

## **Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)**

### **National Media Conference**

### **The Role of the Media in Promoting Electoral Democracy**

#### **New media and democracy**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak, it's an honour to be speaking in front of such distinguished guests at the National Media Conference on The Role of the Media in Promoting Electoral Democracy. I'd like to extend thanks to the Independent Electoral Commission, most notably Dr Brigalia Bam (Chairperson), Ms Pansy Tlakula (Chief Electoral Officer) , and Ms Thoko Mpumlwana (Deputy Chairperson) for the opportunity.

Local online media attracts around 9-million readers monthly to the country's top websites. Of this figure, 5-million people are South Africans who reside inside the country and the other half are individuals who visit from abroad.

Online media is an international medium. It is accessible not just by South Africans, but the rest of the world. In effect our websites are shop windows to our country – they have a job of presenting our story to the international community. It's a critical medium if you consider this. To get the election story here, the world will be logging on to South African websites.

The online medium has the ability to deliver breaking news like television or radio, but with the kind detail you'll find in print. This is the unique proposition of online as a journalistic medium. Online media is a digital medium, featuring text, audio and video all in one. Expect video and audio broadcasts of the next election to happen online as well as on your TV and radio sets.

But internet in this country is a medium criticised as being too niche. Five-million users represent just under 10% of the population and we know why:

Internet is expensive and not affordable to all. Although five million users is nothing to sniff at – it's double the size of the population of the Republic of Ireland and equivalent to the size of Norway's population -- but is certainly underperforming in this country if you consider the potential.

While it's important to look at the realities, I'm not going to dwell on these figures, because soon they will be irrelevant.

We are in the midst of an unstoppable digital revolution. Soon the internet will be a way of life and the potential is staggering. We know the internet is on course for massive growth and will be cheap and ubiquitous, accessed by a range of converged digital devices – not just your desktop PC, it'll be your cellphone, camera even your fridge or microwave. It's a question of when, not if. In this country we are seeing a rollout of broadband and there is a downward pressure on internet costs. Add to this the new competition in the Telco sector, and it is no secret that it's boom time for the online medium.

If you are still sceptical, then consider the potential of the mobile web: that is of course websites accessed via mobile phones. Many big online media players now have mobile editions. (If you'll excuse this shameless punt you can access Mail & Guardian Online's mobile site by smsing mg to 32368 or visiting [m.mg.co.za](http://m.mg.co.za) to get an idea of what I am talking about.) Given high cellphone penetration rates, the relative cheapness of mobile internet connectivity and that there are more than 32-million cellphone users in the country, mobile media is potentially a very mass, and very influential medium. In many countries this is already a no-brainer. For sometime in Japan – where their present is the rest of the world's future -- more than 70% of web access happens via mobile phones, not desktop PCs.

If you still need to be convinced of the future of this medium, consider this: At the end of last year, worldwide mobile phone subscriptions reached 3.3-billion users or half the world's population. Compare this to older mediums such as television (about 1,5-billion viewers), newspapers (1,4-billion paid readers) or desktop internet usage (about 1,1-billion users) -- and it is not hard to see why

there is so much excitement about the potential of the mobile web. The web on mobile phones has the potential to be a truly mass medium, cutting through the cost and mobility constraints of desktop web access. And who knows, maybe one day, voting for our next president may be as easy as a touch of a button on our mobile phones?

The internet of course is not just a tool for media, but also for politicians. We just have to turn our heads across the Atlantic to see how the web is being used in the US elections. Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are campaigning online heavily. These savvy politicians have their own Facebook groups and profiles, are represented on You Tube (Obama has racked up more than 11-million You Tube views and is by far the most popular candidate online). You'll find these politicians also on Twitter, My Space, LinkedIn, Flickr – you name it, they are there creating their own online networks. The battle for the hearts and minds of the electorate is being waged as much online as it is in the real world. Here at home, during local government elections a few years back, we were one of the few countries where our political leaders blogged their campaigns. (For example, readers got to know the intricacies and personal sides of De Lille, Bantu Holomisa and Tony Leon's campaigns). Mail & Guardian Online readers loved it, and it's a success we'd love to replicate again. In fact it's arguable that our president has been the country's biggest blogger for some time -- it's just that he hasn't been doing it on a blog! Of course I'm referring to President Mbeki's erstwhile weekly ANC Today email newsletter.

But more importantly, the web is not just a tool for media or politicians, but a medium for voters, the electorate -- or the people we in the media like to call "the audience". Unlike traditional mediums the internet is highly democratized. This last point I think is crucial as it talks about an important phenomenon on the web: the rise of citizen media, including bloggers, podcasters vodcasters, or users of social media sites that create interpersonal networks via Facebook (social networking), Digg or our local Muti.co.za (these are social bookmarking sites).

At the core of this phenomenon is the fact internet has made it easy and cheap to create and distribute content -- and that is a profoundly democratic thing. Anyone can blog or set up a Facebook group promoting their favourite politician or cause and command an audience and play their part in influencing the vote – it costs nothing to do.

This revolution by the audience has caused traditional media to do quite a bit of soul-searching because now they realise they no longer have exclusive monopoly over publishing or broadcasting. The audience is playing in media's own backyard – any individual can blog, commentate or report, just like a journalist.

Now let me stop right here for a minute -- I'm painfully aware of a contradiction here. I am on the one hand evangelising about this "democratic medium" which is levelling the playing field and making media accessible, but on the other hand it's accessible only to elites and "the haves". I'm often accused of being a "technological determinist" when speaking about this, but I think this criticism misses the point. When I talk about these trends I am not advocating an immediate panacea for the digital divisions that face us, but I am talking about an emerging long-term trend that will eventually see the internet and the information economy being more accessible as the digital revolution marches on.

There's evidence all around us: Some influential individual bloggers worldwide are commanding audiences bigger than entire newspaper outfits. Bloggers are influencing purchasing decisions and opinions when people search on Google for advice on what they should buy – or perhaps who they should vote for. For example, I don't read traditional media exclusively anymore, but I read blogs too. And by the way, I am not just a media practitioner but a blogger myself at my own blog: [matthewbuckland.com](http://matthewbuckland.com)

Savvy media recognise that, rather than gnashing teeth and wailing at the emergence of this micro-publishing movement, they need to work hand-in-hand. It's made media and publishing more democratic and ensured a

plurality and diversity of views – and that’s a good thing. It’s a segment of “new media” that we should be taking seriously. It’s no fad or hype. It’s a phenomenon created by the internet and its here to stay.

In the US elections four years ago, bloggers were invited to cover the elections alongside journalists -- and it’s something I urge the Independent Electoral Commission to consider too: extend an invitation to local and international bloggers to come alongside accredited media to cover the elections together with media. What could be more democratic than that?