, 1994).

In the run up to the election, this is going to become even more important as different political parties will try to get the maximum favourable airtime. Media consultant, Raymond Louw, speaking at the bosberaad when asked to comment on the current coverage by the SABC, said: "I've sensed a leaning toward the ANC." Head of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), Justice Kriegler, also speaking at the bosberaad, warned that the SABC should be careful, especially in the run-up to the elections, not to be perceived as a servant of the government. He said the political atmosphere within the country was more important than the technical capability to foster, develop and promote the growth of representative democracy. The media was needed for the transmission of the long term message of political tolerance. It is apparent that the potential for government, as the ruling party and as a competitor, to abuse the media does exist.

If there is no policy on the type of coverage and the editorial role of the SABC as a public broadcaster between the editorial decision-makers and management, this issue is going to become more and more important as the political campaigning for the election increases. The credibility of the SABC is also at stake as the new television station, e-tv,

will be broadcasting news and current affairs. Together with establishing and maintaining credibility with their viewers, the SABC also faces competition for viewers from the commercial station. The role of the media in elections is – inter alia – to give impartial information and to provide a neutral platform as part of the public sphere. As a public service broadcaster especially, and a media organisation in general, the SABC needs to avoid being part of the government sphere and rather to provide a public sphere.

The economic climate at the SABC is also fraught. After the corporation became a public broadcaster, independent American management consultants, McKinsey, were hired in October 1996 to streamline the organisation to enable it to compete in a commercial environment. McKinsey recommended 1400 retrenchments to save R450 million. The threat of job losses resulted in resentful, insecure employees. Journalist Jacquie Golding-Duffy described the prevailing mood at the corporation:

> *After the frenzy which has gripped the corporation following the initial announcement of cutbacks, staffers are voicing their resentment by plastering graffiti over management notices, blaming the new order for the imminent retrenchments. Almost every wall is decorated with petitions from unions and non-unionised groups demanding answers from management (Mail and Guardian, 1997).*

Almost a year after the McKinsey report, resentment and insecurity persists. Employees speak of being "McKinseyed" when they mention understaffing at the corporation. Together with the major cutbacks and general staffing problems management has, as discussed, been struggling to redefine its role in the corporation and to define the role of the public service broadcaster in the country.

5.3   Establishing the vision of election coverage at the SABC

Apart from observing at the bosberaad, I also interviewed the key players in the election task team – people who are responsible for the content planning for coverage of the elections – to ascertain what their vision of the SABC's election coverage should be. Very often it is the vision of the leaders at the top that influences the type of coverage and the issues that are explored. I found that both the radio and television representatives have a firm commitment to democracy in South Africa.

> *The elections will be about building a sense of the South African community and getting people to talk to each other and knowing other people's stories. To ensure that we are not talking at, but to, a viewer. (Television editorial executive)*

The interviewee went on to add that the role of the public broadcaster should be to extend and entrench participatory democracy in South Africa. This view of extending and entrenching participatory democracy and giving citizens a voice in the media was echoed in the radio department.

> *Our objective is to involve citizens in dialogue with each other. To get people to talk to each other. We have a real opportunity to get people into one electronic room (on radio). We need to provide a platform for people to talk, interchange and discuss. (Radio editorial executive)*

Both saw the SABC as a public broadcaster with a commitment to providing information to South African citizens and involving them in dialogue. The other roles of the SABC such as education, mobilisation to vote and a culture of respect for other parties could not be determined as research data was not collected. It is assumed that these are not paramount in the minds of the interviewees, even if they are not necessarily ruled out as important roles that could be fulfilled by the SABC. The interviewees agreed that due to South Africa's political history, different political, economic, ethnic and

cultural groups live in isolation from each other and very often know little of the other even though they may live very close geographically. Both sources saw it as important to connect South Africans of various groupings to each other. This echoes the community building function of media discussed in chapter two.

It was not only the "content leaders" of the election task team who see this as a key role of the SABC, but this was the vision that continued to surface among the task team members at the bosberaad. The sense of the responsibility of the SABC as a public service broadcaster was echoed throughout the workshop by various members of staff. It was also used as a reminder to other employees who seemed to push corporate policy and the need for the corporation to commercialise. However, there seems to be a difference in emphasis in this regard between the editorial planners and the management of the corporation. I was not allowed access to any of the management members, but I got the impression that the corporation is being increasingly driven by commercial interests and the employees are concerned that the SABC will not fulfill its mandate to provide information to the public because of this. The election task team is also understaffed because of budgetary constraints.

I also got the impression of uneasiness between the members of the corporation and of fear of interference from government in the management. This was echoed in the following quote:

> *We must also ensure that TV is credible and need to maintain our autonomy from management. (Television editorial executive)*

The terms of extending SABC's election coverage to the online medium should not be a problem, as employees see the medium as valuable and important to the corporation and as a part of its public service mandate:

> *As a public service broadcaster, it is part of the service that we should provide online access so that people can get the election results online. (NewsNet researcher)*

However, simply accessing results is not sufficient participation in democracy. Engaging in interactive discussion on political news and affairs, and active online participation such as online polls, would constitute democratic participation.

From my research data, it is evident that SABC employees envision the corporation serving a number of functions that can be understood as ranging from the neo-liberal pluralist to the participatory. There were also many SABC staff who saw ensuring fair play in the elections and blowing the whistle on intimidation and corruption as important. Within this framework, the role of an election online site is discussed in chapter four.

5.4   Corporate Culture

Even though the SABC has adopted a bi-media approach for the elections, I detected a tension and a definite leaning toward television as the key medium of broadcast during the election. The very nature and the scale of television as a medium makes it easier to neglect radio, even though radio reaches a larger population in South Africa and has more different-language programming and more news and current affairs broadcasts. A tri-media approach will be even more challenging. Staff are concerned with their core function, i.e. radio or television, and have not really included online publishing in their approach. Hence, the prevalent thinking has not extended to a tri-

media approach to elections. In terms of the SABC's corporate culture, it is a highly

fragmented organisation. It would be very difficult to establish a common tri-media

vision amongst all the employees and this could prevent the success of the online venture.

At the most basic level, there seems to be lack of teamwork between the camera people

and the journalists for television, let alone incorporating full multi-media publishing. The

online media can easily be sidelined given that the core function of the SABC is

broadcasting and its mandate as a public service broadcaster is to reach the broadest

possible audience. However, the Broadcast Bill also includes the development and

extension of services by the SABC beyond the borders of the country as part of its public

service mandate, and this at least underlines the potential for online media. There are

strong additional reasons why a tri-media approach should be considered (see next

chapter, section 6.3); the point here is that it will be complex to implement it.

5.5   SABC's current web presence

The SABC currently publishes online. However, there is no formalised method of

publishing and the different parts of the websites (radio and the various stations together

with the different television channels) are maintained by enthusiasts. The overall website

is badly designed with little indication of a continued corporate identity. The webpages

do not indicate to the user that they are still part of the SABC website. The website is

difficult to navigate and there is no logical structure to the information. The radio news

bulletins are online but there is no additional information. The filenames that journalists

use for sub editors and editors to identify copy are sometimes visible to the user. The

television news bulletins are online in the same form as the radio bulletins. The three

television channels show great disparity in the quality of information online and the design of the website. The SABC 3 site is slightly better as it does have a consistent identity throughout the website that is also congruent with their television identity. The website also has links to sites dealing with some of their shows. The *Isidingo* website is particularly well designed. It also contributes to the entertainment mandate of the SABC.

The radio websites have a better online presence. Radio Five has a very well designed page even though the information is limited. The website is designed specifically for their target audience and radio shows feed into the website by asking listeners to mail the disc jockeys. The disc jockeys also use information from the web for their shows. However, while the site may contribute to community building within a specific audience group, it fails in its public service mandate to provide news and current affairs information. Their news broadcasts cannot be found online. SAfm does not have its current news and information online either. It has transcripts of one of the radio programmes, The Editors, together with programme listings and information on the disc jockeys. The information would be more useful if users could contextualise the information with a summary of the show online and the background information on the topic they were discussing. Although a little thin on up-to-date information, the site is consistently designed giving the user the impression that the site was thought through before going online. Radio Metro is similar to the SAfm site in terms of consistent design and scarcity of information. It is one of the stations together with Radio Five that streams real audio of their shows and as a result attracts an international audience. All of these sites are very static and do not encourage the first time visitor to come back to the

site. The radio websites are managed by the different stations and hence the disparity in the quality of the websites. I was unable to access data on the usage and traffic of the SABC website.

At the time that I was at the SABC, there were meetings with the different television channels in order to convince employees that the online medium is important and to establish a website for their specific channel. The idea is that each channel uses the web to establish a brand identity online. The websites will be designed by the public relations department at the SABC and will be maintained by the channels themselves. The meeting and the interactions there gave me an idea of how difficult it is to convince old employees to try to implement something new. If the election website is done in a similar manner, it will probably generate similar problems. I could not identify anybody who is solely responsible for the SABC online and who would oversee the presence of the broadcaster online in terms of design, content and maintenance. There are various members of staff involved at different levels together with their other daily functions. It appears that employees have great difficulty keeping up with the workload. A lot of thought and initiative is being ploughed into the channel websites, but I got the distinct impression that the online projects are being implemented on a piecemeal basis with little strategy and thought for the primary online presence at http://www.sabc.co.za. From my observations, interviews with staff and discussions, I noticed that there was a keen awareness of competition from other broadcasters on air and online and the need to establish dominance as a content provider. However, little thought had been given to the

core function of the SABC as a public broadcaster facilitating democracy, which could include a presence in cyberspace.

SABC's online initiatives to date include an Intranet. Newsnet is the local SABC Intranet that journalists can access for background research. It serves as a database of information culled from various online sources so that journalists can brief themselves before going out on a story. There is already an election site on the Intranet. This contains links to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA), news reports in other media on the elections, links to political websites and additional information on party policies that were received from interviews with the political parties. This is an excellent resource for journalists. However, it does need greater collaboration between the research unit and the journalists so that it is more demand driven rather than supply driven as it is currently. For the month of November, NewsNet received 37 009 hits with an average of 1239 daily. These statistics did not provide any indication of how people were using the data and how valuable it was, but they do suggest that it does meet the needs of at least some SABC journalists. The NewsNet research team will also be doing research for the election reporting. However, there is no elaborated thought on the role of NewsNet on the public access site even though some of the links that have been culled from the Internet could be used on the SABC website to recommend to site visitors.

Online plans for the elections are rather vague. However, there is an investment in an elections result system that will be provided by Internet Solution, a computer

services company. There will also be different databases to access information from the census database, the election '99 results database, previous election databases and the opinion poll databases. A scaled down version of these will be published online on the public access site. However, no thought has been given to the design of the site or the additional information that will be added to the site – like news and information. At the time of the research (November 1998), it was not clear who would be designing and maintaining the information.

5.6   Training

There seems to be a shortage of staff at the moment together with increasing juniorisation of the newsroom. There is also concern that there will not be enough people for the coverage of the election. It appears from my study that people are still threatened with the status of their jobs and concentrate on protecting their private interests - journalists operate from a defensive position rather than being pro-active. A session at the bosberaad was devoted to watching and critiquing the news. It emerged that the poor quality of broadcasts can be attributed to a shortage of staff, juniorisation of the newsroom and overworked newsdesks. One of the Canadian consultants, who is assisting the SABC with the training of journalists for the election coverage, criticised the current news broadcasts for the use of bureaucratic language and the choice of spokespersons. This problem can be attributed to the fact that juniors mimic older journalists in the newsroom and tend to file copy that editors request. There is also the problem that not all SABC journalists can use new technology and hence access the Newsnet, and there are insufficient training resources in this regard.

5.7   Conclusion

This chapter examined the background of the SABC and the effect this has on current corporate structures. It also looked at the attempts to restructure the corporation and the current internal politics. It highlighted the SABC's across-the-board role in elections concentrating on the factors that promote participatory democracy and democratic journalism. It also discussed the conditions and the implications for the SABC when adopting a tri-media approach for coverage of the elections.

Even though corporate structures may inhibit innovation, I think that the enthusiasm of staff and their commitment to participatory democracy in South Africa may make the online venture feasible. It will probably be difficult to convince all staff members in the election task team, but that is normal for any media organisation venturing online. Guidelines for a democratic online role are implicit in the broader mandates from the IBA and the Broadcast Bill which call for independent journalism, impartial information and a global audience. If the online venture is done properly, this will give the corporation the edge, making it the premier online election news provider. The next chapter will discuss the online publishing models and strategies for site design and content.

Chapter Six
Taking the SABC online

6.1   Introduction

This chapter examines the implications for the SABC publishing online and makes recommendations based on the concept of participatory democracy and democratic journalism as outlined in earlier chapters. These recommendations consider the factors examined in chapter five that inhibit or promote online publishing, as well as the features of online election websites examined in chapter four.

6.2   The Internet as a source of political information

The Internet was still a fledgling medium in 1994, restricted to universities and research institutes both here and abroad. South Africa's first democratic election attracted widespread media attention both nationally and internationally. With the second elections, the excitement and interest may not be the same as the last one, but there is now a new publishing medium that offers new opportunities for both publishers and citizens. Easy navigability and low barriers to entry are some of the features that make the Internet popular. As a medium, the Internet has the technical potential to incorporate all the previous forms of mass media – radio, television and print. For the South African media, the Internet is beginning to gain increasing popularity as an additional publishing medium and this has important implications for the coming elections. According to Media Africa's Internet services industry survey, more than a million people are now online in South Africa (http://www.mafrica.co.za/webusers.html). South African web commentator Arthur Goldstuck (1998) predicted that by the end of 1998 the total figure

would be at the 1,5 million mark. Current growth patterns of the Internet illustrate that it has the potential to become a mass medium, thus extending cyberdemocracy from a small elite population to the mass public.

6.3 Considering online coverage of the South African national election

The most important aspects of election coverage by the SABC have been identified by SABC staff as: evaluating South Africa's new democracy, connecting citizens to each other and providing information to allow citizens to participate in the election.   These goals accord with the roles discussed in previous chapters (cf chapter two and three) although these roles are broader. The online media can service a number of other functions apart from providing current news and information, like contributing to voter education, mobilising citizens for participation, promoting interactive discussions between citizens and building national identity (cf chapters two, three and four). Although bi-media coverage fulfils some of the functions of the SABC, the website can replicate functions like voter education, news and information, extend them and add a new one – interactivity – that goes beyond.

The most important questions in motivating for a SABC online elections initiative are, perhaps; what is the role of the SABC online and who is this site serving? The SABC online election sites extends the role and services of the public service broadcaster to the online medium. The online site can serve a number of purposes. Some of these include encouraging citizens to participate in the process of governing and educating citizens on the political process so that they can make informed voting decisions. As a

public service broadcaster, the SABC is supposed to serve all the citizens of South Africa. Realistically, the online medium is highly specialised and draws a very affluent audience.

Yet, while the website may serve an affluent audience, it can extend the role of the SABC as a public service broadcaster and information can, theoretically, flow to other sites via the multi-step flow of communication theory (cf chapter 2). The multi-step flow of information discussed in chapter two argues that the online content and discussions will filter through the rest of the country. Whether affluent white online users will share information with black voters who are not online is debatable. The site might attempt to promote this, but independently of this, there is strategic reason in SABC serving the "information-rich" in cyberspace. As the sector of society that controls much of the country's wealth, this audience needs to know how its electoral choices can impact on society at large.

The election also provides a unique opportunity to establish an online presence, testing the capacity of the SABC to enter a new arena of content provision. If this venture succeeds it will provide an important indicator of future online publishing plans and extend the role of the broadcaster in South Africa. In terms of the SABC's corporate profile, publishing online will establish the SABC as a multi-platform content provider. The Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Jay Naidoo, in an address to SABC staff, advised that new media should be an area that the corporation actively explores because new media are poised to become the communication providers of the future (Kojoana,

1998:8). Thus, while the online medium allows the SABC the opportunity to extend their

services and role as a public service broadcaster, coverage of the election online will also

give the SABC the opportunity to test their capacity in terms of multi-media publishing.

The corporation can explore possibilities for partnerships and earning advertising revenue

and can use this as a reference for further online publishing ventures.

The interactive nature of the Internet also makes it different from traditional

broadcasting with its top-down flow of information. A website is driven by user demand.

Users click on the information they want as compared to any other traditional media

where users are given the information. Thus an online website needs to package

information that the online surfer is interested in. The information needs to be current

and updated on a regular basis. All this offers a new learning experience for the SABC.

6.4   Publishing models

Media organisations publishing online can be broadly divided into three

categories. None of these publishing models is distinct from the other, nor mutually

exclusive. Similarly, the functions that these websites serve can vary depending on the

goals of the organisation. Most media organisations seem to create a hybrid based on the

resources available and technical capacity affordable.

The first model is adhoc publishing. There is no corporate strategy for the online

presence and content is published by enthusiasts who do it as an additional part of their

daily jobs. At the inception of the World Wide Web, this model was common as most

organisations were experimenting with the medium. However, the web has matured since

its early beginnings and many companies now view publishing as a full corporate

venture. Media organisations are increasingly beginning to view the World Wide Web as

a serious venture and invest in publishing online. Adhoc publishing is cheap and does

not necessitate a large number of additional resources. While this model may have

worked four years ago, it looks amateurish now.

The second model is adding online publishing to the other services an

organisation provides. This normally includes employing a separate web development

team who is fully responsible for the online presence. The online team will be

responsible for content provision, marketing, database management and research and

development. Most media organisations tend to use this model given the intricacies of

integrating a print or broadcast product with an online product. After assessing the

corporate culture and resources available and technical capacity at the SABC, I would

advise that the SABC use this model as it is the easiest to add to an existing service with

the minimum disruption to the core services that the organisation provides.

The third model is full multi-media publishing. Web commentators are calling

this the third generation of web publishing. This is perhaps the ideal model of the online

era where media companies change their focus to content provision rather than merely

concentrating on a single product like a newspaper or a news broadcast. What this model

entails is that any content generated by the company is fully re-purposed to publish on

any platform. This also includes utilising computer-assisted research and reporting

techniques by all the journalists. Journalists view themselves as content providers or information technologists rather than merely print or broadcast journalists. This publishing model requires a change in mindset and investment in technology and radical change in corporate structures to accomplish multi-media publishing.

6.4.1 Publishing online at the SABC

As noted above, given the technical and resource constraints, I would recommend that the SABC opt for the second publishing model. The rigid corporate structures and the lack of teamwork are prohibitive to a full multi-media publishing venture. This publishing model would entail hiring an editor for the online site, a webmaster to oversee the technical directions and journalists who can re-purpose content from television and radio together with adding links and further background to this information. Given the current capacity and resources at the SABC, I would recommend at least three and at best six journalists to do this. The SABC will also need to hire at least three sub-editors or gatekeepers that can check on the accuracy, syntax and filter the information for the website and programmers to publish the information. A large proportion of the information will be pre-packaged features written by SABC journalists and guest columnists. This stockpiling will help free up editorial resources to deal with the increasing intensity of work on the site until the election day.

There are basically two options for an online presence. The first option is to produce all SABC websites with an election flavour. This can be done by including election-related articles on the channel websites. The second option is to launch a full

election website as part of the special election broadcasts. Against the first option, to redesign, implement and promote election angles on all the different websites in the short space of time prior to the election is ambitious and would be very expensive as compared to launching a single website. Managing all the different arms of these sites and continuously checking to ensure quality control and online identity is being maintained would be difficult.

Regarding the second option, the research on the election websites showed that organisations published the online election edition separately from their other publishing ventures. Publishing separately will establish the core identity of the website as the SABC election '99 website. If this venture is to form the building block for a full multi-media venture later, then establishing a corporate profile, such as election '99, online will be important. None of the SABC websites is currently a core online news producing website and this venture can serve as the launch for future online news publishing as a serious course.

It is also easier to channel the audiences from the special election broadcasts on radio and television into one central website. In terms of marketing, promoting and attracting viewers, it is easier to attract viewers to a specialised information service rather than a conglomeration of various sites. The election website url can be flighted on all special election broadcasts on both television and radio. The corporation can also adopt a tri-media advertising campaign which can feed into the different platforms. This would mean that the current websites can remain as they are with banner advertisements and

hyperlinks to the election sites. Election news on any of these sites can also redirect visitors to the special election site. All the other SABC sites can direct viewers/listeners/users to this central information source on the elections. If the site is successful, it can be used to sell advertising for the full SABC site and perhaps collaborative ventures with other media organisations or information technology organisations.

Looking at the history of South African media online, most media organisations first launched with a single publication or a part of that publication before taking the entire venture online. Times Media Limited first launched Business Times from the print version of the larger Sunday Times, added the appointments sections and finally a year later took the entire publication online.

Also, attempting to publish an election site separately will be an indicator of how well the corporation can cope with an online venture in terms of re-purposing and creating content for another platform. This can also be used as a barometer for future online ventures.

6.5   Technical limitations of the medium and accessibility

The current structure and design of the Internet are not conducive to large numbers of users searching for information. Online users receive their information via a telephone line that is in turn connected to a modem. Currently, this is very slow and results in user frustration and online logjams. Site design should take these technical

bandwidth limitations into account. The site should not be loaded with large graphics, audio and video clips. Users do not have time to wait for long downloads and will leave a graphically overloaded site. Monitor sizes vary considerably together with the resolution and colour display capabilities of these devices. Most home users tend to have 14-inch monitors that can display at a screen resolution of 640x480. To ensure that the user will see approximately the same colour that the designer intended when designing the site, Garcia (1997:6) advises designing the website colour palette to include the colours that most web surfers can see, which entails using a 256 colour web palette. Internet users are becoming sophisticated and with the abundance of information online, it is easy to lose them. Thus these technical limitations are very important when considering design of the site. Access is important for cyberdemocracy: even if there is a website, it would be meaningless if users cannot access it effectively.

6.6 Target Audience

According to a MediaAfrica survey, the average age of the South African Internet user is around thirty-five. This figure is based on a survey of approximately one hundred South African Internet service providers. It tracked the growth of Internet usage over a six-month period from October 1997 to March 1998 (http://www.mafrica.co.za/webusers.html). Thirty-five percent of respondents were in the twenty to thirty year age group. The typical South African user is highly educated with a high income. The SABC 3 channel viewer falls largely into similar income categories (AMPS, July-December 1997). These viewers are an affluent target audience and they are probably also Internet users. They are identified by their need for news and

information and an appetite for the good life. This indicates that this audience can be targeted via news broadcasts, current affairs programmes and special election broadcasts. Serving this same constituency on the Internet can replicate the functions served by radio and television, thereby reinforcing impact. The online site can go further by offering the added unique features of the Internet which can extend and deepen this group's relation to the elections in particular and democracy in general.

The Internet transcends physical spaces and geographical boundaries. Expatriates and others who are interested in South Africa will also probably visit the site. While it should not cater specifically to an international audience, the site design and information on the site should consider this group of users by simplicity of design for quick downloads, providing depth, background and context that cannot be found elsewhere.

6.7   Structuring information online

Telling stories online is different to the traditional mass media (print and broadcast) because the audience and the capabilities of the medium are different. Broadcast is essentially a passive medium as audience members are fed pre-selected information. Print stories are often third person narratives written to be read and broadcast stories are generally short clips. The online medium is different as online users can choose their news and information from many sources or vendors. The web combines the best features of these media and allows users to read from a more personal perspective. "Just as the reader of web sites presents his own characteristics: moves fast, scans often, but stops for serious interpretation, navigates with the speed of TV channel

surfers and has an insatiable appetite for information, the designers creating materials for these readers must also think fast, design with movement in mind, and provide, in the relatively small canvas of the screen, a sense of organisation, hierarchy, and visual attractiveness" (Garcia, 1997:11).

Black (1997:106) says that traditional storytelling is linear, with the classical inverted pyramid structure used most often, giving readers the most important information and then teasing them to dig deeper for additional information. "On the Web, a story can be approached from a number of directions; imagine the main story to be like the hub of a wheel and the other elements to be spokes. It should not matter where you begin, nor should it matter if you leap from spoke to spoke (via hyperlinks) and never reach the hub." If the main story is about voter registration and its problems, maybe one part of the story will allow the user to click on the different regions to check on the number of registered voters which can also link to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) website on voter registration. Another link will give users information on where and how to register to vote while another will connect users to a newsgroup that will discuss the issue of voter registration. The idea is to give readers chunks of information that they can digest in easy-to-read screen-size pieces. "Ideally, readers will go away satisfied, without feeling that they've missed the main course" (Black, 1997:106).

Although there may be multiple points of entry, it is still important to guide the reader in terms of importance of information. Garcia (1997) advises the use of colour and typography to do this. He also advises designers to start with a visual point of entry

guiding the reader into the page. Effective web sites and information design consists of a strong relationship between content, the visual environment and an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the medium. Garcia (1997:14) identifies the following model for effective information design:

- understanding the content presented;
- focusing strongly on a specific audience;
- simplifying the message;
- integrating words and visuals;
- recognising the differences in the medium.

If all of these factors are understood and taken into account, it makes for a stronger story online that will engage users. This implies that the SABC's online team will have to include an editor/manager to oversee the online publishing, sub-editors, programmers and identify stringers throughout the country that are prepared to provide content for the online site. The specific size of the online operation, the number of people involved and resources for the site, like digital cameras and tape recorders, will depend on the budget for the website. However, there should be at least four journalists in each of the major cities that can supply copy for the website, together with two sub-editors checking the copy; four programmers to package the copy for the website and publish it online; a designer that will oversee the look of the website and ensure that the stories are in keeping with the SABC election style online. The SABC's online journalism needs to consider the following factors as they will impact on the coverage on the website:

a) utilising young journalists

b) forming an editorial policy

c) providing appropriate training

a).   Utilising young journalists

The juniorisation of the newsroom was identified as a current problem at the SABC (cf chapter 5). I would argue that the juniorisation of the newsroom does not need to be a liability for the online medium; it is a young person's medium. The 1998 South African web user survey conducted by South Africa online revealed that 35% of the respondents fell within the 20-30 year age group, with 8% constituting the under 21 group (http://www.mafrica.co.a/webusers.html). These young journalists at the SABC understand youth issues and how to reach the youth, which can be a valuable asset for the online medium. Young people also seem to take a lot quicker to new technology and adapt it to suit them, which can be of benefit to the SABC publishing online.

b).   Creating an editorial policy

The Opinion '99 poll and the subsequent problems that it created between management and editorial staff, is symptomatic of the lack of editorial policy on how issues are going to be covered by the broadcaster. Radio and television should analyse their role in the media and cover the election reporting accordingly. Statistics can be interpreted in any way by an analyst and this can be particularly dangerous with an inexperienced journalist. The results system will be able to churn out massive amounts of raw data and journalists will need training on how to handle this data to make it relevant for the viewers/listeners or else the system will be wasted. The election results database is also going to be published on the web and once again, surfers require interpretation and contextual background to the statistics.

c). Providing appropriate training

Newsnet publishes large chunks of data online for the journalists. While this is useful information, it needs to be packaged into manageable sizes for journalists working on deadline so that they can package intelligent reports for broadcasts. The election is going to generate vast quantities of information from the news media, opinion polls, political parties, databases and statistics online and the journalists need to be trained how to use all of this information for their reports. One of the dangers of too much information is that the journalists will ignore the background research and simply continue with their old style of reporting. There should be an intensive computer-assisted research and reporting training programme to fully utilise all these resources. If any of these journalists are also going to be reporting for the website, then they also need to be trained in online storytelling and writing techniques.

6.8 Production process

Establishing a separate online publishing team is perhaps the best alternative, given the corporate culture at the SABC. It is technically possible to write macros that will automatically format information from the stories database, NewsStar, to the World Wide Web. Stories written for broadcast, both television and radio, are generally short sound bytes with very little explanation. This does not capitalise on the near limitless space online, nor will it enhance any of the journalistic roles examined earlier (cf chapter three). It will merely be an additional publishing medium for the same information that users will be able to get free of charge from either television or radio. There is also no reason for users to go online as there is no new information. This will also not bring back

first time viewers to the site and the participatory role of the SABC online will be obsolete.

Auckland Park should be used as the base for the online production centre. This is the headquarters of the SABC and it is convenient to co-ordinate with the central election planning and broadcasting also operating out of Johannesburg. Journalists submitting stories for either television or radio should be able to submit stories with additional information for the online team to publish. The best way to ensure a steady stream of copy is by identifying a few good journalists who will provide copy from the regions for the online team. Bandwidth constraints within South Africa may make video unfeasible for users but audio is manageable at present. Soundbytes and interviews recorded for radio broadcasts can be digitised and published online. The online programming team will be able to retrieve this information from the NewsStar database. The NewsNet research can be utilised to provide added links.

6.9   Revenue streams

The web has not established itself as an income generating medium, thus any online venture cannot be viewed as a commercial venture. However, an online venture will establish a presence in the new medium, provide marketing opportunities, an online brand and allow the SABC to extend its role as a public broadcaster to another arena.

One of the options for publishing online is to partner with another organisation. Partnering relieves carrying the entire burden of cost alone and if it is with an

organisation that complements the SABC's weaknesses and enhances the strengths, then the partnership may be beneficial to all. For example, partnering with an Internet Service Provider or a web design company will provide the technical back-up and programming requirements which can be very expensive while the SABC provides the content. However, one of the minor disadvantages of partnering is that the corporation loses the uniquely SABC online presence and becomes SABC with X online.

In terms of cyberdemocracy, the funding mechanism should not compromise the neutrality and impartiality of the SABC. In addition to this, it is important that citizens also see the SABC as neutral and that the association with the commercial advertiser/partner is not to the detriment of the corporation's credibility (cf chapter 5).

6.10   Fulfilling cyberdemocratic functions

The SABC website can enhance participatory democracy through democratic journalism that realises various roles: a social democratic role by providing depth, education and national identity; a neo-liberal role by being diverse; a watchdog role by monitoring and being critical; and a participatory role by being interactive.

This means educating South African citizens about the democratic process and about other South Africans, establishing a national culture and identity together with mobilising citizens for participation and encouraging citizens to monitor the performance of elected representatives.

6.10.1 Nation building

Data collected from SABC staff reflected that connecting the various groups in South Africa and allowing them to speak was important for the election. Although a large number of South Africa's population will not be online, their stories need to be told and shared with others. The website should reflect this goal. English is the dominant language of communication between the various language groups in South Africa. It would also be very expensive to include news in all 11 languages on the websites. However, an exploration on using Altavista's babblefish technology that converts files into different languages, will be valuable. Special election programming and election news broadcasts on television will have a special "election '99" logo to inform the viewer that this is a part of the SABC election package and to create a sense of national pride and identity. Using the arguments from the previous sections, I would advise that the SABC website continues the visual feel of the special election broadcast logo so that readers are aware that this is a continuation of the information from the television broadcasts. Television is a visual medium and viewers would recognise the online logo from the television broadcasts, thus associating it with the SABC and also tying this into the corporation's tri-media coverage of the election. It would also establish a strong visual corporate identity so users are fully aware at all times that they are at the SABC site. The design of the site should not only have the logo but the choice of fonts and colors for the background and links should continue with this identity (cf chapter 4).

The website can fulfill the nation-building function of the SABC by using the colours of the national flag. American websites used this to a large extent in their election websites.

6.10.2 Providing news and information

Garcia (1997:36) warns that an online venture should not be looked at as a matter of duplicating the core product of a media organisation, but the online product should be viewed as an extension of the services that an organisation specialises in. The near limitless depth that this medium offers means that the spill-over from radio and television can now be accommodated. The website can extend the pluralist role of many voices and provide an educational role through giving political analysis and depth to the information that the other media, television and radio, could not provide. A guest columnist, who is well-known in the South African media, writing a special analytical piece for the website will draw readers online and provide in-depth information for readers wanting to know more about an issue.

News bulletins can be enhanced for the online version with hyperlinks to other sites carrying similar information together with links to the core election information sites like the Independent Electoral Commission site. If the Opinion '99 issues are the most important aspects for the SABC election broadcast, then the site can provide additional information on where the parties stand on these issues and their track record in parliament on these issues. A chat session with political party representatives would contribute to the participatory and watchdog role of the SABC as users will be able to directly question

the politicians on issues of interest to the electorate rather than the public relations material that politicians use during elections.

The BBC website has a section called Talking Point that allows users to express their opinion on specific topics. This participatory role of the media engaging citizens in discussion can be taken a step further by broadcasting the user's questions to politicians on the air. An e-mail button could allow users to mail politicians. Although online polls are not very reliable, they can be great fun on a website and used to attract users.

6.10.3 Publishing news as it breaks

The ability to publish breaking news fast and updating results as they are received becomes more important closer to the polling day. Just prior to the polling day for the American mid-term elections, there were already queries by users on where they could get real time election results. South Africans will be looking for the results online starting on Election Day. Finding information that is out-of-date gives the user the impression that the site is not maintained. It also ensures that the users will not re-visit the site for up-to-date information. If the SABC website url is going to be flighted on all news broadcasts and special election programming, then the information needs to be current. Also, there is probably going to be a large amount of interest in the South African elections by the foreign media and they need to know that the information is the most current if they will be using it in their products. "Already CNN, BBC and others have indicated that they will not be sending the big teams they did in 1994 to the 1999 elections. They will be depending on the SABC's supply of coverage" (Kojoana,

1998:7). Also, as identified by SABC staff (cf chapter 5), providing online news and information is part of the corporation's mandate as a public service broadcaster.

6.10.4 Educating citizens

More value could be added to news coverage from both television and radio by providing more information online and links to other information sources, thus extending the role of the SABC as a public broadcaster. Both television and radio election planners identified the social democratic role of the corporation by saying that the issues the members of the public identified as important in the Opinion '99 poll will be covered in their broadcasts. The website can take this a step further and entrench the educative role of the SABC by providing information on the five main issues.[1] This can include questioning the political parties on their stance on these issues and publishing it. There can also be a FAQ section that will cover commonly asked questions on the issues. To take advantage of the interactive element of the medium, a chat forum or a newsgroup can host a daily discussion and a topic for the day could concentrate on one of the issues. This not only educates and encourages citizens, but journalists can also participate and learn from it. The BBC website hosted a quiz for the duration of the election with a prize at the end of the elections for the person who could submit the most correct answers.

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[1] These issues were identified by the respondents of the Markinor Opinion 99 as the most important issues in South Africa. They were employment, crime, education, housing and the economy. Staff interviewed said these issues were an important indicator of citizens' concerns and would use them for their planning of election coverage.

6.11   Combining functions across platforms

The current programming ideas can also include features on the website to take full advantage of the medium and further add depth, immediacy and interactivity. Pieter Dirk-Uys's idea of a rainbow train is probably one of the best opportunities to exploit all these features of the online environment. This rainbow train will travel around South Africa, with Pieter Dirk-Uys travelling as the comic character Evita Bezuidenhout, and will conduct voter education at local town hall meetings when the train stops. The aim is to educate South Africans by visiting small rural towns. Reporters on the train can file stories on their exact location and the progress of the journey. This also adds another opportunity to get a journalist to file copy on the political progress and perceptions of the country in remote areas, thus connecting different people and "telling the South African story". Users should be able to e-mail politicians on the train and "Evita Bezuidenhout" to ask their political questions. Information can also be compiled from the meetings and published on the web, again connecting South Africans from all walks of life and from different geographical areas, and serving the participatory role of the media.

6.12   Tackling a tri-media approach

According to information disseminated at the election bosberaad, in the three months leading up to the elections, there will be a total of fifty-four national slots of thirty minutes duration that will be dedicated to covering in-depth current affairs programmes and two programmes per province weekly. These are some of the proposed programmes that can also adopt a tri-media approach to the elections and add value to the SABC content offerings:

The issue – A weekly thirty-minute debate on the issues. This programme will be driven by a journalist and will provide a platform for ordinary people, leaders in society and politicians to discuss the issues of the day. These issues can be taken online where the debate continues. There can be an *At Issue* button that will allow online users to follow the television debate and contribute to it. This section can also allow users to mail the leaders or politicians with their questions. This programme fulfils the participatory role of the media by building interactivity within the community.

The coffee shop – A group of South Africans from widely different backgrounds are given a different brief each week to discuss at an informal venue like a coffee shop and debate solutions to these issues. This also has great potential to be taken online. Online users can suggest their solutions to problems in South Africa and debate and discuss the issues. This can be given added depth with a journalist providing a guest column that will complement the television episode. To further contextualise and 'humanise' the programme, individual profiles of the participants can also be provided on the website. This is the civic journalist view of the media connecting citizens and mobilising them to participate together with the neo-liberal view of elites participating in the public sphere.

Face the Nation – Politicians face a handpicked audience which asks them questions. Each programme will be introduced by a documentary insert. One of the suggestions was having the Minister of Education, Sibusisu Bengu, face scholars on educational issues. Online chat forums and e-mail questions can extend participation beyond the studio audience. The online site can mirror the television programme by examining the minister's progress in greater detail. There can also be a report card type of feature where users can vote on how the minister has performed in different areas. This

examines the role of the media as the fourth estate, i.e. a watchdog, and makes politicians accountable to citizens.

6.13   Conclusion and outcomes

This chapter has highlighted the features of the Internet together with the challenges and opportunities that online publishing poses to the SABC. It examined how the election website can both contribute to cyberdemocracy and extend the role of the SABC as a public service broadcaster during the elections. The election '99 also provides a unique opportunity to establish an online presence that will test the capacity of the SABC to enter a new arena of content provision.

Chapter Seven
Conclusion

7.1   Introduction

This chapter defines the implications of this study for the theorisation of media and democracy and the move to online technologies. It must be stressed that, as mentioned in chapter two, context is very important. The implications of this study are based on the context and environment at the SABC and are not necessarily transferable to any other corporation unless it displays characteristics that are similar to the SABC. This chapter places the findings in a wider context and looks at the implications for research methodology and concludes with a summary of findings.

7.2   Role of the media and democracy

In chapters two and three, I identified the role of the media in terms of four categories – the watchdog role, the pluralist role, social democrat role and the participatory role. There is no one specific role of the media or type of journalism and a public service broadcaster like the SABC can serve many roles and use various types of journalism to achieve these. In the case of the SABC, this need not just be in the news and actuality programmes, but can be extended to include online publishing. Chapter two identified the developmental role that the media can play by reporting on government successes. The SABC website can contribute to development in South Africa by reporting on the government's success while in office and by reporting how ordinary South Africans' lives have changed. What I argue, however, is that the participatory role,

manifested in part in public journalism, is of special importance for this thesis which

focuses on the role of the Internet and democracy.

7.3   Contribution to cyberdemocracy

Chapter three identified the public sphere as the space created by the media that

allowed citizens to exercise control over the state (Curran, 1991:29). For Habermas the

public sphere allowed citizens to debate and discuss issues that are relevant to them. In

modern society the media have become the public sphere that allows citizens to discuss

and debate political issues of the day. Habermas's public sphere was criticised for

identifying only a single public sphere, when in fact there are multiple mini-public

spheres that interact with each other. The ideas and vision at the SABC allow for the

website to expand and deepen the existing public sphere for an important stratum of

South African citizens. This enables these South Africans to participate deeply in the

democratic process if they so wish.

One of the most commonly asked questions is whether the Internet can facilitate

cyberdemocracy or would it lead to a new type of information poverty allowing only a

limited sector of the population to participate? Even though Internet usage in South

Africa is limited to the elite, the Internet can still contribute to cyberdemocracy. The

many-to-many nature of Internet communication has great potential as a democratising

medium. Dahlgren (nd:69) identifies cyberspace as a link and a meeting ground for the

civically engaged and politically mobilised. While this may not be wholly true for South

Africa, the SABC online will allow for a stratum of politically mobilised elites to use cyberspace in this way.

From the examination of international online election sites, it is evident that these sites played a number of different roles. They contributed to a democratic culture within cyberspace, as well as democracy outside of cyberspace, by facilitating community building through interactive online chats and newsgroups, delivering voter education, by providing news and information, and mobilising citizens to participate. Thus, cyberdemocracy can also contribute to democracy in general.

Democracy encompasses many interacting sites of power and not all participation in society is necessarily democratic. Democracy deals with participation in issues to do with power, control, resources and socially-impacting decisions. By facilitating democratic interactions online, the Internet contributes to cyberdemocracy and cyberspace contributes to democracy outside of cyberspace, as discussed above, by extending the public sphere, facilitating community building and allowing citizens to participate in democratic interactions. These correlate with participatory democracy discussed in chapter two. The SABC website can also serve these functions and a tri-media approach will strengthen this.

7.4 Democratic Journalism

Chapter three discussed democratic journalism and public journalism. Public journalism movements encourage participation from journalists and citizens. It stresses

covering news from the perspective of citizens and issues that are of importance to them. The Opinion '99 survey indicated issues that are of common concern to South Africans and interview data from SABC staff revealed that this information will form an important basis for election programming. The website extends public journalism by enabling journalists to participate online in chat forums gaining a perspective of the citizens' views. The online forum also allows journalists to become citizens, rather than disconnected commentators, in keeping with the public journalism ideal. Participating in online forums connects journalists to citizens by facilitating conversations with them. It also gives journalists a direct view of the concerns of citizens and allows journalists to report from this perspective.

7.5   Relevance to research methodology

Direct observation was conducive to observing the practices and the nature of relationships that SABC staff shared in their natural setting. The inductive analysis of qualitative research as explained in chapter one was important in allowing minimal prior theories to be imposed on the outcome of the research. Using myself as the research instrument allowed for the flexibility, insight and the ability to build on tacit knowledge that is unique to humans (Lincoln and Guba in Patton, 1990:15). This view is also concurrent with that of critical theorists which is based on understanding and social critique. Critical theorists assert that meaning is not only internally constructed, but social forces play a large role in influencing the construction of meaning. The interviews allowed me access to the individuals to examine their knowledge of reality from their perspective rather than imposing it on them. The direct observation allowed me to make

observations based on the employees social circumstances and to analyse this in terms of the social forces at play within the organisation. The direct observation and interviews also showed that South Africa's political history has played a large part in shaping the history of the corporation and the current culture and structures at the SABC. This is also congruent with the critical theory perspective that knowledge of reality is shaped by a collection of social, political, cultural and economic factors that have crystallised into a series of structures because of historical circumstance (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:110).

I have attempted to provide sufficient information about the content in which this inquiry and its recommendations were carried out so that anyone interested in transferability has a base of information appropriate to make the judgement. The possibility for transferability of the SABC research is based on the organisational structures within the corporation and their visions and goals. These can be transferred if the organisations display congruence in terms of their online goals and visions and the internal structures of the organisations.

The transferability of the online election website research was general enough to be transferred from the First World to South Africa, even if the latter is less cyber-developed.

7.6   Looking ahead

In the earlier chapters, I indicated the potential of the Internet to facilitate democracy. The corporate structures and the vision of leaders play a large role in

influencing the outcome of publishing the coverage of the elections online. The SABC

going tri-media and including an election website will depend on the corporation's

commitment to its role as a public service broadcaster, its commitment to extending

participatory democracy and services to the public and its role in educating the South

African voter. The success or failure of publishing the election online will depend on all

of these factors.

Although the Internet is quite new, especially in South Africa, it has potential as a

new democratising medium here. Many-to-many and interactive communication, depth,

immediacy and interactivity allow for the SABC to encourage participatory democracy

on their website. The SABC can publish in a new medium allowing at least some

citizens greater access to information and to many more features that are democratically

relevant. In short, the election provides a great opportunity to establish an online

presence, extend the corporation's services, establish a corporate profile online and

facilitate democracy in South Africa.

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Appendix 1

These questionnaires were e-mailed to the webmasters of election websites and to the online news and carr-l mailing lists.

Research questionnaire

We will be having our second democratic elections in South Africa soon and I am conducting research on the online coverage of elections in order to work out an election strategy for the local broadcaster here. The Internet is still developing here and any information that you provide will be of great help to us especially as we can draw from your experiences and hopefully use the technology to its full potential.

Any help that you can give would be most appreciated.

Thanks
Kammy Naidoo

Webmasters

1. Did you appoint an editor for the site?

2. Did you have a news team separate from the print/broadcast team specifically for the elections website?

3. How many people worked on the website?
☐ Content – writers/photographers
☐ Designers
☐ Programmers
☐ Managers/editors

4. How did the content from the print/broadcast edition feed into the online site?

5. How long did you plan for the website before going online?

6. Did you hire new staff or use existing staff members?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Response to the site

1. Was there an increase in the number of hits?
☐ Dramatic
☐ Slight
☐ Non significant change
☐ Decrease

Was there worthwhile discussion in the chat forums and newsgroups?
☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ N/A – no chat forum

Do you think it was a useful exercise?
☐ Yes   ☐ no

Why?

Would you do it again?

☐   Yes   ☐   no

What parts of the site would you leave out?
What aspects of the site would you improve on?

Additional comments:

Cover letter

We will be having our second democratic elections in South Africa soon and I am conducting research on the online coverage of elections in order to work out an elections strategy for the local broadcaster here. The Internet is still developing here and any information that you provide will be of great help to us especially as we can draw from your experiences and hopefully use the technology to its full potential.

Any help that you can give would be most appreciated.

Thanks
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☐ Dramatic
☐ Slight
☐ Non significant change
☐ Decrease

Was there worthwhile discussion in the chat forums and newsgroups?
☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ N/A – no chat forum

Do you think it was a useful exercise?
☐ Yes   ☐ no

Why?

_____

Would you do it again?
☐ Yes   ☐ no

What parts of the site would you leave out?

What aspects of the site would you improve on?

Additional comments:

Journalists

1. Did you receive any specific training for the website?
☐   Yes   ☐   No

2. Did you go online for information?
☐   Yes   ☐   No

3. How often did you go online
☐   Daily
☐   More than once a day
☐   Weekly
☐   Less than once a week

4. What information did you find most useful?
☐   Analysis
☐   Campaign information
☐   Chat groups/newsgroups
☐   News coverage
☐   Polls

5. What information did you need and did not find online?

Time Lines

Content creation

Design

Management

Content creation

- decide on the type of content for the site

- how will content from the other media feed into the online site

- identify regional stringers to supply copy for the site.

- Identify guest columnists/ other outside writers who will be willing to supply copy

  for the site.

Design of the site

- Create tentative design of the site.

- Decide on colours, fonts, logos.

- Decide on final design

- Create templates and style sheets.

- Practice a mock run-up before going live.

Management of the process

- Appoint an editor that will be responsible for overseeing the entire process

- Decide on a budget for the website

- Decide on the number of people that will be working with the online team and

  appoint this team for content creation and design.

- Liaise with the advertising unit to generate adverts for the online site or broker partnerships with another organisation.
- If the site is going to partner with another organisation – decide on the share of the work and how the content will be generated.