Abstract
This poster reflects the increase in public awareness of the SAAO through media coverage and highlights the measures implemented by the SAAO to enhance public visits over the period 2002 to 2006.

Introduction
On 1 June 1998 the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology announced in Parliament that the South African Government would fund 50% of the total cost of the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT). While SALT is an inexpensive project by international standards, it was a huge undertaking for South Africa. The level of commitment to astronomy was such that much was expected in return. SALT stakeholders met in September 2000 to give shape to the goal of using the construction of SALT as a vehicle for educational, industrial and regional empowerment. The outcome was the SALT Collateral Benefits Programme. Developing the collateral benefits in parallel with the telescope and its instruments has been a major thrust at the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) over the last six years.

Media coverage
It became clear very early on that the tremendous interest in the progress of SALT among the media could be utilised for public awareness. Over this period under discussion, the main interaction with the press was through 133 press releases and numerous interviews for both print and broadcast media.

Although the SAAO subscribed to a local news service to monitor the extent of print media from very early in the SALT construction phase, it was only for 2005 and 2006 that this news service monitored broadcast media. All statistics of earlier broadcast media were reported by staff members who conducted interviews with both radio and television stations. The dramatic increase in 2005 reflects the high profile reached by the inauguration of SALT by the South African President Thabo Mbeki.

A media company was specifically employed to coordinate all media coverage around First Light and the inauguration of SALT. Special interventions were made to package the complex science matter for all target audiences, ranging from scientists and politicians to learners in rural areas.
For the launch event in November 2005, national and international media were accredited and transported to SALT. A media centre was set up in a nearby telescope dome overlooking SALT, to enable media to stream audio and video footage of the inauguration and President Mbeki’s tour of SALT live to national and international audiences. For these efforts, the SALT media campaign received the Public Relations Institute of South Africa’s PRISM Awards for Best Media Relations.

Public outreach

The direct effect of the media exposure had a dramatic impact on visitor numbers to the SAAO, in particular to Sutherland.

The SAAO Cape Town hosts a monthly open night at its headquarters at the observatory. These open nights are conducted by astronomers living on the SAAO site. Day visitors are accommodated on an ad hoc basis. The public is often invited to the SAAO to observe special astronomical occurrences and these events are always very well attended.
In Sutherland, the SAAO operated three scheduled day tours per week by the start of the period under review. These tours were conducted by volunteer staff, working at the observing site for the particular week. By the end of the period under review, the Sutherland day tours had increased to 2 tours per day, Monday to Saturday and tour guides are employed to conduct tours. More tours are soon to be implemented to keep pace with the increased influx of visitors. Night tours were instituted in late 2004, as reflected in the above chart. These were initially conducted by observers. Today, the SAAO operates four night tours per week conducted by trained tour guides.

In order to enrich the visitors’ experience in Sutherland, the existing technical building was converted to a dedicated Visitor Centre. The astronomical exhibits were designed to take visitors to the edge of space and time by comparing with contemporaneous events in the fossil record. By 2006 the SAAO had also invested in two dedicated telescopes for visitors.

**Conclusion**

The SAAO has been able to develop a close relationship with specific science journalists to enhance media exposure of astronomical events. This will be vital in the build up to the International Year of Astronomy. The success of such a campaign will be evident in the increasing streams of visitors to the SAAO.

**References**

- Buckley et al. (2005), Africa’s Giant Eye: Building the Southern African Large Telescope. SALT Foundation, Observatory