

29. Snapshot of the SABC

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The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was established by the government in 1936 with radio services offered first in English and Afrikaans, and, later, in the various African languages. During the National Party rule from 1948, it came under increasing accusations of being biased towards the ruling party. At one time, most of its senior management were members of the Broederbond (the Afrikaner secret society), and from institutions like Stellenbosch University. The SABC was a radio service until the introduction of television in 1976.

Since the first democratic government was elected into power in 1994, the SABC has been through various board and senior management changes resulting in numerous trajectory patterns, both negative and positive, for media diversity in the country. The rise of democracy in South Africa had a significant shift on the broadcasting laws of the country. The Independent Broadcasting Authority Act was designed to make provision for the licensing of community and commercial broadcasters as well as for the transformation of the SABC from a state to a public broadcaster. During this transformation process, the SABC appointed its first black group chief executive, experienced journalist and business executive, Zwelakhe Sisulu. He was the third of five children of liberation struggle icons of South Africa, Walter and Albertina Sisulu. Anti-apartheid activist and teacher, Govin Reddy became chief executive of radio, and, subsequently, deputy group chief executive. Molefe Mokgatle was appointed chief executive of television, and labour reporter Snuki Zikalala was appointed head of news at the SABC.



A bouquet of pay-television became a reality in 1995 in South Africa when DStv was launched. This meant competition for SABC-TV. Fiercer competition was on the horizon when free-to-air channel eTV offered viewers more choice in 1998. DStv capitalised on the need to better serve the Afrikaans market by introducing the KykNet channel in 1999. On 4 February 1996, the SABC relaunched the TV1, CCV-TV and NNTV channels

effectively becoming SABC 1, SABC 2 and SABC 3. The black population from the low to middle income group was the target audience for SABC 1 and SABC 2. Television programming on SABC-TV channels during this era had brilliant content featuring, among others, the successful drama *Shaka Zulu*, based on the story of the life of the warrior king, and, which had worldwide success in the 1980s. It was produced by William C Faure. SABC 2 rarely broadcast live sports due to funding issues, and, instead, focused on sporting highlights, and played local afro-soul and pop music interludes in between shows. Splendid music shows included *Afro Café* and *Sould Out Sessions*. During Nelson Mandela's administration, to promote diversity and integrate the people of South Africa, the popular Afrikaans music shows *Musiek Roulette* and *Noot vir Noot* became part of the mix.

Six of the SABC regional stations, namely Radio Algoa, Radio Oranje, RPN Stereo, Radio Highveld, Radio Jacaranda and KFM were put up for sale. It collectively raised over R500 million from private consortiums. Though a fairly tidy sum for the SABC at the time, it would have, in retrospect, preferred to hold on to the stations as they became huge money-spinners for their new owners.

The SABC got itself into the limelight for the wrong reason when Max Du Preez, an author, columnist, documentary filmmaker and founding editor of an Afrikaans newspaper the *Vrye Weekblad*, was dismissed by the SABC as editor/presenter of the award-winning weekly investigative programme *Special Assignment* for gross insubordination over a documentary about witchcraft. This caused a major public outcry and dispute about whether the SABC was being transformed from an apartheid propaganda machine into a genuine public service broadcaster, or, again, becoming a government mouthpiece. The union called for an independent investigation into the climate of fear and intimidation within the SABC. The issue was around the independent role of the public broadcaster and its implications for media freedom.

In 2002, the public broadcaster became SABC Limited, and the state held 100% of its shares. The SABC launched the revised Editorial Policy after a process of consultations with the public and stakeholders throughout the country. The public broadcaster was required, in terms of the Broadcasting Act, to develop policies that were intended to ensure compliance with the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) Code of Conduct, the corporation's licence conditions and legislation. During 2007, the SABC became the first South African broadcaster to launch a 24-hour television news channel. The channel was transmitted on the Vivid platform across the African continent and on regular SABC channels after midnight. Vivid was used to offer free-to-air programming to outlying areas where there were no terrestrial television signals. Rights to

the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa were granted to both the SABC for free-to-air and to DStv pay channel Supersport.

“SABC was the first South African broadcaster to launch a 24-hour television news channel”

A shake-up in the leadership at the public broadcaster resulted in the controversial Hlaudi Motsoeneng becoming its chief operating officer. He announced in May 2016 that footage of the destruction of property during protests in South Africa was banned from coverage. New guidelines for news broadcasts were cited as the reason. This caused outrage from various SABC journalists, civil society and media organisations. During the fracas, seven SABC journalists and a contracted worker were fired for opposing a policy guideline banning the broadcast of images of violent and destructive protests in South Africa, and the SABC's stance on media freedom. This led to a protracted labour dispute. Icasa ruled in July 2016 that the SABC had to withdraw its resolution to ban the broadcasting of all violent protests as per its Code of Conduct. In addition, the journalists won a court case overturning their dismissal. In May 2016, Motsoeneng also made an announcement that all

SABC radio stations must play 90% South African music with immediate effect. This decision was well received by the South African music industry as the outcome would see royalties being paid to composers. Further, this would create more on-air exposure for artists generating additional live gigs which, in turn, could boost the South African economy in numerous ways, including job creation at events, and the payment of taxes. However, the decision by Motsoeneng was not properly considered, and excluded public participation. The sudden change of music playlisting on SABC stations led to a loss of listenership and, accordingly, drop in revenue. A strategic plan would have worked if it was discussed with various role players including the public. Motsoeneng's decisive measure was short-lived, and he was eventually shown the door at the SABC. The 90% ruling was shelved. In 2017, in line with Icasa's regulations, all public broadcast radio stations amended their local music quotas from 40% to 60% and public commercial stations from 25% to 35%. With the recent appointment of new board members and senior management at the SABC, a statement, in 2018, was released of its intention to retrench nearly 1 000 permanent and 1 200 freelance workers as part of the broadcaster's restructuring strategy. In November 2018, the SABC warned that it would soon be unable to pay salaries unless a R3 billion guarantee was secured from government. The public broadcaster, however, abandoned its plans of mass retrenchments in 2019 for a period of 14 months pending a skills audit.

At the time of writing, the future of the SABC hangs in the balance. Ongoing government bailouts are not the answer. The broadcaster is in serious need of a turnaround strategy to steer it on a path towards sustainability. It calls for competent leadership and management where accountability counts.

References

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