

## **“Newsroom culture and democracy: The dilemma of the new SABC”**

Speaker: Anton Harber  
Caxton Professor of Journalism & Media Studies, University of the Witwatersrand

Respondent: Aubrey Matshiqi  
Senior Associate Political Analyst at the Centre for Policy Studies

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### **SUMMARY NOTES**

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Dr AnnMarie Wolpe welcomed the speakers and the audience to the dialogue. Dr Wolpe introduced the topic for discussion by mentioning the threat that political influences may pose for the media, and the pressing need to safeguard our hard-won freedom of the press in South Africa.

#### **ANTON HARBER**

I must be a fool.

SABC CEO Dali Mpofu said last week: “Show me an editor in any media organization who can ignore counsel from three independent lawyers and proceed to flight a defamatory documentary on the president, and I will show you a fool.”

Here I am, Advocate Mpofu. I have published many times after lawyers have spelt out to me the risks of defamation, and, given the chance, would continue to do so. That is because editors know that there is a crucial difference between legal advice and the decision to publish. The former is offered by lawyers and carefully considered by wise editors; the latter is made by editors weighing up this advice against other factors, such as the public’s right to know.

If editors did not publish anything that lawyers say is per se defamatory, they will publish hardly anything. Editorial organizations which hand over these decisions to lawyers are those with fundamentally conservative and cautious publishing approach to news. In fact, one way to gauge the culture of a news organization is to describe its relationship with its lawyers.

We learnt this during the 1980s, when the mainstream media, after two decades of intense state pressure and facing a myriad of restrictive laws, fell into a habit of self-censorship by routinely declining to publish what lawyers said was risky. One of the critical changes brought by the emergence of the alternative press was to change the way of operating: we were not interested in lawyers telling us what we could not publish; we wanted them to either tell us the risk, or tell us how to overcome it, but we took the decisions away from their chambers back to newsrooms.

It is a question of practice and attitude. Just as we had to challenge the newsroom practices of the 1980s in order to challenge the culture of self-censorship, so the

SABC has a need to develop practices and attitudes appropriate to a national public broadcaster.

This leads one to the central question: why is it that you can put in place all the appropriate structures and policies for a national broadcaster, and still see the SABC regularly run headlong into controversy over its editorial practices and output?

The SABC's independence and its obligation to serve the public good is written into law, and the institutions of state are obliged to protect it, even promote it. The SABC has a board appointed by parliament through a public process and empowered to run the organization at arm's length from the state. It has, also after lengthy public debate, developed an Editorial Charter that one can quibble with but which is fundamentally sound. If you read its core values, based on our national Constitution, and the full gamut of the organisation's published policies on a range of editorial subjects, it is not easy to find serious fault.

Why then does it stumble from crisis after crisis related to its relationship with the government and the ruling party? Why is the SABC's news and current affairs so poor, so dull, and so lopsided? Why are these elaborate structures and worthy documents failing? I think that the answer lies in the news values and culture which permeate the organization.

What do I mean by this? Newsrooms have to be equipped to make serious and significant decisions quickly and effectively. They operate under strict deadlines, they cover running stories, which by nature are unpredictable and controversial, and they are flooded every hour with millions of words, thousands of pictures and a myriad of interest groups lobbying for attention.

In the midst of this, they have to make the toughest editorial and ethical decisions which may have major impact on society and individuals, so there is a great deal of pressure to make appropriate decisions. These relate to the full range of the editorial process: deciding which of the thousands of potential events and stories that present themselves each day to pursue; deciding how to do it and what resources to throw at them; what picture, quotes, information and graphics are needed; when the story is ready to run; how it is to be edited and presented; and so on.

To cope with this demand, and to expedite such decisions, newsrooms develop certain practices and procedures, which coalesce into a newsroom culture. This culture is critical in shaping these decisions and their outcomes.

This culture is most commonly expressed in the concept of "newsworthiness". Journalists like to think that they develop a nose for news, an instinct for what is important, relevant and appropriate for their audience. They like to think that there is something intrinsically newsworthy about an event that determines that they should cover it, and a set of immutable and global norms and practices which determine how they do it.

That is, of course, a myth. Newsworthiness and the practices that surround it change from time to time and circumstance to circumstance; there may be certain patterns but different individuals and organizations, facing the same set of events in a day, will make different choices as to what is important and how to approach it.

And that is the way it should be. Different media outlets have different roles, audiences, owners and priorities and this is part of the diversity we value and nurture. We want and expect the *Mail & Guardian* to make different editorial decisions to *The*

*Argus* or the SABC. It is not just that they have different owners and audiences, but that they have different values and different social and political roles. A cheeky weekly should not have the same news values as a national public broadcaster.

I think that a newsroom culture is often best demonstrated by the questions an editor asks when presented with a decision on a story. At the *M&G*, you might typically expect an editor to ask: what does this add to the information already carried in other media, is this thought-provoking and surprising, is it going to make our reader sit up and gasp? At *Business Day*, the question might be a lot simpler: does this interest business executives? If not, it is out; if so, it is in. At the *Daily Sun*, they have in the centre of the newsroom a mannequin in blue overalls. They would ask: would this man part with R1.40 to know this? A women's magazine or motoring editor might ask: will this offend my advertisers? But the same question would be taboo in other newsrooms.

Each of these questions reflect a different set of values and norms, and each of them will produce a different set of views as to what is newsworthy or how a story should be pursued and portrayed. The *M&G* might run a story precisely because it is going to get up the nose of business leaders; *Business Day* might withhold, or at least run differently, the same story precisely because they don't want to get up those noses.

Or another example: one media outlet might encourage reporters to doorstep someone in the news, shove a camera in their face and force them to respond; others might consider this an intrusion of that person's privacy and inappropriate behaviour. In one case, the reporter will be rewarded for doing it, in the other he or she would be punished. It is not a question of right or wrong, as both are – under certain circumstances – appropriate professional behaviour. It is a question of different practices and norms, different values, different views of the role of the media in the world.

I have not done and know of no systematic examination of the newsroom culture at the SABC. But I do interact with a lot of working journalists there and have at the very least an informed impression of the operation. And it is this: the SABC has a culture of trepidation and nervousness; a bureaucratic watch-your-back atmosphere in which to survive you need to avoid trouble, keep your head low, and above all don't be provocative. The question that is asked, above all else, by SABC editors is this: will this story offend anyone in authority, either in their Auckland Park building or beyond? Will it create a stir among those in power, both in the SABC building and outside of it? If so, be careful, be careful, be careful – these are the critical watchwords.

In short, I would borrow a phrase from the SABC Editorial Charter, and call it a 'culture of enthusiastic upward-referral'. The Charter sets out which kinds of decision need to be referred upwards to different levels of authority. I think that in a cautious, bureaucratic set-up, individuals are all too keen to send any decision of consequence upwards and onwards.

A young reporter who was involved in the Zuma trial coverage told me that she had five editors look at each script with only one thing in mind: to keep the coverage on the straight and narrow. This meant she could do no more than account in the driest way what was said in court that day. But this was a court case that raised the most wide-ranging, important and difficult issues around gender, tradition, patriarchy, sex and so on. One could not cover it properly without canvassing these rich issues and without moving from an account of the daily evidence. But a culture of nervousness

and trepidation would keep you away from tackling them and ensure coverage was bland, dull and inadequate.

It is in such a culture that you would want to draw up a set of guidelines to determine who can or cannot be quoted. If you want control, if you want to limit the capacity of individual journalists to make decisions on their own material, if you want to instil obeisance rather than encourage creative energy, then you would suggest that reporters had to fill some rigid criteria before they could interview someone. In a newsroom with an open, confident culture, you would encourage journalists to speak to as many different and varied people as possible and then decide which of them has the most interesting things to say. You would expect them to be able to justify their use of a commentator when challenged, but not merely on the basis of their degrees and affiliations; it would be sufficient to say that the person had something to add to the story and enriched the end-product.

To be fair, most organizations as large as the SABC have bureaucratic cultures that encourage caution, respect for authority, straight-and-narrow, keep-your-head-down behaviour. It is in the nature of structures of this size and type.

Secondly, a nervousness about taking on authority, an overriding respect for a party of liberation in government, an uncertainty over how critical to be of a new and popular democratic government, are not just SABC problems - they are national problems that everyone is grappling with.

Furthermore, public service broadcasters all over the world have been uneasy with the complex and volatile relationship with state, political and economic power. There have been very few successes around the world in dealing with this. It is only fair to recognize the difficulties and enormity of the task that is faced by Advocate Mpofo and his people.

And I should add that we are talking here exclusively about news and current affairs. One should acknowledge that in other areas, such as drama, the SABC is producing a rush of high-quality, local productions. And I am not saying this only because I have been involved in one of them.

But I think that a first step in dealing with the problems in news and current affairs is to recognize what the task is. I think one can safely say that the sort of culture I have described at the SABC is not one that is likely to produce good journalism. It is not one that would nurture talent and give it space to be creative and bold – as journalism needs to be if it is to be entertaining and informative.

I have heard many descriptions of problems at the SABC: my colleagues have highlighted the inability to keep skilled journalists; juniorisation of the newsroom; interference from the board; and so on. In my view, these are symptoms not causes; at the root of the problem is the editorial and journalistic culture I have described.

I am concerned that we – and the current commission of inquiry at the SABC - are keen to find blacklists and phone calls from the presidency, and such obvious manifestations of inappropriate journalistic conduct. But what might be missed, what may fall outside of the scope of the commission, are the values of the newsroom, the culture and the routine practices and procedures which shape their editorial output, and which are the core of the problem.

This leads to another question: what *is* an appropriate news culture for a national public broadcaster? Part of the problem is that, because of our history, we in this country generally recognize only the extreme approaches:

- journalism that is close to power and sees its role as serving the national political agenda - the journalism of genuflection

OR

- journalism that is wholly antagonistic to power, that defines its role as purely a watchdog role. Adversarial journalism.

Both of these approaches have long and rich histories in this country, for better or for worse. But neither is appropriate to a national public broadcaster, particularly in a South African context. You do not need me to tell you how our history has taught us how inappropriate the journalism of genuflection is. But, for a national public broadcaster in a new democracy, an aggressively adversarial journalism may also be inappropriate.

You want a culture that is independent but not adversarial, one that is provocative and stimulating but not aggressive; one that stimulates national debate on the key issues but will not campaign for any position in that debate; one that is committed, above all, to producing quality, one that can reach into the corners of the country in a way the rest of the media cannot; above all else, we expect the public broadcaster to rise above the commercial limitations of the rest of the media; it is the only institution that can do this.

I am contemptuous of those who say the SABC is unchanged and remains like the SABC of apartheid. This is self-evidently not true. But there is – and probably always will be – a tug of war between the two extremes of South African journalism – genuflection and adversarialism. The *Unauthorised: Mbeki* documentary that was pulled at the last minute was a victim of this internal battle. It was commissioned by those who want to show they can be watchdogs, and blocked by those too nervous to allow it to happen. But to take on the presidency at this time in this way – in a once-off half-hour, tough critique made by an adversarial journalist – was always headed for disaster.

What was missing was someone with the journalistic *nous* to say this: we need to deal with the presidency and the tough issues around it, but we are going to do it with depth and skill, we are going to run a series of different views and provoke people into talking about them and weighing them up; we are going to give it time and resources to ensure we do it with care, and not leave any crucial editorial decisions to the last minute so that we embarrass ourselves. That is what we expect of our public broadcaster, and that is the culture that is lacking.

We are at a critical moment in this country, when we can decide how open a society we want. The race for presidency has been taken out of the closed conclaves of the ANC and thrust into the front pages. The choice of the next president seemed just a few months ago destined to be a formal process whereby the incumbent would anoint a successor and, unless we were ANC branch chairs, we would sit and wait for the smoke to come out the chimney to tell us a new leader had been appointed; now the merits of different candidates are being canvassed in the open. It is true that candidates still cannot admit they are candidates, but we all know they are, and our political society is opening up in a way appropriate to a new democracy. Similarly, you saw in this weekend's newspaper a transcript of the President's hard-hitting speech to a closed ANC meeting.

These are the signs of a society opening up. If this is to be pushed forward, and we are to become a truly open society, then the national broadcaster has a crucial role to play in getting us there. It is, I emphasise, the only institution with the resources and the non-commercial priorities to play this role – but it is failing to do so. The kind of journalism we need so badly is being drowned in a culture of enthusiastic upward-referral.

### **AUBREY MATSHIQI**

I think the Harold Wolpe Trust has very healthy appetite for controversy – why else would they decide to invite such speakers as a notorious right-winger like Anton, and a banned coconut intellectual like myself? Anton and I came here with different motives – Anton with the express aim of getting himself *on* the SABC blacklist, while I came with the idea of getting myself *off* that list! (*laughter*).

I will avoid responding directly and specifically to some of the issues raised by Anton; instead I will respond more broadly. There's a character in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* who says "so full of scorpions is my mind" - my mind too is full of scorpions. Recently, there are so many things that I used to be sure of, but that I am no longer certain about. This is a difficult thing to experience. I take comfort from the fact that it is critical for us to embrace uncertainty, because that is a noble intellectual pursuit, and if those at the SABC who are responsible for the so-called blacklist embraced uncertainty more, they would be more accommodating of views that do not coincide with their own.

This is a challenge for us all: to embrace uncertainty so that we can tolerate views that make us uncomfortable or do not coincide with our own.

I have also been thinking a lot about dictatorship, since COSATU's warning that the ANC leadership is 'drifting toward dictatorship'. It is assumed that Zwelinzima Vavi was talking about dictatorship in a classical sense. If there is indeed a blacklist at the SABC, this should be seen as a sign of how this country is sliding toward a dictatorship. My view is that we are *not* sliding into a dictatorship in the classical sense - and the happenings at the SABC are *not* evidence that we are.

But I would like to pose the question whether we are not sliding into a dictatorship in an Orwellian sense. Orwell said the following relevant to our debate: "Unpopular ideas can be silenced and inconvenient facts kept dark without any need for an official ban". Here he was talking of how, in so-called democratic countries, censorship has become sophisticated, and is carried out without torture, jailings, killings.

In fact, just the other day I was speaking to a journalist who said to me: "Archbishop Tutu argues that the church is afraid of being critical of the South African government, because those who do criticize are labelled unpatriotic and not committed to the democratic project". At the time I was irritated with the good Arch, because I thought to myself: "Under apartheid, if your views didn't coincide with those of the State, you could be jailed, maimed or killed. In this country now, those are not dangers you are going to face for criticizing the government. Until this weekend, I felt that because we do not face those dangers, South Africa cannot be sliding toward a dictatorship.

But, is it enough for us to be democratic and say we are not sliding towards the conditions conducive to a dictatorship, solely on the basis that we do not jail, maim and kill those with other views? Should we not set another standard in determining

how democratic we are? I think we should, and that standard should be the absence of fear – the absence of the fear of being labelled, and absence of the fear that those in power can impose on you. I refer not only to power that resides in the State – I don't believe that power and powerlessness always exist in counterpoint.

Instead, I believe that the situation is often one of power dispersed to different centres – the media, the State, civil society. This means that not only the State, but also the media and civil society, are capable of bringing about a dictatorship in the Orwellian sense. Thus, we must ask questions not only about the State, not only about the SABC, but also about our media more generally. If we were to slide into a dictatorship in the Orwellian sense, would that be the result solely of the culture existing at the SABC? No, it would be the result of a culture in the media generally.

I see news not as a set of neutral facts, but as material that is socially and politically constructed. In every newsroom, people are faced with decisions about selection. That which they select is transformed, and that transformation occurs on the basis of the ideological assumptions of the transformers. Whether it's at the SABC, the *Mail and Guardian*, or wherever, it is not a valueless process of recounting facts. But what is concerning and what is a potential threat, is the concentration of media in a few hands. Here, the SABC is critical in its role as national broadcaster. The SABC must be protected both from commercial interests and political interference. In terms of commercial interests, the media outside the SABC can play an important role by asking critical questions about the relationship between the SABC and those commercial interests, especially in terms of the effect this has on the quality of the journalism that comes out of the SABC.

We must ask the question whether, in terms of the commercial culture, it is only the SABC that is guilty, or whether the media as a whole in South Africa stand accused of the allowing commercial players to exert too much pressure on them. Some people have focused on the media as a whole in order to exonerate the SABC from claims of political interference. Others have focused on the media as a whole because they are genuinely concerned for the health of our nation's media.

On Saturday I attended the President's birthday, and he gave an elegant speech, as usual. I was quite perturbed by what he had to say, notwithstanding that I agreed with him. He gave a critique of how capitalism has imposed a materialistic value system on South African society. I agree that this unbridled materialism is something that we must debate critically. But I would have liked him to have interrogated the extent to which the post-apartheid South African state has made it possible for those values to be institutionalised. There is a tendency in this country for things not to be said, unless they are said by the President first.

In an 2001 article of mine, I asked the following question: to the extent that a ruling culture has emerged, in the ANC and in the country, which has the potential to undermine democracy and close the space for debate, is President Mbeki to blame, or are ANC members generally to blame? The critical question to ask is whether we ourselves are sheep. I can see many of us in the coming weeks making statements from behind the battlements of the President.

In closing: if you, like me, have enough scorpions in your mind, we must welcome that. The SABC must welcome that – the media outside the SABC must welcome it too. If we embrace an intellectual culture which is comfortable with uncertainty, there is great hope for our democracy, because we will be in a position to tolerate those views which do not coincide with ours.

## Questions from the floor

1. When I was preparing to become a teacher, I remember my lecturer said: when you are a teacher, you can't criticise another teacher, because that is unprofessional behaviour. Professor Harber, is it not unprofessional behaviour for one journalist to criticise another journalist? As I see it, the issue is not about a correct analysis of the situation at the SABC. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see that there are problems there. The issue is: why do journalists not provide or present the correct analysis that you have captured of the SABC, so that it can be dealt with before it implodes?

A comment for Aubrey: I'm very happy that you identified the parallels between the fear of being thrown in jail for your views, and the fear of being labelled for your views. To me, war does not start with the first shot, but with the verbal mudslinging between the parties. The progression of a society towards a dictatorship cannot be measured in terms of violence alone.

2. Anton, you mentioned that there has been no systematic study of the issue, but I have in fact been busy with a study of this issue for about half a year, and it should be finished soon. Perhaps my findings will contribute to the debate. I liked the way you took the debate to another level by declining to focus solely on government pressure as the single source of problems in the system. We need to move the debate away from blaming government pressure, and away from blaming single elements within the SABC itself, such as the impacts of Snuki Zikalala.

The one issue I would like to raise is as follows: if editors want to claim their role back, the question remains - what is their role? You have talked about it, but I feel you have mixed up some concepts. You said they must provide quality and depth in their news, but that doesn't say anything about their relation to government. How are SABC journalists supposed to define themselves in relation to political power in South Africa? They cannot look to the SABC Charter for direction, because there is nothing in there. The Charter is drafted in such a way that it is so vague and open to such broad interpretations, that no journalist would say: "I cannot subscribe to that Charter".

My second question is: you were describing the culture in the SABC newsroom as we see it now - has it always been that way?

3. Thanks for mentioning Snuki Zikalala's name! I was wondering if he would be mentioned at all tonight!
4. (Steven Gordon): I make this comment merely as a concerned member of the public. Something that has bothered me for a while is an ongoing bias in the SABC's reporting on the Middle East conflict. Approximately a year ago I contacted Jimmy Matthews at the SABC and questioned him about it. He acknowledged that there was indeed a bias, and that I should expect it to get worse. In coverage of the recent conflict, I have noticed a distinct anti-Israeli bias. I think history will probably judge Israel quite harshly for its current behaviour; but I think it's the role of a public broadcaster to accurately and impartially convey the facts to us. The SABC has systematically skewed the facts to a certain point of view, which might reasonably be called an anti-Semitic one.



I thus tried to contact the SABC and express my concerns. I gathered email addresses of pertinent people at the SABC, in the Independent Democrats, in the DA, in the ANC, in ICASA and in the SACP. I left out only the Broadcasting Complaints Commission. The only group from whom I received a reply was the DA, who seemed largely to support my view. I then contacted the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, who informed me that I may only lodge a complaint about a specific broadcast, shown at a specific time and on a specific date. I think such a policy is untenable. Can we really address broadcasting bias with such a narrow and inflexible procedure?

Having viewed the SABC now, and the SABC under Apartheid, I have to echo what I said in my email: PW Botha would be proud - they continue to do a fine job of dispensing propaganda.

5. (Dave Kaplan): Anton, I heard you saying that we need to be cautious at this time, in our post-Apartheid period, operating under a very popular government. I understood you to say that this imposes some kind of responsibility on media not to take an overtly antagonistic stand to what government is doing. Does media have a different role and set of responsibilities in an environment like ours, compared to its role in other societies?

If so, what is the content of that responsibility? How do we escape the situation Aubrey described, where we wait for the president to make the statement first, and only then do the rest of us feel safe to discuss it? It would be easy for a 'special responsibility' to lead us into a position where we are cautious not to speak first. So what is that special responsibility that you envisage the media having in this context?

**Anton Harber:**

In reply to Dave Kaplan: I was talking specifically about the SABC when I tried to define what sort of culture it should have. That distinction between the SABC as the national broadcaster, and other private media, is very important. I think the ideal situation is one where we have many sorts of media with many roles, and no overriding sense of responsibility governing them. Some media should be fiercely watchdog and aggressively adversarial; some media should simply tell us what the government is thinking, doing and saying. I was setting a national public broadcaster apart as having special roles and responsibilities.

To me, the national public broadcaster *does* have a special responsibility, precisely because it's there by law. If you ask me what that responsibility is, and partly in answer to what was asked about the relation of journalists in the SABC to political power, I tend to argue that the one thing that defines it is that it ought to rise above the limitations that the commercial media has.

Thus, because a national public broadcaster can broadcast into the smallest corners of the country, and can devote time and resources to reporting on the presidency with a depth that others don't have, it ought to fulfil a role in which it presents as balanced a view of issues as possible, so that debate and thought may be stimulated country-wide. The private media has responsibilities, certainly, but I wouldn't want to define one particular role and responsibility for the media as a whole.

In reply to Steven Gordon: I'm reluctant to comment on the SABC's coverage of the Middle East conflict, because I have not watched much SABC coverage on that. I tend to get my information on that from other news sources, so I'm not really in a

position to comment on the adequacy of the SABC coverage. There are many things about the current coverage of that issue which are troubling, but I don't have the authority to make any statements, and would prefer not to.

In reply to Question 2: I purposefully chose not to mention Snuki Zikalala (the s-word) and that's because, in relation to Snuki, we have fallen into the trap of blaming everything on one person. Snuki Zikalala does represent a certain approach and a certain culture, there can be no doubt about that; but the issue is not limited to him, and in a sense he is an easy target. I'm very glad to hear that there is a study of culture in the newsroom underway, and look forward to the conclusions.

In reply to Question 1: You asked whether journalists ought to subscribe to a professional ethic of not abusing each other. My answer is: quite the opposite! This is the case partly because journalists operate in competition to each other (differently to teachers) and partly because we operate in an environment where we should be questioning, sceptical and critical...those are the kinds of qualities that we look for in journalists. There are times when journalists will rally to protect each other, but in general, we try to steal each other's stories and abuse each other as much as possible.

**Aubrey Matshiqi:**

In terms of how SABC journalists relate to power: I don't believe we should have one standard for the SABC and another for the rest of media. There should be one standard, and that is the one set by Eduard Said: all media must speak truth to power. Someone else once said: the media should have a respect for the power of logic, and not the logic of power. I believe also that the media should have an agenda, as long as that is an editorial agenda and not one coming from outside the newsroom, such as a class-interests agenda, or a political agenda.

Every cause, no matter how noble, has its tyrants and we must beware of these: the tyrants who hide behind noble causes. For instance, in the context of the Zuma rape trial: why should we expose people to the fear of being labelled sexist, should they make known their views? Why should people recoil from being critical of what is going on in Lebanon, because they are scared of being labelled anti-Semitic? We must be careful of the tyrants who hide behind noble causes, and refuse to allow that a fear of the labels they brandish, keep us silent.

**Anton Harber:**

I want to disagree with my good colleague. Of course all media must speak truth to power, but there are different approaches that different media can take. The *Weekly Mail* could run a campaign *against* the death penalty, while the *Citizen* could run a campaign *for* the death penalty. The SABC can't do this. There's a critical difference between the national public broadcaster and private media, and a critical difference in their roles.

The SABC's role should be to open up debate within the framework of our constitutional values. Overall, it must strive to present both sides. *Business Day* does represent, very clearly, a certain class interest: and so it should. The SABC cannot or should not play that same role. Those are differences in their roles and functions that I think we should accept.

6. Faried Israel: Anton, you slipped in very casually "subject to our Constitutional values". I was surprised at how casually you slipped that in, because the public broadcaster does not operate in a vacuum. What I would have liked to hear a bit more of is, what are these parameters? There is no such thing as

an unbiased human being, let alone an unbiased broadcaster. How do the Constitutional values have to shape how that broadcaster operates, in your opinion?

7. A question for Anton: How do we draw the distinction between the breaching of ethical journalism, and representing a target group, given your suggestion that it is fine for certain media to take the positions of certain interest groups, but not fine for other media houses to do so?
8. A question for Aubrey: in suggesting that we need the president to give us permission to pursue certain discussions (which is a comment that I think is accurate) how far would you say individuals and political commentators, such as yourself, push it? Do you push the agenda in opening up those questions and raising those challenging discussions which cause discomfort for some, especially government, bearing in mind that there is this fear of being labelled?
9. Don't you think sometimes that the problem is bigger than the newsroom? We as journalists work with the tools we are given and allowed to have. For instance, the recent ban on policemen speaking to journalists about crime figures. Essentially the result is that, by the time stats on crime are released, there is no way for journalists to go back and verify those figures. This affects the quality of our reporting, but that rule flows not from our newsroom culture, but from other sources.
10. The way forward as I see it is as follows: it is the public that pays tax to the government, which then pays the journalists at the SABC. Perhaps SABC journalists need to be reminded that they are not being paid by government - they are being paid by the public. We shouldn't merely criticize what they do without making them conscious of what they should be doing for us. Maybe more efforts need to be made to re-orientate the SABC's perceptions of whom they bear a responsibility towards.
11. A question for Aubrey - how would you respond to the suggestion that the SABC chooses not to use certain journalists or commentators not because they have been 'blacklisted', but because they are not properly informed?

Also, how confident are we that the outcome we receive from the Commission of Inquiry will be independent and impartial?

**Aubrey Matshiqi:**

In reply to the Commission question: I am uncomfortable with the fact that it's a closed enquiry. It is not unreasonable to infer from statements made by the CEO on this matter that he had a different process in mind, although he did not explicitly say that he was going to have an open enquiry. Closed enquiries are always open to the possibility of partial or complete manipulation. I make these comments without impugning the integrity of any of the commissioners. I rely on the commissioners to conduct themselves with integrity, and because of that reliance, despite my misgivings, I still harbour some hope that good will come out of it.

In reply to the blacklist question: my view is that the SABC did not blacklist me – they were merely the venue at which I was blacklisted. I don't think the SABC took a corporate decision to blacklist certain commentators. One individual took that decision, but it is not insignificant that it happened at the SABC, because it suggests that its culture allowed that to happen. I am not of the view that any media

organisation is under an obligation to use the services of any particular commentator - as long as the reasons to exclude a commentator are not politically motivated.

Are we ill-informed? That is hard to answer. If we are, the SABC has the resources to invite commentators who hold alternative views, and who will expose those of our limitations which arise from us having conducted insufficient research. The fact that this was not done raises questions about the SABC, not about us. I must say that I was astonished that people thought it appropriate to make comments about commentator quality in defence of the exclusion of certain commentators.

The SABC is a microcosm of South African society, reflecting tensions that exist in South African society, along class, gender and race lines. Because the SABC is a highly contested entity, a highly political one, and one which is part of the process of achieving a hegemonic position by some in South African society, it will reflect the tensions that exist in society. Thus, the journalists themselves, in selecting which stories to run, will reflect both their own and those other tensions. We must disabuse ourselves of this tendency to strip journalists of their class and race tensions and perspectives. To do this is to impoverish the debate.

**Anton Harber:**

In reply to the Commission question: I find it very hard to know how much faith we can have in the Commission. I am hearing that the commissioners are interpreting their terms of reference quite widely. The last commission at the SABC was a whitewash, I think, in that it blamed the reporter at the bottom end of the decision making process, rather than the actual decision-makers at the top. We will have to wait and see how this Commission turns out.

On the problem of experts being quoted who don't know what they're talking about: I don't think it's a problem at all. Sometimes the person in the street will give you a great, insightful quote, and that's reason enough to use it. We need to give people the chance to read everything and decide for themselves.

On different standards for different media: if *Business Day* wants to campaign for a change in the Minister of Trade and Industry, or if they just want to pursue their particular agenda, I don't have a problem with that - because I know where they're coming from. It becomes a problem only if that's the only agenda on offer to the readers. But the SABC is different.

I'm not suggesting that the SABC should be objective or neutral – I deliberately tried to avoid those words. Let me tell you as briefly as possible how I see professional objectivity. I believe that there is a professional ethic which says: you can *strive* for objectivity, even if you never achieve it. I believe there is another professional ethic which says: be a watchdog journalist, be aggressively investigative. That has its place. The latter ethic may be appropriate for *The Mail and Guardian*, but it is not appropriate for the national broadcaster.

The values of a national broadcaster are hard to pin down. Broadly, they ought to be defined by values as contained in the constitution, but that's not saying enough. What may be appropriate for a national broadcaster is a set of values that strives for a balanced view; debate with both sides represented; transparency; accountability; those kinds of values.