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Defining the Public Interest – The SABC as a Public Broadcaster

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A general – and internationally acceptable – definition of public broadcasting has generally been stated as:

Content which entertains, educates and informs the public

However, in order for such a formulation to have practical meaning, content has to be given to it.

Before I deal with these matters, I must make it clear that I have been invited here as the head of news at SABC, and while there are many essential debates that need to be conducted around the other genres and the role they fulfill in terms of public broadcasting, I am only in a position to talk about it from my perspective – that of a journalist. I intend to address the impact that the public broadcasting mandate has on our news values and the way in which the newsroom operates.

No discussion around public broadcasting in South Africa can ignore the history of our country, nor can it be divorced from the current context within which we as a country find ourselves. Without going into details, there are a number of basic facts upon which we can agree.

The legacy of the colonial system is that the resources of our country remain in the hands of a largely racially defined elite. In practical terms, this means that the commercial media within the country broadly represents certain vested interests. The fact that the majority of people were excluded from any form of normal education system also has implications for who and what informs the decision-making processes within the media.

The colonial relationship was not one that was unique to South Africa and one finds similar patterns of ownership both intra and internationally.

This concentration of media resources in the hands of a small section of society effectively excludes the views and experience of the majority of the population. Furthermore the

concentration of ownership internationally impacts on all media in South Africa's ability to source material from outside the country. The International Federation of Journalists noted that a handful of conglomerates control much of the information across the globe. Most of these conglomerates, such as Rupert Murdoch's international media empire, have an unashamedly neo-liberal agenda.

It is within this context that news-values and standards have been defined. Nothing marks the ideological nature of the media more clearly than when these values and standards are challenged, especially when that challenge comes from one of their own. As MD of SABC News I will be the first to acknowledge that there are number of areas where there is room for substantial improvement, but the hysteria that has met our every attempt to implement a more developmental news approach – in line with our public broadcast mandate – is a clear indication of the dominant media's unease with a news approach that is no longer completely aligned to their commercially driven imperative.

As I controversially said during press freedom day and I want to emphasise again today: the SABC as one the main protagonists within the media environment, does not play an ideologically neutral role, but our role is clearly spelt out and I would like to address it more closely.

As a public broadcaster the SABC operates within the bounds of the South African constitution. And its powers and functions, as well as its rights and obligations, are derived from a number of sources: legislation, the Broadcast Charter, the licence conditions of each SABC station and channel, and regulations issued by ICASA, including the Code of Conduct for Broadcasters set by the BCCSA.

The SABC's mandate as a public broadcaster comes from the Charter, which defines its objectives. The Charter is laid down in the Broadcasting Act (as Amended) and requires the SABC to encourage the development of South African expression by providing, in all 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
- Advances the national and public interest.

However, the central tenet of the SABC is that in order for it to fulfill its public broadcasting mandate it has to enjoy freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence. In fact, the SABC Board, which is appointed by the President on the advice of the National Assembly, controls the affairs of the SABC and is explicitly mandated to protect the SABC's freedom and independence. The Board has set the following goals:-

- Ensure the SABC promotes democracy and non-racialism by building empowerment through innovative programming that is informative, entertaining and educative in all official languages
- Ensure the SABC plays a meaningful role in supporting the objectives of African Renaissance and Nepad
- Revitalize the Corporation, particularly the News Department, by making it a preferred place of employment attracting, retaining and nurturing the best available talent in the country
- Create a financially sound corporation built on a sustainable business model within a specified timeframe that enables it to fulfil its mandate
- Ensure full statutory and regulatory compliance by all divisions of the public broadcaster

Furthermore, the operations of the SABC Newsroom are governed by an editorial code which addresses a number of issues, the most relevant to this debate reads as follows:

We do not allow advertising, commercial, political or personal considerations to influence our editorial decisions. The SABC is expected to provide information, and as part of this duty should evaluate, analyse and critically appraise government policies and programmes. The SABC is not the mouthpiece of the government of the day, nor should it broadcast its opinion of government policies, unless they relate directly to broadcasting matters

While the editorial policy goes further and explicitly states that:

That our freedom of expression and journalistic and creative independence is protected by law and that this is fundamental to operations of a public broadcaster

As can be seen media freedom is central to our understanding of our role as a public broadcaster. We also take the view that there are a number of constraints that face media workers and organizations when they try to exercise these freedoms. Fortunately there are constitutional and legal remedies for us to use when these freedoms come under threat.

At the risk of sounding overly defensive, I wish to emphasise that both in terms of our mandate and the way in which we operate, we are not a government mouthpiece. My vision is for the SABC to become the leading news organization on the continent, not just in terms of size, but also in terms of editorial excellence. One of the pillars of this excellence is critical journalism.

A journalist who engages critically with society is not necessarily one who only focuses on the negative, but is the one who focuses on the issues and not the event. It is the one who explores

trends. And this is the culture that must and will emerge in the newsrooms of the public broadcaster.

In order to ensure that accuracy remains paramount in our news room we are taking a twofold approach: a greater emphasis on on-going training, focusing on both the basics of journalism and the nature of our society and further checks and balances within the newsroom to hold individuals accountable. This is also achieved through respecting and maintaining lines of editorial authority.

But the central role of the public broadcaster can not only be met through the quality of the content that is provided, but also the manner of delivery. South Africa has 11 official languages and the public broadcaster must service the needs of all those language groupings equitably. This has implications for our news operations.

The other serious challenge that faces the SABC as public broadcaster is the uniqueness of the funding model. Our funding is largely derived from a commercial broadcasting model, but our mandate is to deliver public broadcasting services. Our strong results show we are succeeding in terms of revenue generation – but I think the question has to be posed that at what cost is this success achieved to our public broadcasting mandate.

A public broadcaster is essential to the success of a democracy. If the PBS mandate is properly implemented the broadcaster will encourage transparency and good governance and it ensures that society enjoys the rule of true justice.