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Defining the Public Interest – The SABC as a Public Broadcaster

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Tawana Kupe

The SABC as a Public Broadcaster: Between a Rock and a Hard Place?

The Public Interest

- Embodies the National Interest but is not reducible to it and is not to be conflated with it.
- What is in the public interest is in the national interest but what is in the national interest is not always in the public interest.
- *With regard to communications and the media claims by politicians that some information is not in the national interest can often turn out to be an attempt to avoid transparency and accountability would be inconvenient for their positions.*
- Analytically it is not useful to make a strict dichotomy.
- The Public Interest is definitely broader than the national interest in that it speaks to and reflects the values that no single social organization or individual or entity can claim sole ownership of.
- The Public Interest embodies values of justice and equality which individuals and groups seek to attain and engage in struggles to achieve.
- The National Interest is often the interests and values appropriate by particular groups in their attempts to achieve hegemonic domination in a society.
- Consequently the National Interest can often be a narrow set of justifications, policy choices and strategies of implementation that undermine the public interest. Particularly at times when there are internal divisions within dominant forces or external threats/challenges.
- *With regard to questions of security especially national security the National Interest can often be used as a cover to undermine civil liberties including curtailing freedom of expression and of the media.*
- A genuine Public Broadcaster is therefore the best communicative and discursive space for advancing the Public Interest

'Public Service Broadcasting is a Value and a Practice'

- A Public Service Broadcaster delivers programmes to audiences *as citizens*.
- A Commercial Broadcaster delivers audiences *as consumers* to advertisers.

Defining public broadcasting in the 21st century is a difficult exercise because the broadcasting environment and practices have changed as result of political, economic, cultural and technological changes. These changes are also true of Africa especially since the early 1990s where the 'liberalisation' of broadcasting has ushered in an era of not only new privately owned broadcasters but a predominately commercially driven process of transformation of the broadcasting environment and state broadcasters. The commercially lead process is in itself a result of economic policy choices that have both an internal source and an international dimension.

The World Radio and Television Council (2000) define public service broadcasting thus:

Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting's only *raison d'etre* is public service. It is the public's broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.

Arising out of these statements or attempts at definitions the following can be which contributes to a full definition and begins to map out indicators.

- A Public broadcaster is a means to constitute public communicative space free from political and commercial control. In other words it acts as an open public sphere for debate and discussion.
- A Public broadcaster is central to satisfying a range of public information and communication needs in a holistic manner on the broadest possible range of issues and topics.
- A Public broadcaster is a means to represent society in all its complexity as a way of facilitating on a continuing basis desired social goals including promoting freedom of expression and other universal human rights.
- A Public broadcaster should address the public as citizens who have rights, duties and responsibilities.
- A Public broadcaster broadcasting must allow for multiple communicators across the social spectrum without privileging some voices over others.

- A Public broadcaster is an important platform for representing and circulating in *the public sphere* a plurality and diversity of views representing different ideas about the management of society's affairs.
- A Public broadcaster must allow ample room for horizontal (dialogic) and meaningful feedback or interactivity in a society.
- A Public broadcaster requires funding which is consistent with its nature is a public service and critically one that does not negate its distinctness and identity.
- A Public broadcaster is also an agency for reaching consensus and reasoned disagreements (as opposed to promoting violent upheaval) in a society which can further sustainable democracy and development.

'Our SABC, Your SABC' 'The Pulse of Africa's Creative Spirit'

- A media organisation commanding the largest audiences in South Africa and therefore the closest to a communications medium reaching and accessed by all South Africans or the broadest possible public.
- This it demonstrated that it can play the commercial game and deliver significant profits! Its annual report is titled 'A Successful Year'!
- In its radio services it best approximates the constitutional imperative to use all the 11 official languages and therefore has the potential to advance multilingualism and multiculturalism which in turn promotes diversity - a core value of democracy.
- In some geographic areas the only source of regular information and entertainment
- Has some talented some talented award winning journalists and competent managers who are sometimes poached by commercial competitors and the communications sector broadly.
- Has made some notable attempts to advance and give space to creative programmes that explore South African society in a post apartheid context through filming and producing locally made programmes.
- Makes attempts to contribute to nation building, national pride and well as socio-economic development.
- An economic asset to South Africa as a significant employer, a tax paying entity, a marketing channel for goods and services and through its own procurement of goods and services (including buying from empowerment companies)
- Makes an attempt to contribute to the renewal of the Africa continent through its SABC Africa services thereby seeking to transcend nationalism by mobilising a broader African public although this sometimes comes through as arrogant and cheeky as most of the programme is often representations of South Africa as Africa. A commendable effort given that the BBCs and CNNs also practice the same notion by producing African programmes like Inside Africa.

Reluctant and Lumbering Giant?

Lacking in Confidence and Independence?

- Despite all these factors The SABC comes across a reluctant and lumbering giant.
- Despite the successful year in commercial terms it has also been a year of management turbulence in which the SABC produces news but is also in the news itself for all the wrong reasons.
- *An institution or organization which has yet to attain its confidence and independent status that could underpin all of its programming in particular news and current affairs.* It seems to be in defensive mode unable to convincingly ride out controversies. Instead controversies often consume its energies and fuel a print media feeding frenzy which creates an image of a rudderless ness and compromised news values.
- Its corporate affairs department has the position of a spokesperson something which surely should be unnecessary because its PR should be automatically done by producing as the SABC claims 'compelling programming'!
- It's funding (an eclectic mix of advertising (dominant), licensee fee and public grants) model is at best problematic despite the euphoria about this year's results which are a result of the consumer boom rather what the SABC does. *At worst it plain wrong and everyone including the ruling party agrees.* But it seems no one wants to rectify that quickly. The problematic funding model is one of the sources of its identity crisis which affects its ownership, management, programming and the way it addresses its audience largely as consumers rather citizens who are consumers. The funding issue is then at the heart of its failure to operate in the public interest.
- Does not enjoy the levels of support it should from the public (most people do not bother to pay the license fee) because the public is skeptical of its status. There is no vocal support to public representatives about a different model. The SABC itself hardly ever lobbies the public for support for a higher no strings attached public grant.
- The government and ruling party despite their expectation that the SABC do more to deliver on its public mandate including political and cultural imperatives to cover more developmental issues and use all the local languages and promote South African culture, identity and creativity are in no hurry about a different funding model.

Ownership

'The Shareholder' - who is that?

- Part of the crisis and lack of confidence is that it is not clear who owns the SABC. Legalistically speaking it is all of the South African public. But substantively some owners have more shares than others! It is also well known in media that it is the piper who calls the tune! In terms of the legislation especially after corporatisation the SABC has a 100% shareholder who is the government presumably in trust for the public. But also the dominant source of revenue comes from advertising presumably they are shareholders too. The government exercises its shareholder role through the Department of Communications
- This shareholding structure is problematic and potentially and actually opens the SABC to direct and indirect undue influences from powerful political and economic interests which undermines its independence and the public interest.
- How so? It creates a situation where the Board, managers, producers and journalists can pander to these interests.
- It is bad for the government because it creates a reasonable suspicion that there is government control and a return to the dark days of apartheid if not worse as *BusinessDay* claimed in an editorial two weeks ago.
- It skews accountability towards the government instead of 'citizens' i.e. people who have rights and duties that they can only exercise if they have access to communicative resources and information.
- Public therefore feels no obligation or duty to pay the license fee. No sense of ownership.

Governance

'Deployed Cadres'?

Strictly speaking the SABC board has been constituted accordingly to the procedures i.e. the board was selected through a public nomination process where theoretically all South Africans of good standing had a chance. The nominations were processed by a multi party committee of parliament. The President then appointed the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson according to the Act.

There is however a perception that is reflected in particularly the print media that the Board is linked or influenced by the ANC or at worst ANC people who have been deployed to the SABC as part of a strategy to capture critical institutions and use them to serve the ANC's project of hegemonic domination of the South African society. Such perceptions arise in part because some of the key members of the Board are self declared ANC party members and the parliamentary portfolio committee at the SABC is ANC dominated in itself a reflection of the dominance of the ANC in parliament. It must be remembered that the ANC attained this dominance

through a free and fair election accepted by all as such despite some grumbling including initial SABC coverage and now the controversy over the Imvume donation in which the Public Protector and Parliament have cleared PetroSA. It is also a reflection that many adults of any significant stature in South African given its history would have an anti apartheid background and are likely to have been part of the ANC r allied organisations.

The problem perhaps is not that they are ANC but that there perceptions that the Board either formulates policy especially with regard to news and current affairs that seek to privilege the voices of the ANC government and to exclude or marginalise voices of the opposition and that of civil society formations that are critical of the ANC or have alternative policies.

It is also alleged that the Board is highly interventionist and goes beyond policy making and oversight into day to day management especially often on editorial issues including news selection.

However it appears that the Board is not keen to actively engage its critics and dispel perceptions, rumours of being a conduit for ANC/government pressure and undue influence. The Board might have a point in deciding to ignore such critics if such perceptions and rumours have no basis in fact and to get on with the job. But in matters to do with public broadcasting and the media that might be a miscalculation because the public has not forgotten the not distant past when the SABC was a crude instrument of propaganda in the hands of the National Party and that there is an extra vigilance driven by the slogan never again. The Board might also be misreading the depth of feeling and range of its critics by thinking its just the DA, armchair university professors, etv, the print media, Rhoda Kadalie and some like her! The Board needs to understand that engaging its critics is part of its public accountability role. The Board is there in representative capacity representing all South Africans and needs to constantly. I am not here ignoring the fact that the Board also travels around different centres to meet the public.

Management

A Game of Musical Chairs?

While its is true that there is no one management model that is natural to a public broadcaster it is also true that certain forms of management are inappropriate to public broadcaster and often undermine its public service mandate. The SABC must be managed in ways that ensure both *viability* and *sustainability* which will lead to delivery of public service programming. Viability and sustainability for a public broadcaster cannot be determined by commercial indicators alone. A management system designed for a private corporation or state operated enterprise is likely to undermine the political and cultural imperatives necessary for the democratic empowerment of

citizens looking for equality and justice. It is not an exaggeration that the SABC management model and practices are a commercial clone and that there is management instability leading to the failure to plan for long term sustainability and viability in the political, cultural and economic sense. The SABC tends to in perpetual management restructuring mode which consumes a lot of resources towards consultancies!

What is the evidence of management instability? *First*, it is a well known fact that the CEOs' position has been occupied by more than three people in 10 years and that the CEOs except one did not quite complete their terms or even renew them and focus on long term deliverables. Denials that they were pushed have not been convincing. In the case of the last CEO it is rather puzzling that he left in year when he appears to have been successful in implementing a financial turnaround strategy which for the first time might allow the corporation to focus its energies on actually delivering 'compelling programming'. *Second*, the News Division one of the most critical division of any public broadcaster has also suffered leadership instability including long periods in which positions have not been filled and people are in acting position. Leading the news division is a most sensitive position and one of immense public responsibility and trust. It requires the incumbent to occupy the position for a considerable length of time so that s/he can develop and nurture a news division that has deeply ingrained in what they do the values of editorial independence and integrity that are long lasting and give a specific identity to public broadcaster.

Third, it appears also that each time there is change at Board level management instability enters a new phase with departure of key executives one after the other leaving the Executive depleted. To be sure some people leave genuinely and have a right to leave but this also contributes to management instability which translates into a poor implementation of the public mandate and loss of institutional memory. It is also rather strange that people leave the SABC to be marketers. One would have thought that a position at the SABC is a coveted and prestigious one in which takes life long pride in.

Fourth, the SABC often takes long to fill key positions. This is strange because it implies that the corporation can do without these positions! Often then Acting appointments are made by people who in the end do not take up the position!

Programming

- **Claims to deliver compelling programming but what is the record:**

News and Current Affairs – Is it Minister and Sunshine Journalism?

- Claim: The division has concluded a *strategic shift from event driven to issue- driven diaries*, and the culture of *editorial independence and authoritativeness* has been *firmly established*.
- Its news and current affairs programming is not yet a well horned product demonstrating a sensitivity and awareness to the unique challenges facing post apartheid South Africa and Africa in the 21st century. These intertwined challenges are sustaining, promoting and deepening democratisation, socio-economic development and globalisation in all its dimensions including the cultural.
 - Its news and current affairs output is quantitatively limited. Most severely so in the current affairs and investigative programmes. To be sure there is an attempt to dramatically increase output. The main news bulletin is 30mins of advertising laden programme! Excluding time taken by ads and the weather it is barely 20mins or feels like 20mins. Some of the adverts like the dancing mice and cats reduce its importance into something akin to the SABC News singing for its supper!
 - Qualitatively the SABC News needs to address how it frames issues and as well how it makes intricate careful thought out balances in giving access to different voices across the social spectrum as it grapples with all these issues. It needs to ask the difficult question to what extent are the range of issues and voices representative (and not only in the demographic sense but also in terms of gender, ideology, class and geographic location).
 - The poor framing of issues has led to charges that SABC news has become 'minister and sunshine journalism'. The problem perhaps is not that there is a parade of ministers and officials political news is often has a significant focus on politicians and officials it is how they are framed. An event or speech occasion without politicians being asked to explain themselves is poor news judgement. The significance of a politician's speech is both what they say, how they say it and what they choose not say. The job of journalist is to probe all these aspects!
 - In fact the real problem is the relative absence of senior politicians including the President on a regular basis being asked to explain a range of issues from economic policy to service delivery blockages in ways that could be understood by the broadest range of South Africans across the social spectrum.
 - The SABC is going on as if the Zuma Controversy is a series of isolated incidents and has not done much probing and high level open ongoing debate programmes. Yet the matter is so serious the President has accused his own political allies and comrades of rumour mongering and character assassination.

- With regard to class and ideology the SABC needs to balance elite interests with the interests of those struggling to become part of the mainstream of economic and social life e.g. those most vulnerable to poverty, underemployment and unemployment and who are yet to experience and take for granted the social gains of democracy.
- With regard to geography the News bulletins have an urban bias that does not give one a sense of South Africa even then it is too much of Pretoria and Johannesburg something of Cape Town? Is Cape Town just parliament, burning shacks, whales and accidents on Table Mountain and shenanigans at the City Offices? What do the regional bureaus really contribute?
- It also fails to adequately cover science, technology including Information and Communications Technology, mathematics yet we have deficit in these areas.
- News bulletins have an overall feel of being about passing events that momentarily disturb the peace. They lack a hierarchy of significance.
- Consequently news bulletins have yet to congeal into events that signify significant social processes and amount knowledge that can citizens can use to participate in democratisation, socio-economic development, self awareness and identity building.
- One cannot identify in the output taken as a whole, an ethos or editorial framework or strategy that is distinctly SABC, South African and African and competes with other frameworks in the rest of the world.
- It appears also that the News and Current Affairs Division is also dangerously under resourced apart from its now well known instability with regard to duration of the stay of leaders and journalists. It lacks a mix in its editorial staff of experienced, mature journalists who can tackle complex topics and senior politicians from a position of confidence, knowledge and independence.
- Related to this lack of seniority seems to be a lack of depth in skills particularly journalists with specialist knowledge of specific subjects/topics/issues who can confidently hold their own against politicians, officials, experts and analysts.
- While it has some excellent stations (e.g. SAFM, Metro) and programmes (e.g. Special Assignment, Fokus) this has not necessarily translated into a brand that exudes editorial excellence that promotes the public interest.

Cultural and Educational Programming

Who pays the piper calls the tune?

- An imbalance and inequitable use of African languages across programme genres
- A commercially driven interpretation of local content which short changes its mandate to advance South African culture through creativity. The Apprentice, The Weakest Link!
- A smug self promotion campaigns designed more to outsmart its 'small' commercial competitors, which demonstrates its lack of understanding of its own positioning in the broadcasting landscape but a realisation that it is also to a large extent a commercial broadcaster which delivers some public service broadcasting!
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- There is a drift towards celebrity driven talk shows where sometimes it's the celebrity rather than the issues that take centre stage.
- Its screening of locally made movies relegates them to late night or a ghetto.

Way Forward – Making the SABC into a Genuine Public Broadcaster

- **Fire Dr Snuki Zikalala – NO! If Dr Zikalala is so strong the question is why are we so weak not to insist on genuine public service news?**
- **Fire Advocate Dali Mpofu the Group CEO because he is a manager neither a broadcaster nor a journalist! NO Leave Advocate Mpofu alone to learn about broadcasting journalism and then to his repertoire of management skills.**
- **Fire the Board they are ANC plants - NO! Make them even more accountable to the public through a range of reporting mechanisms even if it means an amendment to the Act.**

Seriously

- A genuine public broadcaster is *confident, independent, sustainable, viable and accountable*

- It has a flagship News and Current Affairs Division which sets journalistic standards for all the news media, that are driven by editorial independence and integrity which eschews bias, partiality and instead upholds 'objectivity' by respecting facts and is not afraid
- For its confidence and independence the SABC should draw more strongly from the Constitution Section 16, The Broadcasting Act as amended, IBA/ICASA Act and ICASA as an independent regulator.
- For its unequivocal editorial independence from government and powerful political and social interests it needs to strengthen its capacity to report fairly, objectively, impartially and access the broadest possible range of views from across the institutional and social spectrum in South Africa and Africa.
- For its independence from economic and commercial interests it needs a new appropriate funding model with public funding is a no strings attached core preferably voted for by parliament and granted and guaranteed for 5 year terms to ensure certainty and enable long term planning.
- Its needs board that is protective of its independence taking its from the Constitution and legislation and accountable to the public.
- More report back mechanisms and reviews of controversial editorial decisions will increase levels of accountability which are critical to public broadcasting.
- Accountability should *first* and *foremost* is to the public as citizens and is to be achieved principally by making programming decisions based on editorial independence and integrity.