



MEDIA INSTITUTE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA (MISA) ZAMBIA

REPORT OF THE STUDY INTO THE ZAMBIA NATIONAL BROADCASTING  
CORPORATION (ZNBC) NEWS COVERAGE DURING THE 2006 LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT, PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS - AUGUST, 2006

Prepared by Fidelis H. Muzyamba and Brian M. Lingela

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LUSAKA

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC	All People's Congress (APC).
HP	Heritage Party (HP)
MMD	Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD)
PF	Patriotic Front (PF),
UDA	United Democratic Alliance (UDA)
ZNBC	Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This report presents the preliminary findings of a study undertaken by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zambia as part of a content monitoring of Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) radio and television news. This study is aimed at determining whether or not ZNBC provides fair, balanced, impartial coverage of all contesting political parties during Zambia's local government, parliamentary and Presidential elections scheduled for 28 September 2006.

The study has also been necessitated by complaints from different sectors of society that have expressed concern with the manner of coverage of ZNBC news during the election period.

## **2.0 WHY STUDY NEWS COVERAGE?**

Mass media help shape the political landscape in various ways. Advertising, discussion programmes and interviews are among the common programme types used in carrying out this mandate. However, news programmes, constitute a unique and especially useful tool for shaping public opinion and agendas.

According to media theories, coverage in news is very important because people gauge the importance of something on the basis of what they see covered in the media. In other words, prioritisation of an issue in the news gets to be accepted by people as their own prioritisation of important issues. Another commonly accepted assumption of media operations is that coverage in news generally leads to some status enhancement for those covered. They, in the process, gain exposure to the electorate so they can sell their ideas.

For prominence of coverage, the following are the determinants:

1. Source (s) used
2. Headlines: a story making it to the headlines is regarded as more important than one which does not
3. Sound bites: these are portions of actuality in which the source is shown speaking in their own words]
4. Fairness (allowing contending sides of the story to be told)
5. Objectivity (letting the facts of the story speak for themselves)
6. Placement in the newscast (is the news hierarchical, who gets the lead story?)
7. Quantity of coverage (e.g. length of news item.
8. Lead: whether the story is a lead story or not

This study focussed on the first six criteria. Although it did not use the last three due to lack of sufficient time, the first measures are still sufficient in determining the nature of the elections coverage at ZNBC. A more complete forthcoming study will include the other dimensions as well.

## **3.0 THE ZAMBIA NATIONAL BROADCASTING CORPORATION (ZNBC): A BRIEF BACKGROUND**

ZNBC is, according to the Amendment Act of 2002, and even the Electoral Act (2006) supposed to, offer balanced, non-partisan and fair news reports of the political landscape. It is now a public broadcaster and is expected to operate in the public interest. This is a critical requirement for furtherance of democracy and good governance.

There have been various complaints that the national broadcaster is still biased towards the ruling party and government, but is this so? This MISA study follows another one conducted earlier in July which revealed that, indeed, ZNBC news coverage still tends to be hierarchical in favour of the present government, and tending to devote more space in the news-hole to the ruling government / party. How is the station faring since that study? A check-list consisting of several key variables is used in this study of the news content from the month of August, 2006 – September 2006.

The input of material into a particular news report is a result of the interplay of a number of factors. Journalists go out and look for newsy items, edit the content and package it for the newscasts. However, much also depends on the resourcefulness of political players, and their ability to engage the public and build the political agenda, invite the media to activities, or indeed, and make available material to the mass media if they are not able to gather it themselves for some reason. All things being equal, it is expected that coverage will be generally equitable for all parties in an election. If it is not, people will cry foul and demand for change.

#### **4.0 METHOD AND SAMPLE**

The method of content Analysis was used for the study. Television and Radio ZNBC newscasts were recorded for the study. For TV, a total of 135 news stories were examined from the 19:00 hours newscast over a period of 6<sup>th</sup> August to 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2006, while for radio 48 news stories were examined from the 13:15 hours newscast the period 4<sup>th</sup> August to 31<sup>st</sup> August. The sample consisted of almost the entire population of newscasts for the periods indicated as recordings were made on a daily basis except where logistical problems prevented this from happening.

#### **5.0 KEY QUESTIONS**

The following key questions were considered:

##### **5.1 QUESTION 1: IS ZNBC NEWS FREE OR PARTISAN IN COVERAGE?**

###### **5.1.1 ZNBC Radio**

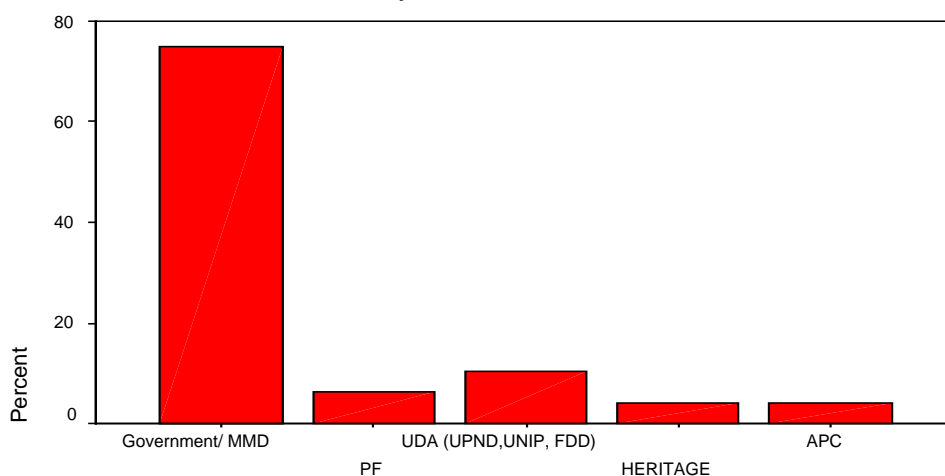
This study revealed that there continues to be partisanship in favour of the ruling party and government in the news coverage of ZNBC. The ruling Government and its Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) continued to receive more coverage as compared to other contesting political parties. They continued to be the most covered party comparatively speaking. As the table and graph below illustrates, the Government / MMD had a whopping 75 percent of the ZNBC radio news hole in the period, compared to 6.3 for the Patriotic Front (PF), 10.4 percent for United Democratic Alliance (UDA), and 4.2 percent each for Heritage Party (HP) and the All People's Congress (APC).

Out of a total of 48 stories recorded during this period, 36 were for the MMD, 3 for the PF, 5 for the UDA and 2 for the HERITAGE party and APC respectively.

**Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Government/ MMD	36	75.0	75.0	75.0
	PF	3	6.3	6.3	81.3
	UDA (UPND,UNIP, FDD)	5	10.4	10.4	91.7
	HERITAGE	2	4.2	4.2	95.8
	APC	2	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

**Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted**



Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted

As can be seen from the above tables, the preponderant part of news coverage continues to go to the Government / MMD ruling party with less going to the opposition political parties that are contesting the elections. Below we also show percentages of stories collectively going to the opposition parties contesting the elections in relation to that given to the ruling MMD. Here, the MMD received 54.2% as compared to 25% for the opposition collectively.

**The Stories are Favourable to:**

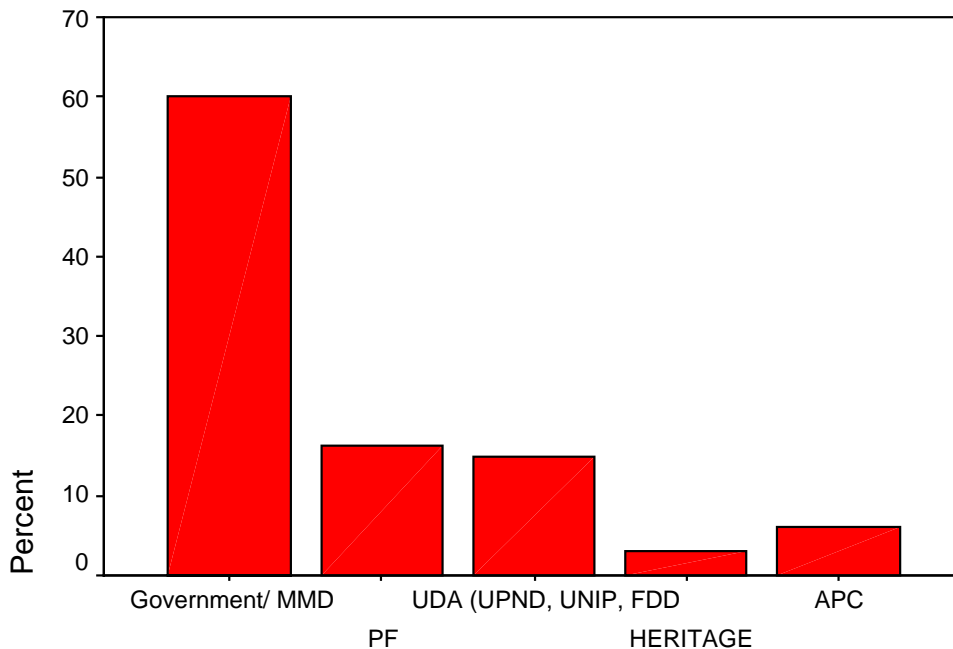
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Government/MMD	26	54.2	54.2	54.2
	Contesting Opposition	12	25.0	25.0	79.2
	Neutral	10	20.8	20.8	100.0
	Total	48	100.0	100.0	

**5.1.2 ZNBC TV**

Like with Radio above, a similar situation obtains for television where 57.9 percent of the political stories were found to relate to the government/ ruling party, 15.7

percent to the Patriotic Front, and 14.3 percent to the UDA (see table and graph below). 2.9 per cent went to the Heritage Party and 5.7 percent to the All People’s Congress. As may be seen from the next two tables, the ruling party and government had more than half the coverage than any other single party during this period! This does not augur well for Zambian democracy because it prevents competition on fair and even ground. Democracy thrives on the free-flow of information, especially during election times.

**Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted**



**Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted**

**Name of Political Party Quoted**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Government/ MMD	81	57.9	60.0	60.0
	PF	22	15.7	16.3	76.3
	UDA (UPND, UNIP, FDD)	20	14.3	14.8	91.1
	HERITAGE	4	2.9	3.0	94.1
	APC	8	5.7	5.9	100.0
	Total	135	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	5	3.6		
Total		140	100.0		

The next table also shows an analysis of the news coverage of the parties outside government - shown collectively.

**The Story is Favourable to:**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Government/ MMD	57	40.7	42.2	42.2
	Contesting Opposition	53	37.9	39.3	81.5
	Neutral	25	17.9	18.5	100.0
	Total	135	96.4	100.0	
Missing	System	5	3.6		
Total		140	100.0		

**6.0 POLITICAL PARTIES AND PLACEMENT OF NEWS ITEMS**

On the majority of days (see table below), there also was a tendency to have the hierarchical arrangement of news whereby the itemisation followed Zambia’s ruling hierarchy. The President’s and other government leaders’ deeds and statements frequently occupied the lead story position, both on radio and television (see Table below).

This is retrogressive since it gives the impression that the ruling government has the most important ideas of the day, or the most important ideas for the elections campaign or future of Zambia. Experience has shown that those outside government sometimes have better ideas and plans for their countries, but these would never see the oxygen of publicity if the current ZNBC habits, attitudes, and philosophy of operation continue. The opposition parties usually make it to the lead story position only when something negative happens in their camp. (e.g....

ZNBC newscasts starting with at least two consecutive news items being about Government/ MMD	
<i>Radio</i>	<i>TV</i>
80 percent	54.6 percent

**7.0 QUESTION 2: IS THERE FAIRNESS AND OBJECTIVITY IN THE REPORTING?**

**7.1 ZNBC Radio**

In terms of use of objectivity and fairness, the findings showed that there is, generally, adherence to these ethics (see tables below). From all the newscasts, only one story could be considered unfair, and six out of the total were thought not to be objective.

This, however, is little consolation as the other sources of bias – especially the sharing out of the news-hole on elections coverage, and prioritisation within newscasts - need urgent address for ZNBC to occupy its position as a public broadcaster.

**Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted \* Are the Stories Fair or Not Fair?  
Crosstabulation**

Count

		Are the Stories Fair or Not Fair?		Total
		Fair	Not Fair	
Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted	Government/ MMD	35	1	36
	PF	3		3
	UDA (UPND,UNIP, FDD)	5		5
	HERITAGE	2		2
	APC	2		2
Total		47	1	48

**Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted \* Are the Stories Objective or Not?  
Crosstabulation**

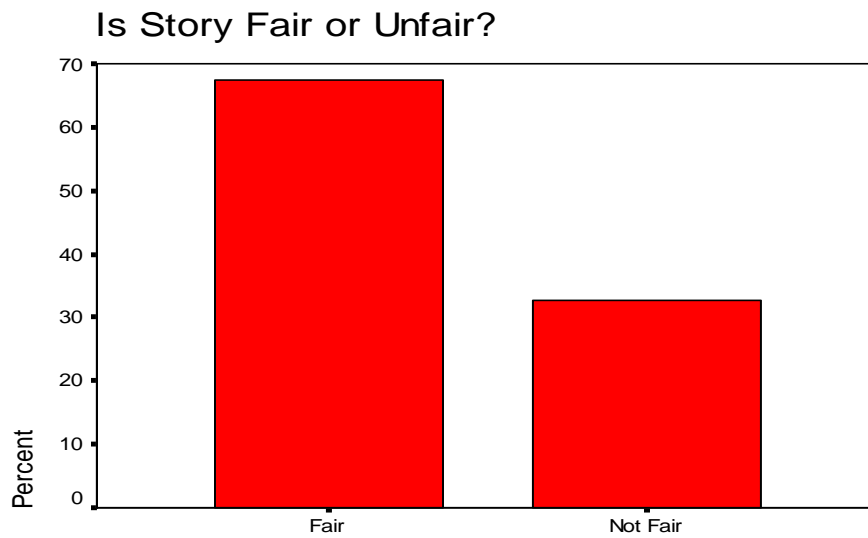
Count

		Are the Stories Objective or Not?		Total
		Yes	No	
Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted	Government/ MMD	29	6	35
	PF	3		3
	UDA (UPND,UNIP, FDD)	5		5
	HERITAGE	2		2
	APC	2		2
Total		41	6	47

## 7.2 ZNBC TV

For television, the situation was again generally satisfactory with regard to fairness, objectivity, and the use of sound-bites. Fairness and objectivity in this context means allowing contending sides of the story to be told and letting the facts of the story speak

for themselves (see the bar chart below).



Is Story Fair or Unfair?

#### Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted \* Is the Story Objective or Not? Crosstabulation

Count

		Is the Story Objective or Not?		Total
		Objective	Not objective	
Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted	Government/ MMD	76	5	81
	PF	21	1	22
	UDA (UPND, UNIP, FDD)	20		20
	HERITAGE	4		4
	APC	8		8
Total		129	6	135

#### Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted \* Does the Story use Soundbites? Crosstabulation

Count

		Does the Story use Soundbites?		Total
		Yes	No	
Name of Political Party Covered /Quoted	Government/ MMD	48	33	81
	PF	16	6	22
	UDA (UPND, UNIP, FDD)	16	4	20
	HERITAGE	3	1	4
	APC	7	1	8
Total		90	45	135

The overall picture is satisfactory, but it was felt that more efforts should be made by reporters to get the opinion or position of the opposition when reporting on what government/ ruling party says. This was not done in a number of cases thereby resulting in unfair news reports (see table).

An urgent question remains as what should be done about the disproportionate amount of news-hole going to the ruling party/ government.

## **8.0 CONCLUSIONS**

From the foregoing, the following conclusions are made:

- Generally, the coverage of ZNBC radio and TV main news during this period has been biased and skewed towards the ruling MMD as compared to other political parties contesting in the Tripartite elections, namely, Patriotic Front (PF), United Democratic Alliance (UDA), HERITAGE Party and All People's Congress (APC) Party. This is because more coverage has been given to the MMD as compared to all the contesting political parties collectively.
- However, it is important to state that in terms of the extent to which the individual stories were presented, this was fair and objective. In this regard, we commend ZNBC.
- ZNBC is a public broadcasting corporation existing to serve the people of Zambia. The public interest is a paramount consideration in all public broadcasting corporations. However, despite the generally expanded coverage in this elections period, ZNBC is still devoting a disproportionate amount of news-hole to the government/ ruling party. It also tends to over-prioritise items concerning the government / ruling party to such an extent that there is a distortion of the true news media landscape. This is unacceptable in a democracy.

## **9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. ZNBC is urged to immediately stop the hierarchical arrangement of news. It is a political rather than professional idea, and can never be justified in a democratic country wishing to become truly modern and competitive among the community of nations. It distorts the true picture of what is at play in Zambia. Let the listeners/ viewers be the judges as to the best ideas for Zambia. Only professional news judgement criteria should be used by journalists in the prioritisation and placement of all news and current affairs items.

2. All news and current affairs programmes (*Newscasts, Radio Newsreel, Newslime, Focus, and The Reporter*) should be left free of political interference because they have a critical national role in agenda-setting and nation building, especially as people chose whom to vote for.
3. To be truly fair, a smaller, more proportionate and equitable size of the news-hole should go to the ruling party/ government.
4. ZNBC should continue exhibiting fairness and objectivity in the coverage of news not only during elections but at all times since these are professional fundamentals that must be adhered to all the time.
5. The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act no. 17 of 2002 and ZNBC (Amendment) Act No. 20 of 2002 must be fully implemented to ensure ZNBC is regulated by the IBA as opposed to the present situation where it reports to politicians in the ruling party.