



RIGHT 2 KNOW

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Appendix 1: Right 2 Know Campaign response to the SABC's editorial policies

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Introduction

The 1994 transition to democracy promised the transformation of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) from a broadcaster of state propaganda into a public broadcaster independent of the government and enabling the Constitutional rights of everyone in South Africa to freedom of expression and access to information. For our democracy to function the SABC as a public broadcaster has a vital role to play in informing citizens, facilitating dialogues on matters of public interest, and giving a voice to ordinary people.

The SABC has a particularly critical role to play given the lack of media diversity in South Africa: Under-funded community media and a print media controlled by four corporations publishing in English and Afrikaans and predominantly serving 'consumers' in urban areas. As such the SABC – reaching almost the entire country and broadcasting in all official languages – is the primary source of information and opinion for a large majority of people in South Africa.

The SABC derives its' mandate from its Charter which requires the SABC to encourage the development of South African expression by providing, in the official languages, a wide range of programming that:

- Reflects South African attitudes, opinions, ideas, values and artistic creativity.
- Displays South African talent in educational and entertaining programmes;
- Offers a plurality of views and a variety of news, information and analysis from a South African point of view; and,

- Advances the national and public interest, where public interest relates to content which informs, educates and entertains citizens

As we approach the 20th anniversary of our first democratic election we see worrying signs of political interference in SABC news and current affairs – as well as programming dominated by entertainment and shaped to reflect the lifestyles and concerns of economic and global elites.

It is in this context that the Right2Know Campaign takes the opportunity to contribute to the review of SABC Editorial Policies currently underway.

While it is beyond the scope of the Editorial Policy Review, the Right2know must reiterate our call for greater public funding for the SABC. The SABC currently receives only 2% of its income from public funds and cannot play the role of public broadcaster if it is expected to compete with commercial broadcasters for advertising revenue. The current commercialisation of the broadcaster not only forces it to cater to sections of the population with consumer power, it also means the SABC has insufficient resources to equip its' newsrooms and produce or purchase the programming required to meet the communication needs of a country as diverse and complex as South Africa.

Democratic journalism, editorial decision-making & upward referral

Possibly the most serious problem impacting on the editorial integrity of the SABC is the problem of politically-inclined interference in decision making. This practice contradicts the SABC's core editorial value of editorial independence, and flies in the face of the broadcaster's declaration in its editorial code that 'we do not allow advertising, commercial, political or personal considerations to influence our editorial decisions'. The policy does not match the practice, and until this problem is addressed, the editorial policy will remain a dead letter on these issues.

The SABC has an editorial decision-making problem that dates back many years. This history includes the pulling of a documentary on former president Thabo Mbeki, the blacklisting of commentators that were considered critical of the government, the pulling of the 'Big Debate' series on spurious grounds, the Chief Operating Officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng's call for a 70 percent good news quota, and most recently the censorship of the booing of current President Jacob Zuma at the late Nelson Mandela's commemorative service.

At the time of the pulling of 'The Big Debate', The Right2Know Campaign argued that the decision smacked of political censorship and an abuse of the public broadcaster to protect certain individuals' political interests. We also rejected Kaizer Kganyago's (SABC's head of group communications) statement that the show was pulled for reasons of editorial oversight, and that news and current affairs programmes should not be outsourced. It is telling that the SABC suddenly discovered this so-called 'lapse' once the first season had ended, and the show had earned a reputation as a tough-talking debate where Ministers went to be 'sliced, diced and fried'. It would appear that the SABC wants to insource current affairs because the

programme producers are too independently-minded for the broadcaster, and they have developed cold feet with a national election looming.

The pulling of ‘The Big Debate’ happened as the SABC went on a nationwide roadshow to ensure public participation in the review of editorial policies. At the time R2K argued that the decision flew in the face of the current and draft policies which both commit the public broadcaster to reflect the diverse range of South African attitudes and opinions. At various public appearances the former SABC GCEO Lulama Mokhobo held up the Big Debate as the best example of this diversity.

We argued that the SABC is being dragged back to the days when it was a state broadcaster practicing political censorship ahead of the public’s right to know, and nothing that has happened since the ‘Big Debate’ debacle has disabused us of this view.

The Right2Know is of the view that the SABC’s process of editorial decision making needs to be reviewed thoroughly, which also includes a review of the process of upward referral and the involvement of senior management, such as the CEO and CFO, in editorial decisions.

But before making recommendations on these issues, it is necessary to start at a different, more foundational point. What kind of journalism should the SABC be practicing? It is disappointing to note that many of the rich, detailed debates about this crucial issue have been lost.

In the mid-1990’s, as part of the-then Television News Production’s (TNP) transformation process, intense discussions took place about changing the values, cultures and practices that underpinned the SABC’s journalism under apartheid. There was a great deal of support at the time for democratic journalism, where journalists were weaned off the apartheid culture of being told what to do, and speaking only to the spokespeople, and developed capacities to be critical, independent thinkers and make the tough calls themselves. Democratic journalism assumes that the journalists in the field, who are on ongoing contact with the issues and the people on the ground, are in the best position to make good news judgements.

Training programmes were set up to assist journalists in making the transition, and during these programmes the principles of democratic journalism were introduced. Questions about what constituted ‘newsworthiness’ were interrogated, and journalists were encouraged to embrace free, independent thinking rather than the sort of thinking that went along with a hierarchical, command and control structure. Journalists were also encouraged to diversify their sources of information and story ideas.

The then-head of training, Hein Ungerer, captured this new vision for journalism succinctly:

‘For the first time here were people saying to you that “you don’t really actually have to talk to the Ministers. You don’t really have to talk to the spokespeople. You actually talk to the people who tell you the story...”. And that was very new for South Africa because we used to go to media briefings and you already had the story before you left. It was very oppressive, a very dogmatic system’.¹

¹ Dale Ratcliffe, ‘Through the tunnel: South Africans, Canadians and democratic journalism’, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Training and Development, pg. 25.

A transformation document produced at the time outlined some of the key principles of the transformation process, which included the following:

- Editorial decision-making is consultative and delegated to various levels of editorial management including the executive producer of a programme. While editorial decision-making is acceptable, editorial domination is unacceptable.
- For the structure to be an enabling one, it should
 - ✓ Be responsive to staff and the needs of the medium
 - ✓ Involve as short a chain of command as possible
 - ✓ TNP top management should be accessible to staff
- Accountability to staff is an important feature for a new management structure
- Each programme should fall under an executive producer.²

With respect to the relationship between top management and TNP staff, the document argued that decision-making should involve the people who would be affected by the decisions, and top management should be accessible and share ideas and not dictate.³

R2K associates itself with this vision of democratic journalism, as we believe that it provides an appropriate means of enabling the public right to know, by bringing journalism closer to the very public that it claimed to serve. In a decentralised, democratised newsroom context, political control becomes less possible, as decision-making is devolved as close to the point of newsgathering as practically possible. It stands to reason that bureaucratised, hierarchical decision-making is inimical to this form of journalism, which requires as flat a management structure as possible.

Upward referral and the existence of an editor-in-chief runs against this newsroom culture; these arrangements are based on the tired old assumption that to improve efficiency and effectiveness, the SABC must centralise and create additional layers of management. This kills initiative and lends itself to political control. Decentralisation and democratisation run in the opposite direction. One of the SABC's major problems is that editorial decision making has become so bureaucratised that the lines between management and editorial have become hopelessly blurred, and the editorial policies need to address this problem head on.

Many problems appear to have arisen with the upward referral system, where editorial decisions were taken initially by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and then by the Chief Operating Officer (COO). In addition to the problem of bureaucratic decision-making, there are two additional problems with this system. The CEO and COO are management positions and management should not be making editorial decisions at all; this is a well-recognised principle of media organisations worldwide, and there is no reason why the SABC should be the exception to the rule. The editorial policies encourage management overreach. The fact that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) have an upward referral system, with the SABC leaning more towards the ABC's system, does not automatically make it appropriate for South Africa. References to

² Television News Productions Transformation Unit, 'TNP's transformation proposals for consideration by SABC top management, TNP, 4 October 1994, pg. 5

³ Television News Productions Transformation Unit, 'TNP's transformation proposals for consideration by SABC top management, TNP, 4 October 1994, pg. 9.

these practices elsewhere also ignore the considerable controversy in those countries around the system of upward referral. These managers often do not have journalistic backgrounds, and are therefore unsuited to making editorial decisions.

Even more seriously, the CEO and COO are political appointees. In terms of the SABC's articles of association, the three top management positions of the SABC are appointed by the Minister of Communications, which is almost certainly unlawful as it violates the requirement in the Broadcasting Act for the Board to control the affairs of the Corporation. This means that the Minister of Communications indirectly controls the editorial content of the SABC, which is unconstitutional as it violates the SABC's right to freedom of expression. It matters not if the Minister actually exercises this power through, for instance, the removal of a CEO or COO that may make editorial decisions that embarrass the government. The fact that this power even exists is automatically *ultra vires*.

However, R2K does recognise that editorial decision-making needs a certain level of hierarchy, to enable the tough decisions to be made speedily. However, upward referral should not be encouraged as key decisions should be made as close to the point of newsgathering as possible.

Therefore our recommendations on the issue of editorial decision-making and upward referral are as follows:

The tough calls identified in the editorial policies as grounds for upward referral need to stop at the editor responsible for a particular programme or unit. This means that the editors-in-chief are the separate heads of the news and current affairs departments in radio and television. Not even the Head of News should be involved in editorial decision-making, as this is a management and news policy position, not an editorial position. This problem was pointed out clearly by the internal commission of enquiry into the blacklisting of political commentators (the Sisulu Commission), and its recommendation to clarify the Head of News role as a policy role and not an editorial one, should be adopted in the editorial policy. There is no need for a separate editor in chief position: s/he will undermine existing editorial decision-making, inevitably leading to internal conflict and demoralisation as the staff who have been put in place to make decisions are undermined.

Quality & Diversity in Programming

Overall SABC programming is biased to the interest of urban middle class audiences. Research undertaken by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) on SABC programming in 2012 drew the following conclusions⁴:

⁴ Lethabo Dibetso and Thandi Smith, 'Lack of Diversity (Repeat): Analysis of SABC News and Programming', 29 August 2012, pg. vii

- There is still an under-representation of marginalised people and issues that affect them. Voices of women and children are still not heard and gender issues are given less recognition.
- Content produced is mainly targeted at urban dwellers, marginalising those who are already marginalised and disadvantaged. The news analysis also reveals that provinces with well-defined metropolitan areas receive better coverage than provinces with less developed metropolitan areas.
- There seems to be an over-representation of English as well as White people across all SABC services, which is not representative of the demographics of the country. This however is not exclusive to the public broadcaster and can be seen across all media and is a reflection of South Africa's social context.

While insufficient research has been undertaken it is fair to assume that SABC programming is currently dominated by content that promotes conspicuous consumption and the aspirations to middle class life styles. South Africa is a country with high rates of gendered violence, a history of institutionalized racism, and great economic inequality where only a small percent of people can live the lives they see on TV.

In this context the picture painted by the MMA is one where the SABC reproduces unjust power relations both locally (in terms of language, race, gender and class) as well as globally (with a dominance of American programming). The Right2Know Campaign believes that the public broadcaster's programming policy should actively promote equality and justice. Programming should reflect and affirm the lives and cultures of the majority of South African who live in poverty and promote the values underpinning the Bill of Rights.

Production of local content is critical in this regard. MMA's research established that the SABC has failed to meet local content quotas set by ICASA and has not adequately promoted all of South Africa's official languages.

Additional research undertaken by MMA in 2013 found that 56% of the SABC TV shows are light adult entertainment like some soaps, series, and comedies violent cartoons or cartoons that show violence as a means to resolve problems, sports, and lifestyle programme. The MMA study concluded that only 15% of TV shows are education, 'edutainment', news and actuality. The MMA report concludes: "The high levels of junk could be attributed to pursuit of advertiser funded programming and product placement as well as limited resources and cutting back on local content."⁵

Entertainment is a vital part of being human and the SABC has a clear mandate to entertain its audiences. Entertaining programming is also however a key transmitter of culture and values. Too much of the SABC's entertainment content promotes the values and cultures of dominant sections of the South African and global community.

⁵ Lethabo Dibetso and Thandi Smith, 'What's on the Menu? Understanding the Diet of Programming for Citizens', August 2013, pg. 5

In addition the Right2Know would expect the South African public broadcaster to place far greater value on education, actuality, and current affairs. Educated and informed citizens are critical to any democracy and economy – more so in South Africa given the complexity of our society and the high levels of unemployment and poor quality of jobs in our economy.

In Conclusion

Given the state of media diversity in South Africa, where media catering to the middle classes and elite are fairly abundant and the majority of people are highly dependent on the SABC, the Right2Know believe the SABC's programming policies should demonstrate a bias to meeting the cultural, information, education, expression, and entrainment needs of the majority.

As we stated in our introduction, there is an urgent need for greater public funding of the ABC is to play the role of public broadcaster. It cannot deliver on its' mandate and compete with commercial broadcasters for advertising revenue and thus sections of the population with consumer power. The SABC needs resources to equip its' newsrooms and produce or purchase the programming required to meet the communication needs of everyone living in South Africa.

Of course all the funding in the world will not deliver quality public broadcasting if those in the SABC responsible for making programme and editorial decisions are not independent of political and commercial control and interference. For this reason it is vital that the SABC review its' editorial decisions making processes to exclude executive management and return autonomy to executive producers and those closest to the news gathering process itself.

Ends