

## LOST IN TRANSLATION: ELECTION POSTER VIEWING AND OTHER MEMORIES

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**Margaret Linström\***

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Elections – as a journalist I’ve covered a few. Predictably the most memorable one was on 27 April 1994. I was a radio news journalist at the SABC and I was dispatched to my home town, Upington, to tell the story of how democracy was eventually reaching this forgotten part of our country. I drew my cross in Kanoneiland, home to a small community on the largest inland island in the Orange River.

Although I was a citizen, voting for a dream long cherished, I was also a journalist armed with an ancient Marantz, recording the voices of those for whom it would be their first time. I approached a small group of men and women, the women wearing bleached head scarves, their faces heavily lined by many years in the unforgiving Northern Cape sun. When I asked them how they felt, they laughed shyly, and turned away. I remember being told in a primary school history lesson that Kanoneiland got its name from the days when Koranna river pirates, under the leadership of Klaas Pofadder, used the island as a hideout. In 1879 the island was attacked by 80 policemen, using a small cannon. The Korannas responded by building their own cannon from a hollow aloe stem. They loaded it with gunpowder but when fired, it exploded and killed six Koranna. I wondered if any of Klaas Pofadder descendants still lived on the island, and if on this historic day, they thought back on how he surely would have relished it as much as they hopefully were.

Our election day had started before dawn in Paballelo – home to the Upington 26. I recalled the day in 1985 when, at a soccer field near the entrance to the township, a large group of demonstrators had gathered. In the next few hours, a policeman, Jetta Sethwala, would be chased into the street by the angry mob and be beaten to death. Fifty-four people were held, 26 were charged, and 14 people were sentenced to death for Sethwala’s killing. They were all eventually released. We’d been warned not to go into Paballelo but it was peaceful, with friendly people thronging the streets.

The only drama of this historic election had happened the previous night while I was filing stories for the next day’s early morning news bulletins and the lights went out. The doomsayers had been predicting the worse, and when this happened they probably smiled in satisfaction, whipped out their torches and slunk off to their secret cupboards lined with emergency supplies. Their happiness was short-lived, though, because all it

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\* Margaret Linström is a veteran journalist with 25 years experience in broadcast and print journalism. She is a Fellow of the Poynter Institute, and lectures in the Department of Communication Science at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein.

turned out to be was an inquisitive wild cat which had taken a short stroll through an electrical sub-station, plunging the whole town into darkness. Was it a case of the damp squib or the dead cat?

Sadly that was my last election out in the field. After that I worked as a bulletin producer, compiling news bulletins in the safe but frenetic confines of a newsroom, and later as a news editor frantically trying to keep all the balls up in the air. Which brings me to the 2009 elections: since the previous elections I had moved from the adrenaline driven world of hard news to the more sedate world of magazine journalism. This meant that for the first time I was an outsider, experiencing the run-up to an election as many South Africans do – from the comfort of their cars with one eye catching election posters plastered on lampposts.

To amuse myself I began poster viewing (much like the Japanese go cherry blossom viewing in Tokyo, with the difference that I did not have a poster viewing party – it's a thought, though) and this election did not disappoint. Friends and colleagues who heard about my post-hard news fixation kindly took to e-mailing me photos of their favourite posters, and thus I built up a mini-archive.

Though it started out as a bit of a joke among friends, I soon realised that there is something more behind this, and that our comments and observations actually pointed out what might be an inherent communication problem that could – and in some instances probably already did – unwittingly damage a political party's campaign, or image. Or both.

While discussing agenda-setting with my first-year journalism students, I realised what the problem was: The intended messages that political parties want to convey with their posters are in many cases lost in translation, if you want, by the "other" messages screaming from the posters. And in most cases, these screamers are far removed from politics or any serious business.

The most baffling of the poster bunch came from Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, and the party involved the Universal Party. The face on the poster was one of a bewildered looking fellow, his arms spread in a welcoming gesture, much like that famously irritating television shrink, Dr Phil. The poster was cluttered with writing but it's "The Good Shepherd" in the bottom right hand corner which really threw me. Are they claiming some Divine intervention? Would a vote for the Universal Party get you straight into heaven?

And it's not just the smaller or relatively unknown parties that got it wrong. The Democratic Alliance (DA) boasted heavenly blue posters with Helen Zille's puffy post-Botox face and perfectly coiffed hair. The words "Vote to win" under Helen's photoshopped face begs the question, win what? A date with Helen? (I digress, but wasn't the sight of Helen toying at election gatherings the most comical sight you've seen in a while? The Young Communist League likened her to a mosquito). Now we all know Helen but who were the other people on the DA posters? On my way to work each day I was confronted by the sight of a man with a big white smile. This unnamed fellow gave me a slight jolt every time I spotted him smiling down at me. I asked around, but no one knew who it was. Some assumed that was "some person working for the DA". Maybe Helen's PA? I presume he was simply the poster boy for

the DA – the Generic DA Man – which would make sense since he was a lovely politically correct cappuccino colour.

Then there was the poster of the African National Congress (ANC): “Working together we can do more” poster. In Bloemfontein one of these was planted in a large pothole in the middle of a suburban street and the wording changed to “... can do more *damage*”.

The Freedom Front Plus’s (FF+) poster sported Pieter Mulder with an enigmatic grin. The words took the cake, though. “Ons staan op vir jou regte.” (We stand up for your rights.) Any Afrikaans speaker would tell you that it actually should be “Ons staan vir jou regte”. The badly placed *op* sounds positively phallic, and one wonders exactly how excited one can become about the FF+?

In KwaZulu-Natal, animals seemed to be big. From Durban came Amichand Rashbansi and the Minority Front’s “Vote for the Tiger”. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) had Daddy, Mommy and Baby elephant on its posters. Other IFP posters featured the face of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, with the slogan “The Tried and Tested Alternative”. Sounds a bit like a washing powder ad to me. To add insult to injury, Buthelezi’s orange shirt with the elephant motif looked suspiciously like the overalls worn by inmates.

The election poster which took shoddiness to new levels was the one of the Pan Africanist Movement’s Thami ka Plaatjie. Whatever the message was, it was completely overshadowed out by two glaring spelling mistakes: “movemmmnt” and “canell”.

Which brings me to my last question: Why can’t our politicians even get the basics right? One should think that months and months’ worth of exposure to Barack Obama’s impeccably designed campaign should have rubbed off somewhere. The success of that campaign was in part built on a poster, featuring Barack Obama looking upward and outward, above the word “Hope”. Created by street artist Shepard Fairey, the image became one of the most widely recognised symbols of Obama’s campaign message. Soon the iconic image was everywhere – on walls, on bumper stickers, on clothing, in home windows, on the Internet and under people’s e-mail signatures. Obama’s campaign set new standards, using everything from social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, to SMS.

Media philosopher Marshall McLuhan’s sometimes strange ideas have been criticised often, but one cannot help to think that in instances such as these the medium really is the message. Fact is, the message remains the core of any communication activity. And getting the wrong message across is far more catastrophic than not getting the message across at all. If political parties in South Africa want to attract a new generation of voters, they’ll have to think fresh and new and harness technology... or die trying.

