# Public Service Broadcasting in South Africa:

## an analysis of the SABC's fulfilment of a public service mandate

Gemma Catherine Ryan

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Social Science,

University of Natal - Pietermaritzburg,

January 2000.

## Acknowledgements:

# Declaration

Unless otherwise specified in the text, the work is entirely my own.

Gemma Catherine Ryan,

January 2000.

# Table of Contents:

Glossary

Abstract

## Glossary of Terms

ABC - Australian Broadcasting Corporation

ANC - African National Congress

BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation

CASE - Community Agency for Social Enquiry

CBO - Community-Based Organisation

CCV - Contemporary Community Values TV

FM - Frequency Modulation

GEAR - Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme

IBA - Independent Broadcasting Authority

ITV - International Television

MNET - Electronic Media Network

NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation

NNTV - National Network Television

RDP - Reconstruction and Development Programme

SABC - South African Broadcasting Corporation

SATRA - South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority

TRC - Truth and Reconciliation Commission

**Abstract:**

This dissertation attempts to outline general problems regarding the appropriateness of the concept of public service broadcasting in the late 1990s, a direct result of the liberalisation of the global broadcasting environment. The work is an assessment of the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate, the general hypothesis being that the SABC has failed to fulfill its public service mandate due to its inability to remain financially stable and politically independent from the government of the day. The research examined feelings and opinions regarding the concept of public service broadcasting within the SABC in order to discover whether current changes in the broadcasting environment have influenced the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate. The assumption is that if the concept of public service broadcasting is shifting, commitment to the principles underlying public broadcasting will shift and therefore public broadcasters are no longer working along traditional lines.

The research concludes that the SABC is facing many of the same problems that public broadcasters the world over have faced during the 1990s: the lack of stable funding, the withdrawal of financial support from the government in the face of increasing competition from other broadcasters and the resulting move towards a more business-like, strategic approach are all traits identified amongst public broadcasters the world over. This does not mean to say that the SABC's situation is not unique in some senses, for example it has been far more subject to political trajectory than many other public broadcasters due to its past status as a state broadcaster and its operation in a strongly political environment. The SABC also faces large-scale criticism from the South African press, which has proved to be an obstacle for the SABC with regard to its ability to move beyond its past. The fact that challenges facing the SABC are not new suggests that the changing environment is not catering for public service broadcasting and therefore its principle of a distancing from vested interests needs to be rethought.

**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

The aim of this study is to explore how the concept of public service broadcasting is being redefined in the current commercially-dominated broadcasting environment both within South Africa and in the world in general. Public service broadcasting can be loosely defined as broadcasting solely for the bettering of society, as opposed to broadcasting for financial gain (Tracey, 1998). This bettering of society is achieved through such tools as educating and developing the public and providing information about different cultures and identities within the nation-state, thereby promoting cooperation and understanding. In a newly democratic country such as South Africa, public service broadcasting is necessary to allow for the building up of a national identity and national consciousness from which all South Africans, regardless of colour, culture, age or location, can draw. Media's role in the public sphere is to become an overall representative of the people, in other words, media, as one of the chief institutions of the public sphere, is entrusted with ensuring a society is, to a certain degree, democratically representative. Therefore media plays a pivotal role in the workings of democracy through its association with the public sphere (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Negus, 1996), hence its importance in the modern democratic state:

'mass media technologies and institutions serve as the medium of democratic

communication and citizenship' (Garnham, 1992 cited in Barnett, 1998: 552).

If media forms are to serve democratic communication and citizenship they themselves must become democratic. In ensuring democracy within the media it is important that broadcasters are structurally and organisationally sound, organised on a national or regional level in a democratic manner, and that they create programming that appeals on an individual level, rather than solely to majority groupings. Democratic media and democratic society are interdependent phenomenon: a democratic society depends entirely on the informed populace making political choices, something which will only be possible if media is democratic. A public service broadcaster, as previously mentioned, is a binding source in society, joining the general population together under the notion of citizens in a democracy. While this is important, a public service broadcaster must also be democratic enough to recognise

difference and diversity: citizen is only one cultural identity that people engage in on a daily basis.

If a public service broadcaster is such a vital tool in uniting, building and reinforcing a uniquely South African cultural identity, it is important that the SABC, as the official national public broadcaster in South Africa for the past six years, be effective in fulfilling its public service principles. A public service broadcaster as a democratic force is underdeveloped in South Africa, hence a public broadcaster has an exceptionally dynamic role to play in a country like South Africa which has historically lacked a public arena in which, ideally, all citizens within the country could access:

> "Within the new era, major institutions of public life in South Africa are now being critically examined, reviewed and reshaped to concur with the new required norms of public accountability, political, social and cultural values. Many of these values, particularly those related to equality and empowerment are linked to public broadcasting. Consequently, a relationship has been drawn that channels PSB (public service broadcasting) into reinforcing and guiding the political, social and cultural processes of the entire social body" (Hwengwere, 1995:1).

The potential impact a public service broadcaster can have on a country and its inhabitants explains why the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate appears to have become such a topical issue within South African public institutions.

While the potential positive impact a public service broadcaster can have on society is indeed vast, accusations have been levelled against the concept regarding its elitism in both control and content. John Thompson (1990) argues that public service broadcasting is an elitist service run by a specific group of individuals who dictate their values to the public in the guise of the dominant values within the society. It is an institution that traditionally has a close relationship with the government of the day. Government ideally maintained all institutions that ran for the good of the public and therefore the elites in question are often those that hold political power. It has been claimed that the main weakness of public service broadcasting lies in the fact that it was created at a specific time and place and is therefore unlikely to survive in the future, commercially-driven, liberalised broadcasting environment.

This issue has become compounded within the SABC: a broadcaster trying belatedly, in the late 1990s ( long after many public broadcasters ceased to be public in character), to fulfill a public service mandate at a time when global broadcasting trends are very much geared towards more commercial, market-oriented broadcasting. This will naturally have an effect on the approach that the SABC takes to its public service principles by virtue of the fact that South Africa is now a member of the global market. This researcher wishes to explore attitudes and opinions within the SABC regarding the concept of public service broadcasting and whether these are being effected by the current commercial domination of the broadcasting environment, resulting in a move away from the fulfilment of traditional public service principles at the SABC.

The amount of criticism levelled against the SABC by other public institutions, mostly the press, have led to accusations of corruption, political manoeuvring and ultimately the failure to fulfill a public service mandate. Public opinion within South Africa, as seen through the media, seems to favour a view of the SABC as a corrupt, ineffective institution that has not successfully repositioned itself away from the government of the day and therefore still maintains a relationship with the government that can be viewed with much suspicion. This research finds these views relevant because media's role in society is to both reflect and shape public opinion. This research utilises these media opinions when conducting this research, for example many of the questions asked were based on issues outlined in the press. This was done in order to compare these internal opinions with opinions within South African newspapers in order to discern whether or not they are overly negative towards the SABC. It is the belief of this researcher that if this proved to be the case, it would then be safe to assume that the print media in South Africa has condemned transformation at the SABC. These opinions are proof of an ideological hurdle within the South African public sphere that the SABC has not, as yet, overcome. The SABC is a public service broadcaster which lacks the support of most other public service institutions, for example the press and other lobbying groups. These overwhelmingly negative opinions regarding the SABC in its new role as public broadcaster to the nation may in the long run result in the SABC pursuing more commercial forms of broadcasting in order to further distance itself from its past role as a state broadcaster.

Research is structured around the hypothesis that the SABC's inability to remain financially stable and politically independent from the government of the day has led to its failure to fulfill a public service mandate. Distancing from vested interests, an important element of public service broadcasting which includes both financial and political interests, forms the conceptual basis of this hypothesis. Analysis of data was therefore structured around proving or disproving these two claims.

Chapter 2 looks at public service broadcasting as an element of the public sphere, highlighting the fact that an effective public service broadcaster, as with the Habermasian view of an effective public sphere, is devoid of market or state interests. Public service broadcasting as a representative of the public sphere is important in order to ensure the successful functioning of democracy within a country and therefore South Africa, as a newly-democratic country, needs to ensure that its public institutions like the SABC are indeed effective institutions. This chapter introduces and explores the concepts of the public sphere, public service broadcasting and the relationship between the two. Chapter 3 deals with the decline of the concept of public service broadcasting in the late 1990s, examining the political, ideological, economic and cultural obstacles facing public service broadcasters worldwide and in South Africa specifically. These have made it impossible for public service broadcasters to operate along the same lines as before. The importance of public service broadcasting within the constructed nation-state is also outlined. Chapter 4 examines the Reithian concept of public service broadcasting on which broadcasters the world over, in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, are based. This chapter traces the history of the BBC, comparing it to the SABC and the changes that it has rapidly undertaken in the past few years since the democratisation of the broadcasting environment. Chapter 5 deals with aspects of policy-making for public service broadcasting in the South African environment, examining government approaches towards the SABC regarding policy and legislation and how this in turn has effected the SABC's organisational approach to its public service mandate. Chapter 6 sets out necessary components of a public mandate, introducing the practical problems that exists within each one at the SABC. Naturally, these components closely echo the themes uncovered in the analysis. It also examines past research on the SABC and outlines the specific operational obstacles facing the public service broadcaster as

it attempts to fulfill its mandate. Chapter 7 deals with methodology, setting out approaches taken in the research and the methods and tools that were used in the analysis of data. Chapter 8 examines the research findings and results.

Chapter 2

# The Public Sphere and Public Service Broadcasting

## The Twentieth-Century Public Sphere

The public sphere can be defined as the realm of social life where the exchange of information takes place and views regarding questions that are of common concern are aired, in order that public opinions may be formed (Dahlgren, 1995). This belief, along with many other beliefs regarding the public sphere, has its roots in the work of Habermas and his analysis of a bourgeois public sphere which evolved in the 17th century coffee houses, salons, table societies and literary societies of France, Germany and England. Habermas believed that the bourgeois public sphere was created as a space where dialogical communication about political, economic, social and cultural issues could be conducted that was free from constraints of both the state and commercial, capitalist interests - within these public groups, ones social status and economic standing were disregarded and thus the concept of public became, for the first time, an 'inclusive' concept. This, coupled with the advantage of easy access, meant that the meetings became the meeting-place for a range of different people, ideally from varying classes, but mainly the upper, upper-middle and what became known as the new 'bourgeois' classes whose livelihood was based on the capitalist commodification of cultural forms that was beginning to take place. Hence the development of the bourgeois public sphere was closely related to the consolidation of capitalism, it developed a distinctive nature as the result of capitalism and the creation of private markets for the buying and selling of cultural forms. It gained momentum during the decline of free trade and the return of protectionism in the nineteenth century, when oligopolistic mergers were leading to an increasing need for state intervention in order to assume a level of equality in the marketplace, hence public interventions in what was up until then defined as the 'private realm' began (Habermas, 1989). State and society became fused into a single functioning sphere that could no longer be differentiated according to the concepts of 'public' and 'private', hence the political public sphere developed as groups of private people came together in public places.

Habermas's work on the public sphere heralded a move away from a simple dichotomisation of public representation occurring through either the free market or state, instead identifying the public sphere as 'the fourth principle', an arena that existed between the realm of public authority - the state - and civil society - a term that included the intimate family sphere and the private sphere of commodity production and exchange (Habermas, 1989; Stevenson, 1995; Negt & Kluge, 1993). This meant that Habermas's work greatly expanded the concept of a public sphere and theorists following Habermas were able to look at threats to the public sphere emerging from both the development of oligopolistic private capitalist markets and the development of the modern interventionist welfare state. Naturally, the scale of modern society dictates that not everyone can physically participate in the public sphere, the concept of public 'does not necessarily necessitate general accessibility'(Habermas, 1989), especially, in the case of Habermas's theory, for those who lacked the educational, financial and social benefits of being members of the upper and middle classes within society.

Habermas, as a critical modernist, believed that modern capitalist media technologies that heralded the age of mass consumption and commodification of the cultural form had led to the disintegration of the public sphere:

> 'When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labour also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public (the public sphere), rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode' (Habermas, 1989:163).

Habermas made a distinction between literary or 'high' culture that had characterised the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in coffee houses, salons, literary societies and table societies and what he defined as the 'consumerist culture' spread by the modern mass media. He believed that this commodified cultural form with its increasing tendency towards entertainment, leisure, and other forms of 'low' culture, its large-scale nature which disallowed 'talking back' and its increasing availability within the private sphere of consumption was stifling the public's ability to engage in rational-critical debate regarding important political and social issues and hence the lack of 'public' nature of the public sphere and an increasing tendency towards 'pseudo-publicness'. This had implications for modern

forms of citizenry which grew increasingly privatised as issues of public concern and interest were trivialised and glamourised in the pursuit of profit:

> '...with the double condition of the restriction of the public to private people as members of civil society and the restriction of their rational-critical debate to the foundations of civil society as a sphere of private control, the old basis for a convergence of opinions has also collapsed. A new one is not brought about merely because the private interests inundating the public sphere hold on to its faked version' (Habermas, 1989:195).

Habermas and his critical views regarding the annihilation of the 'public' through capitalist private interests means that his work is usually used in defence of public service broadcasting, the general argument being that the deregulation of national public services is a threat to democratic citizenship in that it delivers control of our information into the hands of international conglomerates (Stevenson, 1995). However, there are weaknesses in Habermas's work based on its application in the modern context: Firstly, Habermas's analysis of the bourgeois public sphere is a historical concept, but one which is not grounded in actual physical circumstances within a country. Because of this he fails to recognise the tension that exists between the state, economy and the public sphere within countries (ibid.,). For example, the South African government and its control of the information flow within the public sphere through structures like a national state broadcaster. This is a major shortcoming if we are to apply his work to understanding the role public service broadcasters have and will play in respective countries around the world. It is very difficult to banish state and private interests from the public sphere. In his analysis of the four analytic dimensions of the public sphere Dahlgren (1995) identifies one of these dimensions as policy issues, in other words, organisational, financial and legal frameworks for media institutions. This policy that defines the public sphere is largely shaped by forces and actors that are located *within the state* and *within the economy*. Therefore a public sphere in the modern democratic state is never totally devoid of public or private interests.

Secondly, Habermas directs all his attention towards the production and content of cultural forms (Stevenson, 1995), rather than instead looking at the context in which these messages

are received and the social relations which pervade these contexts. This explains his brash conclusion that modern media forms have extinguished the public sphere. If we look within contexts of reception we recognise that 'public' has not disappeared but rather, as Thompson (1990) identifies, a new kind of publicness has come into existence in the modern age. Like Habermas, Thompson recognises that the 'mediazation', as he terms it, of modern cultural forms has reconceptualised the public sphere. However, unlike Habermas, Thompson explores the social contexts and relations of audience reception and concludes that this mediazation has led to a change in social relations and a new kind of 'publicness' being formed as culture becomes increasingly mediated. Therefore, increasing availability of information due to new media technologies means the concept of public is no longer spatial and dialogical in character. If the concept of public is no longer spatial and dialogical in character, then the concept of citizenship is no longer spatial and dialogical in character and thus democratic representation does not require a physical public sphere. Nevertheless, Thompson goes on to point out that this does not then mean that media reception is no longer a social process, it merely means that there is no singular, uniform site of reception. Media reception has taken on a new form, for example the concept of discursive elaboration which looks at how media messages become elaborated by recipients of the message to other individuals, none of whom originally received the message (Thompson, 1990). Thus Thompson provides us with contemporary examples of interaction within a new kind of public sphere. Habermas's favouring of the origins and content of cultural forms means he overemphasises the media's role as purveyors of a dominant ideology and ignores characteristics that ensure a range of different experience with regard to information reception in the public sphere, issues concerning identity, for example gender, race and ethnicity. These ensure that the public sphere remains a subjective ideological experience (Dahlgren, 1995). This issue of subjectivity is also relevant when examining the concept of citizenship: our citizenship depends on commonality within society which is based on our culture, who we are, and most importantly how we see ourselves through exterior terms of reference (Warner, 1997; Dahlgren, 1995). Just as citizenship requires cultural integration into the 'mainstream' society within the state, so too does it require political and economic integration in order to become a source of reference.

Thirdly, Habermas's work has a very limited grasp on the local and global public spheres that exist today. Availability and accessibility means public spheres are operating on local, national and global levels and this negates the use of his work in defence of public service broadcasting's continued existence in the modern environment:

> "Policy goals of integrating different social groups 'vertically' into a single nation-state are increasingly in tension with the 'horizontal' integration of individuals and social groups across national boundaries that transnational systems of production, distribution and consumption of cultural commodities has facilitated" (Collins, 1991 cited in Barnett, 1998:552).

Cultural identity in a global era has moved beyond the realm of the national, and is operating simultaneously on the global, local and national level. Stuart Hall (1992; 1993) suggests that there are three potential consequences of the modern era on cultural identity: national identity is being eroded, defensive national and/or exclusivist local identities are being strengthened, new hybrid identities are being developed which are no longer confined to space and place. Habermas does not provide us with a frame of reference for identity formation outside of national boundaries and therefore his work is increasingly outdated in a global context.

The fact that Habermas wrote at a specific time and documented a specific historical path of development means that his work lacks applicability in the modern context, especially if we wish to examine transformations in the nature of a public service broadcaster in the modern era. Berger (1998) points out that Habermas's concept of the public sphere has since been 'de-romanticised' and nowadays it is a recognisable fact that a public sphere is not necessarily about rational thought, nor is it merely about information as opposed to frivolous entertainment. Nevertheless, Habermas made some very important contributions to literature on the public sphere, recognising it as ideally distinct from both state and private interests, something which the public broadcaster in the modern age has constantly aspired to be:

> "The role of a public sphere outside of a single source of power (the state) seems to be something that transcends both North and South, and has value for all societies" (Berger, 1998:605).

In order to make Habermas's work more relevant in the contemporary era, it is necessary to supplement his views with those of Thompson, whose work regarding the public sphere and

public service broadcasting was more suited to the contemporary environment. This dissertation wishes to explore whether the SABC, as a public broadcaster, has failed to remain distinct from state and private interests and will thus make use of Habermas's ideas regarding the public sphere as a distinct 'fourth principle' within society, a sphere of democratic communication and citizenship that is independent of the state and capitalist private interests. This dissertation wishes to explore the ever-changing nature of a public broadcaster in an ever-changing communications environment, how the nature of public service broadcasting has been forced to undergo drastic changes as ideological, technological and economic environments around the public service broadcaster have changed dramatically. In order to do this more contemporary theorists will be used.

## Public Service Broadcasting as an Element of the Public Sphere

As previously stated, a public sphere which works efficiently in a democratic state must be seen as independent of both the market and the state (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Garnham, 1997). Public service broadcasting, as an institution, fulfills three ideal functions: Firstly, it has historically occupied an institutional space that has some independence from both the economy and the state. Secondly, it provides a national arena for a diversity of social groups to communicate with one another. Thirdly, it speaks to the public as citizens in a democracy rather than consumers in a market (Stevenson, 1995).

Public service broadcasting appeals to social citizenship because people may be surviving physically but socially they run the risk of becoming isolated. Public service broadcasting is designed to cater to this need (van Steenbergen, 1994). This has become especially important due to the theoretical shifts that have occurred in recent years regarding the role of both the market and state in social life: the undermining of the nation-state that has occurred in recent times; the public sphere is no longer the preferred cultural mode: there is a continuing focus on television as a privatised, domestic mode of consumption; the creation of the ever-widening gap between the information 'haves' and 'have-nots', heralded by our entry into the technological age; and finally, the shift to international markets, or rather the 'globalisation phenomenon'. What has essentially happened is the cultural and ideological shift towards market forces in the last two decades has led to the dominant definition of public information

being shifted radically, away from public good towards a more privately appropriable commodity (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Tracey, 1998; Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990; Garnham, 1997; Tomaselli, 1994; Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994; Barnett, 1998; Paterson, 1998; Berger, 1998) Herman & McChesney identify similar threats to the public sphere. Firstly, they look at government control and censorship which is widespread in both First and Third world countries. They also speak about the few countries where public broadcasters were previously former colonial government broadcasting monopolies which have been taken over by independent regimes and used in more or less the same way for the benefit of the regime. They then go on to cite the BBC as a strong example of a public broadcaster that remained relatively impartial and cultivated the public sphere to a remarkable degree. In addition, private systems of control are a threat to the public sphere because they ensure that only a narrow class of individuals are represented in the broadcasting industry - the control of media technology is based on ownership and control in the media industry and thus a small sector of the population, as opposed to a majority, participate in the public sphere. The nature of the modern communications industry ensures that ownership becomes concentrated over time, thus aligning the media more closely with large corporate interests. Private systems of control will depend on advertising revenue as a source of income, and will therefore find it necessary to serve advertiser's interests in order to prosper. Serving these interests will lead to a tendency to be politically conservative and hostile towards criticism of the status quo from which they benefit. Globalisation of the media has also had an effect on the public sphere that can be construed as both negative and positive. Positively, globalisation of the media provides competition for complacent state-controlled systems, allowing for the creation of a global culture and an enhancement of understanding of the different cultures, for example of carryover of some of the positive values of the West, like women's rights.

Nevertheless, on a more negative note, the commercialisation taking place alongside globalisation is slowly changing the public sphere as we know it. Some theorists believe that it is totally eroding the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Herman & McChesney, 1997), others feel that the advent of technology and globalisation forces have created a need to adapt Habermasian theory regarding the public sphere to conditions in societies where social and

communicative relations are mediated through time and space (Thompson, 1990; Garnham, 1997). Initially theories were based on the more controllable environment of face-to-face, literary interaction which was also far easier to access than nowadays where a mobilisation of resources such as television, phones, faxes and e-mail are necessary to enter into the public sphere. The increasing proliferation of a range of different identities provided by mediated communications requires a study of the content of communication and also allows for an increase in inauthentic identity. For example, Garnham points out the clash between democratic politics and the communication field, as politics has adapted to society through structures of representation, increasing the level of in-authenticity that occurs in the political arena. The idea of communication to a 'community' creates a tendency towards a suppression of difference, which results in exclusivist policies:

> "The vision of small, face-to-face, decentralised units that this ideal promotes, moreover, is an unrealistic vision for transformative politics in mass urban society" (Young, 1990 cited in Dahlgren, 1995:140).

Therefore genuine inclusion in a community would depend on throwing away these notions of a unified public sphere. Citizenship, like the public sphere itself, should cease to be a living force and instead become an internalised value system (Garnham, 1997).

Theorists disagree on whether or not these new trends are allowing a liberation of the public sphere. Perhaps, as Young (1990 cited in Dahlgren, 1995) points out, it is more of a metamorphosis of the concept itself, a rethinking of our approach towards the public sphere. To imply that it is inauthentic is to imply the old-fashioned notion of a unified public sphere, something which we know no longer exists.

Where does this leave public service broadcasting? If the public sphere as we know it is being reconstituted due to the double threat of globalisation and market forces, then the institution of public service broadcasting as a democratic mode of representation is under severe threat. The current neoliberal trends in the global environment have resulted in a crisis in the current broadcasting and communications field as opposing models favour state intervention and consumer sovereignty respectively in the development of audio-visual media. Two core elements of the contemporary communications era are having a negative

effect on public service broadcasting. Firstly, national goals to encourage economic growth through the stimulation of new markets with high-tech communications equipment. Secondly, transnational corporations offering high-tech satellite systems for whom national boundaries will no longer be relevant in terms of policy creation (Tracey, 1998). How one sees the ability of public service broadcasting to 'weather the storm' so to speak depends on ones conceptualisation of public service broadcasting, an ideology that seems to lack an adequate working definition, perhaps due to the fact that concepts of 'public' and 'community' on which it is based are highly contestable, especially in the South African experience (Mpofu, 1996).

**Public Service Broadcasting**

A public service broadcaster is defined by a set of basic principles or characteristics that are based on the ultimate belief that broadcasting can and must be used to nurture society. Lord Reith, the second director-general of the BBC and a firm supporter of public service broadcasting, identified four main elements of public broadcasting: rejection of commercialism, the extension of availability of programmes to everyone in the community, the establishment of unified control over broadcasting, and the maintenance of high standards of programming (1924 cited in Tomaselli, 1996:127). Tracey points out that pioneers of the public broadcasting ideal, such as Lord Reith, assumed an entirely elitist approach towards public service broadcasting. The film industry, for example, was seen as silly and vulgar and a direct consequence of giving the public what they wanted. Hence Tracey's accusation that the sentiments of public service broadcasting, standards, quality, range excellence and social enrichment, rest on a set of ill-explored assumptions regarding the sociological organisation of modern culture(1998: 262). The British Broadcasting Act of 1981 required that

> "commercial broadcasting be conducted as a public service by a public authority set up for the purpose to disseminate programmes of information, education and entertainment of a high technical standard with a proper balance and range in their subject matter" (Tomaselli, 1996).

This definition advocates balance, range and standards of education and entertainment but provides no detail regarding how one can achieve those ends. Rather than providing a working definition of public broadcasting, this is merely providing elements of the concept

itself. These elements would then be operationalised by the broadcaster, something which leaves them open to a certain amount of interpretation. The idea that certain people could be relied on as 'custodians of culture' was never challenged because the history of broadcasting is embedded within a social order where hierarchy has always been assumed and reproduced in the belief that it must have merit. Hence the Marxist belief that civil society was to be equated with bourgeois society, a phenomenon that only the upper classes could be involved in (Dahlgren, 1995). So it is the very structure of public service broadcasting, as a representative of the broader society surrounding it, that necessitates the idea of cultural custodians  Because of this, it is necessary that someone decides on the value codes that will guide the public service broadcaster, in other words what is quality broadcasting and what is not:

> "The most damning criticism of quality is that it smacks of paternalism, that is the opposite of equality. Yet to totally reject the concept of quality is to give up cultural responsibility, to forego any ability to judge or evaluate television programming" (John van Zyl, 1994:12)

The most important question we can ask about a broadcasting system is whether it is an adequate reflection for and of society, whether it functions as a set of channels through which people are able to communicate with one another (van Zyl, 1994). In order to do this, we have to be able to assume a level of cultural responsibility in evaluating the programming that it provides for us.

There are eight principles of public service broadcasting which attempt to merge ideological goals and empirical conditions. Naturally, these eight goals advocate an ideal-type of public broadcaster and sound much more simple in theory than they would be in practice, where they become increasingly open to interpretation. Goals of public broadcasting are often mutually antagonistic and therefore broadcasting policy will become:

> "a matter of trading off the (partial) achievement of one (or more) goal against the (partial) neglect of another(s)" (Collins, 1992:28).

Firstly a public service broadcaster should practice a universality of availability. No one should be disadvantaged through their locale. In the 'information age' reception has become a basic household right. The idea behind this is that public broadcasters serve citizens in a

democracy, as opposed to maximising customers in a market. If one has, therefore, defined ones audience as citizens of a country one has an obligation to reach all of them (Tracey, 1998; Collins, 1992). The second principle speaks of universality of appeal, programming needs to cater to the many different tastes and interests in society. Serving national diversity is very different from giving people what they want. A public broadcaster should try to open us up to new tastes and interests in society. This operates under the premise that quality programmes will please a lot of people a lot of the time and everybody some of the time (Tracey, 1998). Collins (1992) believes that a broadcaster serving a newly democratic society like South Africa should be accountable to citizens and responsive to changing needs and desires of the audience, in order to ensure that audience preferences, as opposed to elitist tastes of producers or political views of journalists, are satisfied. Mpofu (1996) however, has questioned the relationship between public and private broadcasters by suggesting that it would be beneficial for public broadcasters if they were to complement, rather than compete with, private broadcasters. This could provide sectors with a unity of purpose, over and above their operating in isolation, which is especially detrimental for a public service broadcaster. Indeed, reports in the media field have identified commercial broadcasters paying an ever-increasing amount of attention to public issues, for example children's education programmes, for two reasons. Firstly, public broadcasters themselves have provided a relatively low standard of programming and thus have become vulnerable to replacement in their role as educators, and secondly commercial broadcasters wish to reach more consumers, for example, advertising children's products during educational television for children. It is the belief of this researcher that it is not in the best interest, nor is it economically or ideologically viable in the 1990's, for public broadcasters to operate in a vacuum as they become complacent and jaded, lacking competition and resources and not living up to the expectations that are placed on them. Universality of both types is an important principle for a public service broadcaster in that:

> "The provision of a universal service committed to the delivery of high quality forms of information remains a key component of modern forms of citizenship" (Stevenson, 1995:64).

The third principle of public broadcasting is providing for minorities, especially those that have been/are being disadvantaged by physical and social circumstances. Here, the public

broadcaster plays a dual role: to provide access to these different groups, to provide them with the opportunity to speak to one another and 'voice their dissent'. The broadcaster also provides these groups with coverage of their histories, interests and concerns, as well as providing for their different cultural and linguistic needs. Under a communication system, these groups have neither a large amount of purchasing power and political power and would therefore probably be ignored (Tracey, 1998; Collins, 1992). The fourth principle is serving the public sphere through the cultivation of a sense of national identity and a sense of broad community,

> "........it understands that while within civil society individuals pursue their own private self-interests, it is within the public sphere that they function as citizens" (Tracey, 1998:29).

According to this belief, in the current climate of multi-channelling, only a public broadcaster that is well-funded can resist the temptation to participate in transnational production and distribution (Tracey, 1998; Collins, 1992). Within the current broadcasting environment, a well-funded public broadcaster would be very difficult to locate, because financial constraints for public service broadcasters is a global problem with both North and South experiencing funding problems for 'state-financed', public media (Berger, 1998). The fifth principle is a commitment to the education of the public. 'Education' can be seen in two different ways, firstly as a role of the overly paternalistic public broadcaster that wishes to cultivate public taste and secondly on the more practical level as a formal educational tool for the youth through such initiatives as daytime school broadcasting and other formal learning services. This has all but disappeared as public broadcasters enter into commercial environments. It is interesting to note that commercial broadcasters are beginning to challenge public broadcasters in fulfilling this function. This is suggestive of a melding of the two responsibilities, public and commercial. If commercial broadcasters fulfill public services, public broadcasters will assume more commercial activities in order to ensure their continuing relevance in contemporary society (Tracey, 1998). This could then lead to the disintegration of public broadcasting. The sixth principle is the practice of autonomy, or rather a distancing from all vested interests, arising from the belief that all programmes which are funded by advertising are influenced by the drive to maximise consumers (Tracey, 1998). Likewise, programmes that are funded by the government often assume the tones of 'his

majesty's voice' (HMV). Public broadcasting services have always defined their role in terms of liberal-pluralistic principles which may recognise radical opinion, but nevertheless choose to stick to mainstream political and social ideals (Mpofu, 1996) This tendency makes them a perfect tool for ideological manipulation. It is therefore imperative that a public broadcaster ensure that it remains independent of all vested interests. Collins (1992) believes in the necessity of economic viability within a broadcaster, as well as the efficient use of scarce resources, scarce resources referring to frequency availability. It is vital that provision of services in a country is matched to the ability of the society to pay for these services. For example there is no point in having a subscription channel fulfilling public service responsibilities when the majority of the population cannot afford to pay for the service. The seventh principle insists that broadcasting should be structured in order to encourage competition in good programming rather than aiming for competition over numbers (Tracey, 1998). This relates back to the emphasis on quality, over and above quantity. Finally, public broadcasting should operate alongside the belief that broadcasting should liberate, rather than restrict, the programme-maker. This principle focuses internally on the broadcaster itself, stressing the need for creativity, experimental broadcasting and younger programme-makers in order to ensure the broadcaster is provided with a more dissenting or radical voice (Tracey, 1998). Theorists (Hwengwere, 1995; Mpofu, 1996) also identify universality of payment as a principle. This principle recognises that rather than placing emphasis on the origins of funds for public service broadcasters, we should emphasise the principles, philosophies and mechanisms of programme selection and commissioning that influences public broadcasters integrity. In other words, public broadcasting 'should be both defined and assessed in terms of a commitment to a set of principles rather than in terms of the ownership or financing of broadcasting bodies.' (Mpofu, 1996:11). There are many different avenues of funding for public broadcasting, for example, Canada sustains its public services through partial funding from advertising and governmental grants, Australia sustains its public services solely through governmental grants, Germany solely through advertising (Mpofu, 1996). In other words, the system that the revenue flows in is more important than the actual revenue itself and perhaps we should not allow ourselves to become focussed on the means and instead see financing as the means to an end. Whether or not theorists place too much stock in the origins of funding or whether it is a case of 'whoever pays the piper plays the tune' is a

contentious issue. However, it is necessary to recognise that financial control over a broadcaster potentially enhances political or ideological power: those who control the purse-strings hold the power. Because of this, the source of funding for a public broadcaster shapes the entire nature of the institution itself, financial, political and economic interests are interdependent. This can be seen in the histories of both the BBC and the SABC. Tomaselli (1994) goes on to suggest that public service broadcasting is vital for three different reasons[1], the most important being that it has the 'capacity to play such a pivotal role in the development of this country.' (1994: 130). The institution of public service broadcasting arose in Britain and has been propagated from there over the decades, with what Tomaselli acknowledges as 'varying degrees of success'. This suggests that the form of public broadcasting has the ability to adapt to its circumstances, whether or not it retains its 'moral fibre' during these transformations is debatable. Tomaselli identifies four traditional Reithian characteristics of a public broadcaster: financial independence from both government and commercial sources; programme balance, in other words a requirement to educate, inform and entertain; geographic balance through provision of a nation-wide service in return for a basic fee; political impartiality. It is highly ambitious to expect a public broadcaster to remain financially independent from both the government and commercial activities, the two main sources of funding, and still manage to provide balanced programming for an entire nation. As we shall see, characteristics or principles ascribed to public broadcasting are more often than not idealistic and highly ambitious, relating back to Mpofu's observation that we appear to lack a working definition of a public service broadcaster.

Public service broadcasting has never been a precise term:

"the broad commitment [is] to provide and to protect mixed and complementary programme schedules. It includes a commitment to certain minority programmes and to covering, as far as possible, different genres of programme making. Within each genre -whether within drama, current affairs, comedy, children's programmes or continuing education - there is a full range of programming, a demonstrably broad

---

[1] Firstly, it represents one of the two archetypal forms of broadcasting, the other being commercial. Secondly, due to technological, ideological and economic global threats, it is now, more than ever, under threat.

church. Public service broadcasting is driven by higher aspiration than solely to provide entertainment. Public service broadcasting is the attempt to make quality popular programmes. It does justice to human experience. It deals in more than stereotypes. It adds to the quality of people's lives. Its programme genre's reflect the complexity of human beings" (Jonathon Powell, sometime programme controller for the BBC, cited in Tomaselli, 1994).

On the other end of the spectrum, we have:

"a form of social communication which consists of the distribution and sharing of information according to needs within a co-operative community" (Raymond Williams, cited in van Zyl, 1994:11).

This lack of a workable, useable definition of public broadcasting (Powell's long and involved definition is thorough, but cumbersome, failing to define the essence of a public broadcaster, while Williams' definition is shorter but totally lacking in empirical content) that is literal rather than metaphorical, can perhaps be blamed for the tendency of public broadcasters to sell out to commercial interests. However, as was mentioned earlier, this commercialisation of the air-waves is also the direct result of structural-ideological changes of the past two decades, mainly the trend towards all-encompassing market forces.

Chapter 3

# The Decline of the Concept of Public Service Broadcasting in the Late 1990s

**Obstacles to Public Service Broadcasting**

The attacks on public broadcasting are coming from three different directions:

> "Public service broadcasting faces not only the danger of slow assassination by the thugs of cable and satellite, fiscal restraint, and shifting ideological moods, but the threat of suicide" (Rowland Jr. & Tracey, 1990:8).

Technologically, the new communications strategies set up by satellite, cable and video are fragmenting the audience. Economically, the continuing decline of public funds available to public service broadcasters is threatening their existence, while the financial gap between public and commercially-funded broadcasters continues to widen. Ideologically, public service broadcasting is coming under attack from both the left and the right, for different reasons. The left claims national broadcasters are elitist, unaccountable and exclusive, catering to 'civil society' rather than the greater public and therefore not serving 'public good'. The right, on the other hand, questions the whole concept of public culture, in line with the current liberal-economic trend of audience fragmentation and the ever-increasing popularity of the phrase 'individualism'. The capabilities of technology to fragment the audience are overlapping with the ideological move away from a belief in 'public culture' (Stevenson, 1995; van den Bulcke & van Poecke, 1996). They also identify the role that the public broadcasters themselves are playing in their own demise as they seem entirely willing to give up their public service roles.

Commercial interest in broadcasting has gained in stature since the 1920s and 30s when governments feared the ideological potential for hegemony that lay within the electronic media and thus hastened to ensure that it remained directly under their control. This gain is mainly due to cost involved in running a broadcaster and the ever-increasing demand for popular programming. The main ideological battle waged against public broadcasting concerned the fact that:

"Public broadcasters were portrayed as more resistant to diversity of voice than newer, private forms of control would be. Even when many public service systems broadened their range of programme taste, their aloof image persisted" (Rowland Jr. & Tracey, 1990:11).

Thus it was argued that the airwaves could only be truly liberalised under a commercial infrastructure that would open up the broadcasting field and allow for more choice. Public broadcasters were also critically seen as monopolies guided by issues of self-interest that included a bourgeois interest in maintaining class structure and power bases.

In the wrong hands, public service broadcasting can be

"dreary, lacking in innovation, obsessed with providing minorities with opportunities for communicating with themselves (the ultimate in marginalisation)and obstinately refusing to extend the creative possibilities within the medium. In other words, it could simply be a civil society broadcaster" (Van Zyl, 1994:12).

This is suggestive of a broadcaster failing to build an active public sphere and instead centring around private interests, lacking in political content and failing to draw on audiences as citizens rather than individual consumers. Public broadcasters, in order to operate effectively, require 'a post-capitalist civil society guaranteed by democratic state institutions' (Keane, 1990 cited in Tomaselli, 1994:137), in other words democratic state institutions need to be in place to ensure that private needs within civil society are not given preference over public needs of citizenship. The likelihood of this occurring has lessened considerably in the past decade, with ideological trends advocating a move away from modern functional differentiations between public and private spheres and towards a postmodern blurring of the two boundaries. Modern views imply standardised language and culture where citizens are able to find their collective identities which are reinforced via centrally organised national institutions like media and education that are state supported (van den Bulcke & van Poecke, 1996). Nowadays postmodern views encourage a breakdown of these collectivities and a celebration of difference and fragmentation. Social citizenship nowadays tend to emphasise entitlement, duties are not deeply felt and thus citizenship becomes a depoliticised and consumerist notion:

"One of the major negative features of consumerism as an ideological force is that it

mitigates against collective identities and actions: solutions are always individualistic"
(Dahlgren, 1995:148).

Public service broadcasters are suddenly no longer assured of stable audiences that it can divide into distinct categories, instead having to deal with a public that segments itself on the basis of personal preference. This has a distinct effect on the nature of public service broadcasters:

> "More and more the idea takes hold that broadcasting is a business, more or less like any other, in which a broadcasting market, shaped by consumers viewing decisions arises, characterised by a pressure to gain as large a part of the audience as possible. As a result, the national character of public service broadcasting is threatened"
> (Dahlgren, 1995:148).

The modern environment is creating a tension between the identities of citizen and consumer (Robbins, 1993; Stevenson, 1995). In the modern age, the identity of citizen has become subsumed into the identity of consumer. We currently live in the age of commercialisation and with the ever-increasing commodification of, and competition between, cultural goods, audiences have become structured according to their ability to buy and sell these goods. Personal life-style, cultural taste and consumer preferences are related to particular divisions within the occupational structure of society, thus the consumption practices of citizens are structured along economic lines (Bourdieu, 1984 cited in Turner, 1994). Culture ceases to be a democratic force as a result of the fact that within a competitive market of symbolic cultural goods, a pattern of social distinction will inevitably be imposed on the market by cultural intermediaries (Turner, 1994). Citizenship is no longer a universalist notion as it becomes susceptible to economic and market forces.

This increasing commercialisation of broadcasting in general can be most effectively seen in the medium of television. Television is an industry following the goal of audience maximisation and profit, so although televison may be the public sphere's dominant medium, 'public sphering' is not television's dominant purpose (Dahlgren, 1995). Television is primarily an economic, industrial process with a whole new consumerist language which is threatening the public broadcasters domain (Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990). This supports the view of Habermas, that new media technologies and the resulting move away from literary

culture is destroying the public sphere *as we know it*. However, before we jump to conclusions and assume that postmodern ideology is resulting in an overwhelming trend towards audience fragmentation and the commodification of the concepts of national identity and citizenship, we need to recognise that among developing countries, the problems with the concept of citizenship are less to do with consumerism and postmodern ideology and more to do with social inequality, as we shall see when we examine obstacles facing the SABC. Citizenship in the developing world, especially countries with as fractious a history as South Africa, still exists in its modern ideological form as an agent of national and cultural unification.

John Thompson concurred with a view of public broadcasting as an elitist and exclusive organisation. Thompson suggested that:

> "public service broadcasting vests overall control of the institution in the hands of an elite which, by virtue of the appointment system, tends to comprise individuals drawn from a relatively narrow and privileged social background" (1990, cited in Tomaselli, 1994:128).

This appointment system will then ensure that the cultural tastes and preferences of one particular group of people will become institutionalised as the norm, resulting in the worst kind of cultural paternalism. As mentioned earlier, the running of a public service broadcaster calls into question the neutrality of concepts of 'good', 'quality' programming. What is good quality to one community is not necessarily generalisable to another community. Tomaselli points out that:

> "The criteria for 'good' or 'quality' programming is deeply controversial, without an objective basis and open to contradictory meanings readily mobilised by public and political opportunism" (1994:128).

This is one of the primary examples of the difficulty of transforming abstract ideas into practical applications in a public broadcaster. Neutrality and objectivity are revered characteristics, but realistic constraints require that a set of individuals impose their cultural values onto the broadcaster. The very framework of the institution necessitates an amount of subjectivity, the idea of media representing the people is a highly subjective approach:

> "In order to treat ones audience as real people as opposed to 'stats in skins' then a

broadcaster needs to work within a distinct cultural context" (Tracey, 1998:39).

It is precisely this need which encouraged Negt & Kluge (1993) to form their concept of the proletarian public sphere, an improvement on the bourgeois public sphere in that it recognises the difference and diversity that exists within any audience or group of citizens. In order to understand an audience, we must recognise the social factors which shape how they receive media messages:

> "Once the public sphere is defined as a horizon for the organisation of social
> experience, it follows that there are multiple and competing 'counterpublics'"
> (Hansen, cited in Negt & Kluge, 1993:xxxvi).

With the modernisation of the media and the favouring of more advanced forms of electronic media, there has been an ever-increasing tendency for broadcasting power to become more and more centralised in the hands of a few as technology becomes more advanced. Although this appears to be a paradox in that many would argue that technological development has the potential to increase the participatory abilities of the media, this argument ignores the fact that many countries around the world, and communities within countries, have incredibly limited access to these technologies due to wealth, locale and overall level of development. The fact that electronic media has lifted geographical restrictions on messages, resulting in the creation of a global village means that the space in which broadcasters can operate becomes bigger and thus broadcasters are increasingly organised in a determinate, top-down bureaucratic structure which limits access to production of the media to a few elite individuals. Public broadcasters are naturally not exempt from these changes and this issue calls into question their ability to be democratic when internally they are structured in a highly autocratic manner (Negt & Kluge, 1993). Therefore internal structure influences media messages that a broadcaster sends. The organisational structure of a public service broadcaster directly relates to its ability to be an effective broadcaster.

## Obstacles to Public Service Broadcasting in the South African Environment

The susceptibility of broadcasting institutions to the exercise of state power and government pressure is a perpetual danger to public broadcasting, especially in a country where the current public service broadcaster was a broadcaster directly under state control for many

years. The apartheid state believed that it had both a right and a duty to intervene in the running of the SABC, an issue which scars the institution even after the transition to a public broadcaster (Tomaselli, 1994). The government's choice to place the responsibility of public service broadcasting in the hands of an institution that for decades, was both elitist and racist, has made it extremely difficult for the SABC to be accepted in its new role as a public broadcaster [2]. In the eyes of the media, the broadcaster cannot seem to move away from its past as a politically biased institution. The media's reporting on the SABC suggests a backlash of public opinion, in other words people are unwilling to trust a broadcaster that, until six years ago, was run single-handedly by the state (van Zyl, 1994).

Print media in South Africa have been very critical of the SABC's attempt to transform itself from a state to a public service broadcaster. Whether this is simply print media's campaign against the SABC or a reflection of how the greater public feel about our new public broadcaster is debatable. Nevertheless, this highlights the critical-rational role literary media play in the public sphere. As Habermas, and others have pointed out, literary media is capable of engaging in rational-critical debate regarding public issues:

> "Journalism as a practice needs to be part of the public sphere by definition; and its
> significance is arguably a potential widening of the space of the public sphere"
> (Berger, 1998).

The situation in South Africa and the reception print media and journalists have given to the 'new' SABC tends to reflect Habermas's view. Critical reporting on the SABC has been extremely high, criticism is centred around the relationship between the government and the public broadcaster, signalling the high level of politicisation of the South African broadcasting environment. South African print media has been characterised by cartels for the past 25 years, with industries like Independent Newspapers and Times Media Limited dominating the print media (Clive Emden, director of Independent Media Diversity Trust cited in the Mail & Guardian, 5 March 1999). Out of the four major publishing industries in South Africa, Times Media Limited is the only one with significant black ownership. Hence critical-rational debate here is held in the hands of an elitist minority. The majority of newspapers levelling overt criticism at the SABC are naturally White-owned, middle-class,

---

[2]  See Burton & Ryan (1998)

mainstream newspapers like Financial Mail, The Sunday Times and the Mail & Guardian. Likewise, decades of hegemonic rule through public structures like the SABC have created a public lacking in critical faculties, public criticism and rational debate are phenomena that are limited mainly to the upper classes. Democracy in South Africa is something that is still reserved for those who can afford to be involved in it, people with social status and wealth. Most media in developing countries does not and has never reached beyond the elite within those countries, hence the weakness of the role of the media in ensuring democratic representation within a public sphere in the southern hemisphere (Berger, 1998). It is obstacles like this that the SABC needs to overcome in its drive to become the educator, informer and entertainer of the South African public.

One[3] of the most important requirements for politically independent broadcasting is that the broadcaster wins the public's confidence and is accepted by pressure groups such as reviewers, critics, academics, political analysts, journalists. These groups are elites who often keep their expert information about public institutions and issues private. It also needs to be accepted by what one would term the 'general public', i.e. the voters and tax payers (Tomaselli, 1994), people who pay the state for selling them a service. Looking at the South African situation, the confidence is missing in at least one of the two categories, if not both. These groups retain a large amount of suspicion towards the new SABC and its role in the broadcasting environment. Politically independent, truly public broadcasting is only achievable through consistent regulation of the broadcasting environment. However, media technologies have led to a move away from frequency scarcity and towards abundance in a multi-channel environment and this is encouraging a move away from governmental regulation (Baker, 1996; Tomaselli, 1994; Tracey, 1998; Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990) as, in the words of Michael Tracey, 'paternalism becomes passe', and no government in the age of

---

[3] The other two are:

a) a willingness of politicians to abstain from interfering with the day-to-day running of the national broadcaster.

b) the ability of broadcasters to resist such interference by remaining in control of reporting of news and current affairs.

These issues will be examined later on.

consumer sovereignty has the right to make the choice of what their informed, democratic public cannot see or hear. This makes the government's choice to turn the SABC into a public broadcaster an interesting one: the worldwide trend in broadcasting towards more commercialised, free-market policies suggests that any such attempt to indulge in institutional or legislative regulation of the broadcasting environment would be subject to much outside pressure from other commercialised broadcasting environments.

The tendency to exploit the commercial potential of national broadcasters is fast becoming a very important part of the economic doctrine of countries:

> "Under the combined pressure of these increasingly transnational and interlocked publishing, advertising, film production, financial, cable and satellite combines, by now virtually every industrial country has significantly shifted its broadcast policy towards privatisation... However, largely because of its extra national nature, privatisation is associated with few of the public service and cultural policy guarantees that were characteristic of major commercial entry a generation or more ago" (Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990:15).

For example, in the past decade in Europe there have been an incredibly large number of policy developments which are moving broadcasting away from its public roots laid down in the early 1980s. Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, the Benelux nations, Britain, France and Japan (Tracey, 1998) are all questioning the existence of their public broadcasters. However, we should not ignore the fact that this increasing trend towards commercialisation is led by the state, which will then retain a high level of control over the broadcaster:

> "The contemporary globalisation of economic processes is often presented as undermining the ability of national governments to manage and regulate the economic activities located within their territorial jurisdictions...it is more appropriate to conceptualise a restructured nation-state as playing an active part in promoting those processes routinely subsumed under the convenient rubric of 'globalisation' (Weiss, 1997 cited in Barnett, 1998:551).

Debates regarding the degree to which the government controls commercial broadcasting companies are raging all over the African continent, in Benin, Malawi, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Paterson, 1998). This allows us to recognise that the SABC, as a public

service broadcaster becoming increasingly commercial in a liberal environment, still runs the risk of being controlled by the government of the day. Thus the crucial question around broadcasting in the present environment is how liberalisation can be regulated and made consistent with the aims of nation-building, reconciliation, democratisation and cultural diversity (ibid).

With regard to developing nations like South Africa, there is a dichotomy emerging between the desire to be involved in the new technologies and the concomitant new 'age of abundance' and the desire to retain certain traditional values and systems. The information technology precipitating this change has the potential to work favourably, as well as unfavourably, for a public broadcaster (Paterson, 1998). Favourably, this technology means increased audience access and allows for more of a reflection of diversity as it has the capacity to target niches and special interest audiences. If a public broadcaster operates in a commercial arena it can exercise commercial options and thus allow itself to raise funds to ensure it operates as a successful national resource. Operating in a commercial sphere also encourages creativity and guards against stagnation. Finally, the global potential in media technology can allow for international co-productions with co-financing and can therefore allow a public broadcaster to expand its audience and a country to expand its broadcasting sphere. For example, the SABC has the potential to become Africa's entertainment broadcaster (Baker, 1996). Issues like this suggest to us that it is the definition of a public service broadcaster in the consumerist 1990s that needs to be reconceptualised: we need to resolve issues such as whether or not public broadcasters should be seeking to join the commercial bandwagon in order to make themselves financially viable. To propose that a public broadcaster should totally distance itself from commercial activities would be to reinforce the vision of a public broadcaster that existed in the 1980s, a vision which is outdated in the new political, economic and ideological environment of the 1990s. It would be idealistic to expect a public broadcaster in the 1990s to remain totally devoid of any commercial aspirations, especially seeing the main obstacle to public service broadcasting is fiscal constraints caused by the three broad environmental changes. What essentially has happened is that broadcasters have reacted to this change, they have repositioned themselves in order to cope with the increasingly commercial environment in which they find themselves,

using tactics such as

> "more aggressive and competitive scheduling to erode core programme
> commitment, to use ratings-based marketing rostrums, to pursue co-productions and
> co-financing in a frantic revenue-driven belief in international sales potential, to adopt
> commercial financial community attitudes towards generating capital, and to achieve
> organisational 'efficiency', cost-effectiveness and zero-based budgeting" (Rowland jr.
> & Tracey, 1990:20).

These have been used to varying degrees. Corporate strategies have been employed for
survival, therefore to a certain extent, commercial values and beliefs have been adopted
(Tracey, 1998). Does this then mean that public broadcasters have betrayed their ideals, or
have they merely adapted their philosophical basis to suit the hostile, insecure environment of
the 1990's? We should avoid using the dichotomy of public and commercial broadcasters, the
same type of dichotomy that was set up between quality and popular programmes in the
Reithian era. This would reinforce a narrow-minded sense of the concepts of public and
quality that refuses to take into account the fact that the ideal of public service broadcasting is
just that, an ideal, and in order to ensure a working definition of a public broadcaster in a
country like South Africa, we have to allow for the fact that lack of government funding
means commercial and public initiatives will become increasingly interlinked. To continue
this dichotomy is to condemn the future of public service broadcasting in the 1990s.
Technology, often equated with more commercial broadcasting, is not opposed to public
broadcasting. Public service broadcasting needs to stake out new terrain in the information
age (Baker, 1996).


Theorists like Rowland jr. & Tracey (1990) believe that the information age is more of a
ripple than a tidal wave and while the information age is here, it is concentrated in particular
areas among particular groups of people: the West, Transnational Corporations and the
Transnational Elite. This has potentially negative implications for the plurality of access and
diversity of voices which is supposedly symptomatic of the liberal media age (Barnett, 1998).
Thus the media in a newly-democratic society needs to be regulated and it also needs to
develop a national identity in order to ensure that we do not become culturally dominated by
western forces. Historically, broadcasting in South Africa did not build a common space for

public communication, instead it reinforced the ideas of separatism and distinct racial groups that were introduced through apartheid (Barnett, 1998). Although globalisation can lead to a weakening of national, and in many cases, a strengthening of more local identities, for example increasing ethnic fanaticism as a response to globalising forces (Lull, 1995), in developing countries like South Africa there is still an overwhelming need to cater for a national identity. The assumption is that this can be achieved through the coverage and collective consumption of events like national sports games, inaugurations and elections, among other things. However, the increasing disparities between classes and races in South Africa tend to suggest that nation-building is less about building up symbolic representation of national unity than it is about meeting the economic, political and developmental needs of its citizens. There are three broad understandings regarding the relationship between broadcasting and nation-building: Firstly, there is the belief that radio and television can disseminate symbolic messages and representations of unification and reconciliation. Secondly, the media and communications industry is seen as playing a vital role in the process of economic development and reconstruction. Thirdly, the media have been identified as having the ability to play a vital role in the extension and deepening of democratic participation in South Africa (Barnett, 1998). In the South African context, deepening of democracy is equated with deepening competition and the introduction of Black empowerment agencies into the media field. This is an economistic view of democratic media in that it pays no attention to the audience's ability to not only receive information, but to produce and distribute information as well (ibid.,). Political entrenchment means that South Africa has come nowhere near achieving a democratically-competitive media environment due to the entrenched nature of the SABC and its protection by the government of the day. This directly effects the ability of the SABC to become a democratically-representative public broadcaster that stimulates the development of a vibrant civil society in South Africa. A closer examination of the problems facing the SABC's role as a nation-building broadcaster will be undertaken later on.

Thompson sees the solution to elitist control of the broadcasting environment, from both private and state spheres, as being a form of regulated pluralism, in other words:

"the future development of media institutions should be governed, in my view, by

what I shall describe as the principle of regulated pluralism, - i.e an institutional framework should be established which would both accommodate and secure the existence of a plurality of independent media institutions in the different spheres of mass communication" (1990:262 cited in Tomaselli, 1994: 13).

This needs to occur through legislation, for example, cross-ownership between international and local broadcasters, so we are able to effectively monitor our broadcasting environment. This monitoring must retain a delicate balance between smothering investment and infrastructural development and allowing international or local monopolisation of an environment. The South African broadcasting environment is dominated privately and publicly by monopolies (Collins, 1992; Barnett, 1998; Paterson, 1998; Berger, 1998). This translates into a need for plurality within broadcasting which will allow for more competition in the broadcasting environment. If this balance is not achieved, there exists the problem of creating a stagnant, sluggish, bloated bureaucratic public service broadcaster that performs its duties at an inferior level while remaining strongly protected through the legislative body.

**The Importance of Reflecting Local Cultures**

While regulation of the broadcasting environment is necessary to guard against oligopolisation, it does not necessarily mean to say that without regulation the international broadcasting environment would become one unified homogeneous whole, operating under the control of one or two primary institutions. This view overlooks the role localised factors play in shaping the media: audience variables like gender, class, culture and locale ensure that media remains, to a certain degree, a subjective ideological experience. Community is a fairly localised phenomenon, separated between locales through culture, and most importantly, language (Tomaselli, 1994). The importance of language as a communal experience is visible through Flemish and German-Swiss public broadcasters: the Flemish broadcaster used a prestige language for broadcasting that would transcend regional differences and build national unity while the German-Swiss public broadcaster was operating in the politically sensitive environment of a German takeover and was attempting, through the use of only Swiss-German dialect, to impress upon its public that there was no German takeover (van den Bulcke & van Poecke, 1996). This is why attempts by conglomerates to create a transnational audience in Europe have failed, a campaign to establish a pan Asian-television service failed

until it included local programmes and language (Herman & McChesney, 1997). In most of the developing countries, South Africa included, local programming still attracts a bigger audience than imported products (Collins, 1992). This is probably due to the fact that people are able to relate to these programmes far better than they can relate to international programming, which will display a blandness of style and content in comparison. Cultural diversity is an important aim of public broadcasters, for as Bird (1996) points out, it is possible for local cultures to be represented in public broadcasting without being culturally dominated. A free-market environment does not ensure a diversity of products, culture or ideas. This once again points to a need for regulation in the public broadcasting sphere. So although globalisation has become the catchword of the past decade as things are getting bigger, audiences wider and messages more influential, there is still a need to operate on the level of the local, the regional, the national, in other words, the more specific. Public broadcasting in South Africa has the potential to contribute greatly to the development of a national identity, most public service broadcasters in modern industrialised countries have greatly contributed to the creation of the imagined national community, the 'us' versus 'them' (van den Bulcke & van Poecke, 1996). Ideally, in a country as culturally diverse as South Africa this should be done through encouraging participation and shaping civil society through the enhancement of small-scale settings of communication in the hope that this will provide the ability to produce and distribute information. However, in order to do this a public broadcaster needs to move away from centralised, hierarchically-structured institutions where 'the few talk to the many about the needs of the many from the standpoint of the few' (van Zyl, 1994:2). Naturally, this is a lot easier said than actually done.

This shifting of emphasis away from the global suggests national identity still has the potential to be an important ideological construct in the modern age and public broadcasters have a definite role to play in the broadcasting environment, a role which does not include pursuing commercial interests:

"If public broadcasters attempt to mimic commercial broadcasters to *increase their audience size*, by that route they also lose legitimate claim to a public subsidy. And, as public broadcasters lose their public subsidy, it requires them to become commercial enterprises in order to succeed" (Herman & McChesney, 1997:46).

Commercial can be equated with expansion of audiences, expansion of audiences does not necessarily translate back into tending to more local or national interests. Herman & McChesney (1997) go on to look at BBC and ABC which have both gone commercial, asking whether it will be possible for them to maintain public service standards while becoming aggressively commercial enterprises, seeking audiences as consumers. Although the BBC was able to transfer its attention to a more global media market when political support for a public broadcaster was floundering, this is an option that is available only to the public broadcasters from the more wealthy, English-speaking nations (ibid.,). If the global, commercial market is controlled by wealthy, English-speaking nations does it follow that only public broadcasters from these nations will be equipped to enter this market? They will have the necessary tools to become members, tools like language, economic ideology and hegemonic power that other public broadcasters would not necessarily have. So while it would be overly insular to assume terms like public and commercial, public and technology, quality and popularity are dichotomous terms and likewise, overly insular to therefore assume public broadcasters should share none of the qualities of commercial broadcasters (especially in an era where ideological shifts require a shift in the nature of public broadcasting), it would be perfunctory if we could not recognise that commercial and global interests are both interlinked and removed from national, regional, specific interests in a community that public broadcasting is obliged to serve. Even though the ideological underpinning of public broadcasting in the 1990s is unstable, it would be misguided to then assume that public broadcasters can become increasingly commercial while retaining their public service ideals. Instead, we can recognise how changes in the broadcasting environment in the 1990s - operating costs, capital, the decline of government support - has made it impossible for public broadcasters to continue working as they did before these changes (Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990) and necessitates the discovery of a new philosophy for public broadcasting. To demonstrate the effect of these changes, we will briefly be looking at the history of the BBC, directly relating events that happened there from the 1950s - 1980s to events that have occurred in the SABC since 1994.

**Chapter 4**

# The Reithian Model of Public Service Broadcasting: the BBC and the SABC

## The History of the BBC

The 1950s heralded the beginning of a steady change in the BBC, triggered off by two vital changes. Firstly, up until the 1950's the BBC was Britain's single public service broadcaster in the broadcasting field. The emergence of ITV meant that the BBC had its first competitor (Thompson, 1990; Tracey, 1998). Secondly, a shift in British society meant the Reithian concept of a public broadcasting was starting to be reconstituted, moving away from the more exclusivist 'cultural custodian' approach and the belief that the BBC's job was to 'culturally elevate the masses'. This change continued into the 1960s through a shift in the broadcaster/audience relationship. There was an ever-increasing amount of optimism in the public's ability to choose their programming, something which was unheard of in the Reithian days of the broadcaster. Nevertheless, a concern still remained that the BBC should not be too popular, but rather as a public broadcaster it should be content with its 35 % of the audience share otherwise its output would become indistinguishable from ITV's. In other words, there was still an adherence to the belief that quality programming could never be equated with popular programming or mass viewing, as in solely commercial imperatives (Tracey, 1998). Meanwhile, as the broadcasting sphere democratised problems beset the BBC:

> "loss of its monopoly in broadcasting has very much reduced the BBC's power to manipulate programming policy in the interest of social and cultural aims. It is instead engaged in a battle for its position as the nations home entertainer, a position it must retain if it is to continue as the mirror of the nations great events and a cultural and educational influence of social importance" (MFC Standing et. Al., Working Party Report on the Future of Sound Broadcasting in the Domestic Services, December 1957, paragraph 15, pg 81 cited in Tracey, 1998:81).

This loss resulted in the beginning of a policy aimed at giving audiences what they wanted, highlighting the circumstances in which they would receive them. In other words, the

creation of popular programming. This shift in policy permeated the organisational structure of the BBC:

> "Anyone who is frightened by the word 'popular', who feels that there is something derogatory about it, has no place in television" (Gerald Beale, BBC's Director of Television Broadcasting, 1958, cited in Tracey, 1998:83).

This was a far cry from the pre-1950s conceptualisation of public service broadcasting. The 1960s also heralded the beginning of an unstable period for public broadcasters as the need to justify their existence arose. This was made all the more significant by the fact that up until then, the BBC as a public broadcaster had been an unquestioned part of British public culture. These justifications heavily echo those used by the SABC during its initial foray into the public field:

- licence revenue is the only satisfactory way of financing public service broadcasting.
- society is an organism that needs to be cultivated and developed through public service broadcasting.
- public service broadcasting is a civilised, cultured and democratic society's ideal.
- the BBC was set aside as the organisation to serve the public.
- public broadcasting was favourably contrasted with a more profit-servicing system.
- the BBC is not just offering a variety but essentially it is offering the BEST.

(Tracey, 1998)

Where the BBC and the SABC appear to differ is the pace of change: the BBC's funding problems began largely in the 1970s, along with the ideological shifts taking place in British society. The SABC became threatened by funding problems almost immediately after its transformation in 1994, perhaps due to the fact that South Africa was entering a global environment that was already heavily entrenched in neoliberal ideals. This entrenchment had been led by the government with its move away from the election promises involving the RDP and toward a more liberal-oriented economic policy outlined in GEAR. In Britain it was the presence of a Conservative government that spelt the end of a period of surety: 'down-sizing' began immediately as the BBC was forced to cut its staff and services due to the broader ideological changes taking place which have already been discussed in Chapter 3 (Thompson, 1990 ; Tracey, 1998). A committee was then set up to investigate the future of

the BBC, concluding that broadcasting should be organised on the basis of a monopolistic, non-profit system which would be overlooked by a representative governing body that was, most importantly, politically independent. This is reminiscent of the organisation of the South African broadcasting environment in 1994/5 with a non-profit SABC being regulated by the IBA. Just as with the BBC, licence fees became symbolic of the independence of the SABC and trilogy function of educating, informing and entertaining was identified in both the SABC and the BBC. In November of 1970 the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications was quoted as having 'made it plain' that the BBC 'should not attempt to compete right across the board with commercial interests and that the BBC should build on things that it does 'uniquely well', in other words, public obligations. As Tracey (1998) points out, this entire argument is senseless seeing that minority programming as a public service obligation is far more expensive to produce than popular entertainment programmes. This mirrors government's stance towards the SABC in the 1994/5 period, government financing of the broadcaster was to be supplemented solely through a licence fee. This resulted in a period of financial instability for both broadcasters which resulted in the steady erosion of morale and an increase in imported programming and co-productions as less and less money became available. Broadcasters were constantly pleading with the government on behalf of their difficult position. Along with the 1980s came the rise of Thatcherism and a continuing attack on the BBC by a government entrenched in the Thatcherite belief that 'there is no such thing as society' (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Tracey, 1998; Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990) and certainly no such thing as broadcasting for public good:

> "Much of the pressure for change was coming from Conservative backbenchers motivated by a powerful, if mainly ignorant, desire to see off the BBC, that most visible symbol of a public culture which was the antithesis of their beloved Thatcherism's commitment to private being" (Tracey, 1998:109).

The government believed that the BBC should be reconfigured both financially and organisationally. The three main tenets of this were: Firstly, the BBC should accept advertising,

secondly, the BBC should be funded through subscriptions and thirdly, the BBC should be broken up into constituent parts (Tracey, 1998).

Hence the foundations for an intellectual attack were established. The attack came from many different sources, each with a specific motive. Rupert Murdoch, owner of The Times, launched three articles under the guise of enquiries into the nature of the BBC and public service broadcasting. All three articles came to the conclusion that the BBC should not survive in the future British broadcasting environment (Tracey, 1998). The objectivity of these articles was questionable when one considered that the success of Murdoch's satellite television plans was largely dependent on the destruction of public broadcasting. The Times, Sunday Times, The Sun, the Express, the Mail and News of the World all launched an attack on the BBC, and coincidentally, all these newspapers were owned by Rupert Murdoch. Monopolistic private interests were beginning to invade the public sphere. The 1985 Peacock inquiry into the future role of the BBC assessed the effects of introducing advertising and sponsorship to the BBC (ibid.,). It introduced a range of options regarding the introduction of advertising and sponsorship, assessing the advantages and disadvantages of each option. The decision to retain a licence fee system was based on the fact that the head of the committee was a zealous free-marketeer who realised that this step towards commercialisation would damage ITV-owned companies, radio and newspapers. Instead it was decided that the BBC would privatise two of its radio stations and its local radio. This signalled the beginning of a move towards commercialisation and 'consumer' sovereignty: the organisation began to change, indulging in new services, foreign sales, co-production and co-financing and implicit and explicit sponsorship. In short the BBC became a 'hive of commercial activity'. By 1991 the BBC had shed +/- 8 000 jobs, closed down facilities and privatised many of its activities. All this occurred under government edict:

> "The relationship between the government and the BBC increasingly has the feel of a
> marriage which is dead but in which partners cannot quite steel themselves for the
> divorce court" (Tracey, 1998:119).

Government attitudes towards the public broadcaster had been protection of the licence fee, a compensation for severe financial curtailing. It increasingly became a situation of a government which wanted to make their public service broadcaster into a multi-media,

globally-oriented corporation that still retained its public service remit. The BBC's ability to survive in the face of such a climate is directly related to its long life-span and how deeply ingrained it had become in the British culture. It is questionable whether or not the SABC will be so lucky, especially seeing its past has been plagued by political bias and state control and as a result, it is a public institution more likely to be disregarded than retained in the new South Africa.

## The South African Broadcasting Corporation: an introduction

This BBC 'model' was exported to a number of Commonwealth countries, one of them being South Africa: the origin of the SABC lies in a statutory charter drawn up by Lord John Reith, then director-general of the BBC, in 1936. It was officially established as a broadcaster by an Act of Parliament in 1936. Originally operating purely as an English radio service, Afrikaans and African language broadcasts were introduced in 1937 and the 1940s respectively. During the apartheid years the SABC became a propagandist tool of the state, and as the only national broadcaster in South Africa, played a large role in promoting and reinforcing separate development policies pursued by the Nationalist Party through its refusal to integrate different languages and ethnic groups onto one station. The SABC began to distance itself from the state in the early 1990s, attempting to break away its entrenched role as HMV, and immediately began transformation. This transformation has naturally proved to be the biggest in the SABC's sixty-three year history. Channels and stations were relaunched in 1994 with a new image which met with a lot of resistance from the more conservative factions of the South African public. Originally, the public broadcasting service at the SABC was created to utilise the spare capacity of the two official channels, TV1 and CCV (Mpofu, 1996), however the relaunch originally distributed public broadcasting responsibilities amongst all stations and channels as the nature of the SABC was now overwhelmingly that of a public service broadcaster. This implied that rather than being a minority player, public service was the SABC's major concern in the future broadcasting environment. Nowadays the SABC covers three portfolios: commercial, community and public service, in other words, public service broadcasting has now become one of its three major responsibilities. Internally, the future public responsibilities of the SABC are envisaged as being limited to two television channels and eleven radio stations while commercial responsibilities will be limited to one television

channel and five radio stations (see SABC website). Currently the broadcaster relies on funding from television licence fees, government, and advertising and sponsorships. It owns eighteen radio stations and five television channels, two of which are African continent channels, and services eleven national languages. It is by far the largest broadcaster in the South African broadcasting industry. The SABC is on its way to becoming a liability company with the state as its 100 % shareholder. As previously stated, perhaps the most overwhelming criticism that is levelled against the SABC regards its relationship with the state. The heightened political environment in which the broadcaster operates has left it open to accusations of political bias and government interference.

## The SABC and the BBC

Like the BBC, the SABC pursues the three tiers of broadcasting, a strategy which has been favoured by public broadcasters around the world. It involves a commitment to *education*, supporting the national education system; *information*, in order to create a national level of political consciousness; and *entertainment*, to articulate and strengthen a national culture (van den Bulcke & van Poecke, 1996). As with the BBC in the 1950s, this was not a case of giving the public what they want but rather emphasising 'high' (middle-class) culture. The SABC and its leaders became sacred custodians of culture, judging what they perceived to be good, quality programming. The replication of a set of principles created in a specific environment onto an entirely different environment raises many potential problems: Firstly, what are the results of transferring cultural forms from one society to another where the dominant ideological make-ups are not the same? There are specific cultural differences that cannot be overcome, for example language, and this model is dangerous from the point of view that it can easily become an imperialist form of hegemony when transferred from the British to the South African environment. Secondly, how does liberalism, a value that has been built into the concept of a public broadcaster, take root in an environment where the dominant ideology is more conservative and authoritative? (Tomaselli, 1994)

Obviously, the main difference between the two countries was their political hegemonic content: liberalism was the popular ideological form among British politics at the time of the

public broadcasters inception, while South Africa's political environment consisted of a conservative Afrikaans ideology which paved the way for the creation of apartheid. (Tomaselli, 1994). It was ludicrous to transfer liberal tendencies into a conservative environment, something which is immediately discernible when looking at both the SABC charter and its subsequent Annual Reports which identified one of their aims as being:

> "to take into account the wishes and needs of the various language and cultural groups in South Africa in order to inform, educate and entertain them" (SABC Annual Report 1985:2, cited in Tomaselli, 1994:130).

This definition mentions nothing about the exclusivist way in which it intended going about this, therefore the aims of a Reithian ideal: a single channel, lack of channel specification or segmentation (Tomaselli, 1994), and the aims of the SABC: separate services, separate development, were at direct loggerheads with one another. Colonialism, the attempt to hegemonically dominate developing countries, had given South Africa and Britain a shared culture to a large extent. However even in the 1930s, it would be ignorant to assume that South Africa, with its mixture of four main different race groups that were then once again subdivided into many different ethnic categories, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, Ndebele, British-heritage, Hindu, Muslim, was no more culturally hybrid than early 20$^{th}$ century Britain. Thus to attempt to clone a British public broadcaster in a South African environment would inevitably create a White, English-speaking middle-class dictatorship that, once WW2 began[4] (van Zyl, 1994), became a White, Afrikaans-speaking, middle-class dictatorship. Thus a public broadcaster model was just another element of a colonial hegemony. Everything that was essentially part of the South African culture, the migration of cultures throughout Southern Africa, the multilingualism practised by Black South African's and the constant evolution of Black languages (van Zyl, 1994), was ignored as the Afrikaner Broederbond and its separatist policies took control of the SABC. So although the SABC and the BBC shared the same ideals, the outcomes of these ideals have been, and in the future will continue to be, very different. Thus we can conclude that the Reithian model of broadcasting is not appropriate for the South African environment, likewise neither are other international models of broadcasting because they are not culturally-specific and will fail to take into

---

[4] With the onset of WW2, many of the British officials joined the war leaving the SABC to become a more Afrikaans-dominated institution.

account the diversity of the context in which they find themselves: South Africa is 'located in a curious position of duality' (Collins, Louw, Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli, 1992) with a First world and Third world within the boundaries of one nation.

> "neither the profit maximising assumptions of US broadcasters (though there is a role for private property and profit in a future South African broadcasting system) nor the platonic guardian role espoused by Reithians (though there is a place for education and public service in post-apartheid broadcasting), still less the apparatchik beliefs of a well established South African state/broadcasting nexus, will serve post-apartheid South Africa well" (Collins, 1992:26).

The SABC became one of the most rigidly controlled state broadcasting systems in the world. Government controlled the content of broadcasting at the SABC and interfered in the running of the broadcaster, for example in 1988 Riaan Eksteen, then Chief Executive of the SABC, was fired after deviating from the strict (unwritten) rules about who and what could appear in the news (van Zyl: 1994). It was also the most advanced FM system for radio in the world: medium-wave had been abolished in the 1960's in order to ensure that blacks would be forced to listen to FM and specific language broadcasts could be delivered to small areas. This naturally emphasised the feelings of separateness and difference between groups and encouraged an adherence to multilingualism, as well as a history grounded in political consciousness. This is one of the many examples of the methods that were used to create a multitude of separate identities, as opposed to a singular national identity. This has been the biggest challenge facing the present SABC as it attempts to create a single national identity under the umbrella of the 'Rainbow nation'. The total lack of democratic civil society in South Africa was created through apartheid separatism, the large numbers of illiterate South African's, the banning of politically active groups opposed to apartheid and the isolation of South Africa from the rest of Africa. Up until 1994, a democratic public sphere had not existed, nevertheless the SABC was expected to transform itself from an authoritarian, state-controlled body into a democratic institution protecting the interests of the public. This was neither a quick nor an easy process, especially when we consider the high level of political consciousness among the South African public and the high level of political alignment which had become an integral part of the nature of the SABC.

**Chapter 5**

# Broadcasting Policy in the South African Environment:

Just as the BBC in the 1980s grew increasingly commercialised, so too is the SABC in the 1990s as its organisational structure readjusts to the current ideological climate of commercialism. The pressure from Western, developed countries to commercialise the broadcasting sector of developing countries around the world has been intense and successful, and South Africa has been no exception (Paterson, 1998). The effect is two-fold: firstly, there is an importation of alien values and an erosion of broadcasting support of national development; secondly South Africa is now in a dominant position to control satellite broadcasting within the African continent, an ability which the SABC appears to be very aware of. Just like the BBC in the 1980s, the SABC and the South African government have shown an interest in expanding the public broadcaster, as a thriving commercial venture, into the rest of Africa.

The main difference between the two broadcasters was, and still is, the level of politicisation present in their environments: the SABC is far more subject to political influence than the BBC ever was. Much of the controversy over the future of the broadcaster has centred around the issue of ministerial control. By 1996/7 the ANC was moving towards asserting more control over the path of media reform in South Africa (Barnett, 1998). This is primarily because media and telecommunications are increasingly seen as economic assets and thus broadcasting in the South African environment has become less about political and cultural issues and more about economic issues (ibid.,). From 1997 onwards, then Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting Jay Naidoo began a drive towards increasing government intervention in policy. This involved the amending of the IBA Act which stripped the IBA of its independence; introducing the Broadcasting Amendment Bill and the creation of SATRA. All these changes seemed set to allow the government greater control over the SABC and its finances. SATRA is answerable directly to the Minister as opposed to the Parliament and this suggests that the merger of SATRA and the IBA will allow the ministry greater control over not only the SABC, but broadcasting policy in general:

'Parliament will be asked to amend the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act so that: The Minister will be responsible through the Parliamentary system for the formulation of policy and development of the broadcasting sector as a whole" (White Paper, 1998: Para. 1.3.5.1).

These issues sparked a controversy over the relationship between the state and the broadcaster, with many different sources claiming that there was a return to the same type of government interference that existed prior to democratisation. Indeed, many of the decisions reached in the White Paper, released in June of 1998, suggested that there would be a close relationship between the ministry and the broadcaster:

"The public broadcasting arm of the SABC will be required to report to the Minister from time to time on the profile of its revenues, in order to maintain a check on performance in this area" (Para 2.2).

"The commercial arm of the SABC will be expected to conduct itself in a fully commercial fashion and to provide dividend payments to the portfolio Minister" ( Para. 2.2)

"The government should have the right to issue policy directives to the IBA on policy matters" (Para 1.3.5.2).

"The Government is entitled to be consulted by the South African Broadcasting Corporation about the management and financial affairs of the Corporation" (Para 1.3.5.2).

This interventionist approach to broadcasting has been reinforced with the Broadcasting Bill of 1998, which reinforces the governments centralisation of control of the SABC. This confirms the treatment of broadcasting as 'a cluster of industrial policy' aimed at making the South African economy globally competitive (Naidoo, 1997 cited in Barnett, 1998:565). As Barnett suggests,

"the 'national interest' in the communications sector has been redefined primarily in terms of economic development and growth. As a consequence, *the emphasis which has been accorded to developing and regulating broadcasting to ensure a democratic and diverse system of communications, in the interest of cultivating an independent and vibrant civil society, has been significantly downgraded"* (1998:565).

Therefore, political involvement in broadcasting within South Africa means the sacrifice of

democratically representative and diverse broadcasting and the supplementing of the pursuit
of a national identity in the interests of economic gain:

> "The attempt to construct a media system capable of sustaining a pluralistic national
> identity and equal access to information does not necessarily sit comfortably with the
> imperatives which follow from considering the media and communications industries
> primarily as part of a general economic strategy of reconstruction and development"
> (Barnett, 1998:554).

Another vital difference between the BBC and the SABC as public broadcasters is the
maturity of their respective broadcasting environments. The British Broadcasting
environment has been diversifying since the 1950s and as a result is far more liberal than the
South African broadcasting environment, a newly diversifying field: the BBC initially held
only 35 % of the audience share while the SABC totally dominated audience shares (Tracey,
1998). We should look at the commercialisation of the two broadcasters in the context of
these changes. Commercialisation at the BBC was an attempt to save it from destruction in a
highly competitive field. However, in South Africa the SABC is the dominant broadcaster
and chances are the situation will remain the same for a number of years as other broadcasters
attempt to 'find their feet'. Thus, commercialisation trends in the SABC appear to be a
consolidation of its position as the monopoly broadcaster in the South African broadcasting
environment. Here the ultimate danger lies in the fact that an expanding SABC will be
dominating a broadcasting environment that desperately needs to democratise. The IBA's
1995 Triple Inquiry Report proposed that the SABC be limited to two television channels
after 1998 and its third channel be transformed into a new commercial station with public
service obligations (Barnett, 1998), in order to facilitate the introduction of a new
broadcaster. However, the amendment of the Triple Enquiry Report in February 1996 by the
Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communications overruled the IBA's suggestions of
downsizing the SABC to two television channels and also allowed it to retain two of the eight
radio stations which were to be sold (ibid.,). This highlighted the limited scope of the IBA's
power and suggests that the government favours a strong role for the SABC in the future
broadcasting environment, even if this proves to be detrimental for the democratisation
process. Sceptics have claimed that the SABC, since its transformation, has been packed full

of people at a management level who had more political than practical broadcasting expertise: Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri (now Minister of Broadcasting and Telecommunications), Zwelakhe Sisulu, Alistair Sparks, Reverend Hawu Mbatha and a directorate appointed by the State President which knew little about broadcasting and therefore were to be relied upon as commissars [5]. This amendment was the precursor to a significant political rebuke by the government, the stripping of the IBA's already limited power and its impending merger with SATRA. The government claims that it 'does not wish to leave the commercial activities of the SABC unregulated, with the attendant risk that it will have considerable advantages over other private broadcasters.' (White Paper, 1998, para 2.2). However, rather than then proposing a downsizing of the broadcaster, the government proposes that the SABC be divided into two arms, one being public broadcasting services and the other being public commercial broadcasting services. The division of the broadcaster into two arms signals a change of direction which could essentially mean one of two things:

Firstly, as specified in the White Paper, the commercial arm of the SABC will privatise/ introduce private equity over time. New broadcasters will thus be able to take over from the SABC and with regulation, the environment has the potential to become truly democratic. However, time is a key issue if we are to create a democratic broadcasting environment in the next few years and unfortunately the White Paper is not explicit about the time span involved in privatisation. The paper is also not explicit about whether this commercial arm will be leased as a state asset and therefore gain 'rent' for the state or whether it will be sold off totally to a commercial company and who the money will then go to ( the SABC's public broadcasting services division or the government itself). Secondly, or alternatively, things will continue along roughly the same lines, with commercial programming supplementing the public mandate and the SABC retaining a monopoly in both spheres. This could be detrimental for the broadcasting environment in South Africa.

The decision to divide into commercial and public arms is indicative of an elitist definition of public broadcasting that juxtaposes it with commercial broadcasting. This echoes Habermas's modernist notion concerning a public sphere as a site reserved for information and critical debate. This view advocates that a broadcaster with public service

---

[5] See Burton & Ryan (1998)

responsibilities cannot be funded primarily through advertising and sponsorships, thus it is obvious that broadcasting policy in the South African environment has not changed substantially since the Viljoen Report of 1991[6] (van Zyl, 1994; Collins, 1992) decided the best approach to broadcasting in South Africa would be to

> "set up a false dichotomy between commercial broadcasters who will access the entire adspend and will have no social or public responsibilities and a ghetto-ised SABC public service that will shoulder all the educational and developmental responsibilities" (van Zyl, 1994:7).

As we have seen, this is not the correct approach to have towards public broadcasting if we are to ensure its survival into the next century.

## Financial Constraints at the SABC

South Africa's broadcasting environment is highly underdeveloped, to the extent that the competition facing the SABC today is more or less the same level of competition that the BBC faced in the 1950s. The SABC's only competitor is the newly launched e.tv (MNET is a pay channel and is therefore not an option for the majority of the population who cannot afford it). The introduction of e.tv has ended the sixty year period of singular domination that the broadcaster enjoyed and has also contributed to the increasing drive towards competition within the broadcasting field in general. Nevertheless, the limited nature of South Africa's broadcasting environment makes the SABC's current domination undesirable. The SABC's 1994 submission to the IBA stressed the fact that its ability to prosper into the twenty-first

---

[6] In 1990 the government appointed a Task Group on Broadcasting in South and Southern Africa, chaired by Christo Viljoen, then Chairman of the SABC. They were widely criticised, mainly because of their lack of representativeness: most of the people involved in the Task Group shared a vested interest in the broadcasting and communications field in South Africa, as a result the Group tended to display what Collins (1992) calls a reformist 'insider' perspective, disregarding the more leftist 'outsider' approach. This lack of representation was enhanced by the secrecy of the Task Group discussions. Naturally the team was predominantly White, with the exception of a single Black newspaper editor, predominantly Afrikaans, with the exception of a single English-speaking producer, and totally male.

century was solely dependent on its ability to conquer the challenge of unending change (Delivering Value, June 1994). Looking back on the last six years, it appears that the ability to conquer this challenge was an almost sole consequence of the broadcaster's adoption of commercial values, (for example increasing co-productions, sponsorship levels) and the expansion of the broadcaster into Africa, through such ventures as Channel Africa.

The 1997 Green Paper proposed a number of different alternatives regarding the future of the SABC, although interestingly enough none of them suggested dissolving the SABC and placing public service obligations on other private broadcasters entering the broadcasting environment, a move which would have been beneficial in opening up the broadcasting environment for new players. According to Collins, Louw, Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli, this is due to the fact that:

> "much of the discussion amongst the South African Left involves debating ways of restructuring obsolete (Fordist) modes of production rather than considering ways of fundamental restructuring" (1992:2).

Hence the preference towards restructuring a modernist broadcaster rather than considering the seemingly postmodern developments that have taken place in the broadcasting industry.

> "As South Africa entered the post-apartheid future in terms of an appropriate regulating body, earlier broadcasting environments were rekindled by a legislative content which ignored new contexts and post modern conditions brought into being by new transmission and reception technologies, new global audience profiles and patterns of reception, and new ways of funding public service broadcasting" (Tomaselli, 1996:2).

It is very difficult for a broadcaster in a country with an underdeveloped broadcasting system, not to mention a general level of underdevelopment within its population in terms of exposure to media technologies, to remain up-to-date with global broadcasting trends. We must also remember what is seen as old media in the North is often new media in the South. It may be more important to democratise these old styles of media in a southern context before they are replaced by new styles of media (Berger, 1998) which might be totally lacking in democratic content as commercialising tendencies dominate the environment. In the South African environment, this means it is more important to democratise the SABC

rather than dissolving it and replacing it with more 'postmodern' broadcasters, in other words commercially-oriented broadcasters operating both within and beyond national boundaries and lacking the unifying potential of a national public broadcaster. Nevertheless, it is important that policy decisions regarding South African broadcasting recognise the technological and ideological changes that have taken place globally in order to ensure our broadcasting system does not pursue outmoded methods of production.

The paper also emphasised the limited amount of responsibility which the government wished to have for shouldering the financial burden of a public broadcaster:

> "At present, the SABC operates three channels and obtains its financing from advertising or individual licence fees. If its role is to be modified - either via some form of privatisation and/or expansion into new channels... - the source of its funding could well change" (Green Paper, 1997).

Prior to this change the SABC was supposed to fulfill its public service role without a legitimate form of income. In the mid-1990s, there was widespread agreement that the SABC should reduce its dependence on advertising revenue in order to allow the growth of the broadcasting market (Barnett, 1998). Nevertheless, as was the case with the BBC, government was loath to provide the broadcaster with sufficient income, preferring to encourage a reliance on advertising revenue and licence fee collection. This money was supposed to cover a public service mandate of eleven official languages, the introduction of educational programming, the nurturing of local content and the meeting of 'grassroots needs'. Needless to say, as in the case of the BBC, this was not enough: licence fees is an outdated mechanism for generating revenue and never should have been seriously considered as a viable form of funding[7]. Alongside this lay the issue of downsizing that came with the McKinsey 'era'. McKinsey was the company contracted by the SABC in order to decide how and where it should begin downsizing, a situation characteristic of all public broadcasters when they are faced with financial problems (Tomaselli: 1994). Departments were removed in an attempt to cut back on bureaucratic bloating and the SABC dismissed a large portion of its staff. This resulted in a long period of both financial instability and job uncertainty, and morale slippage as the broadcaster tried to operate with what little resources it had. Added to

---

[7] See Burton & Ryan (1998)

this was the down-sizing process which greatly effected the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate:

"Diminished resources inevitably have serious implications for decisions about programs. The documentary, the single play and minority programming have declined, to be replaced by more overtly popular programming, funded through co-production deals, that will sell in more than one market." (Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990:16).

Lack of resources means a lack of creativity and an inability to live up to public service expectations (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994; Tomaselli, 1994). Naturally, the SABC's capacity to build national identity and reconciliation has come under threat due to its financial situation and the fact that MNET consistently outbids the SABC for programming that is of national interest, for example the rugby world cup. Just as the BBC came under ideological threat in the Thatcher era, the SABC too appears to be operating in an increasingly hostile environment:

"The conundrum that faces the SABC is that, as a public broadcaster with a mandate to reflect and promote cultural diversity, and provide educational, entertainment, and informational programming in eleven languages on a national scale, it has found itself increasingly reliant upon 'a funding source that is under no obligation to ensure its continued existence' (Freedom of Expression Institute, 1996:2 cited in Barnett, 1998: 561).

Since then, the SABC has sold some of its radio stations into private ownership, six profitable regional radio stations which earned an income of around R 90 million per year for the SABC were sold to private companies (see SABC website). This is a far cry from the original plan of downsizing the SABC to two television channels and twenty-three radio stations (Collins, 1992; Green Paper, 1997; Barnett, 1998). The idea of downsizing is covered in the White Paper through its proposed division of the SABC into public and commercial arms with cross-subsidisation from the commercial arm supplementing the public arm. Sources of this cross-subsidisation will be licence fees, advertising revenue and sponsorships (White Paper, 1998, chpt 2 para 2.2). This separation will be

"a precursor to a later, more complete restructuring of the SABC operational

activities, which will review the scope and the size of SABC commercial activities and investigate the possible privatisation of, or the introduction of, private equity to the SABC's commercial services" (ibid.,).

The White Paper goes on to state that the SABC will be turned into a company under the Companies Act. The SABC is already broken up into autonomous business units which essentially has a contradictory effect on public broadcasting: while autonomy will allow for more editorial and programming independence, less likelihood of political control and lead to a more diversified broadcasting system, these individual units are entirely responsible for their financial health and thus are forced to supplement with commercial programming. (Tomaselli, 1994; Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994). The localised level of financial responsibility increases the temptation to favour economically more rewarding programmes and deviation from these programmes will be unlikely once a set audience has been established. A reliance on commercial forms of income (advertising) means programming will tend to target a narrow range of audience members with the money to buy the products. This will lead to an even greater fragmentation within the audience which will gradually become based on class interests more than on race interests as the decades pass by. Even more importantly, the trapping of surpluses in the regions has led to even less cross-subsidisation of non-profit national projects (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994). This essentially means an increase in cultural homogenisation of programming content and a tendency for Third world countries to become locked in a client relationship with First world countries (ibid.,), a relationship which will be very hard to redefine.

As mentioned earlier, fulfilling public needs on a shoestring budget necessitates a collaboration with market trends and audience preferences. This is why the SABC as a public broadcaster, is engaging in commercial initiatives. It is obvious, from the previous discussions, that a lack of financial stability directly contributed to this shift in responsibilities within the SABC. This financial crisis will be ongoing, mainly because operating costs for running a broadcaster are higher in South Africa than they are in the more developed nations (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994). South Africa, as a nation with an underdeveloped communications industry, imports a large amount of its equipment and technology. Because of this, broadcasting in Southern Africa, along with other less developed areas in the world,

requires a tremendous amount of capital outlay. Capital was one thing that the SABC did not have a lot of in the early 1990 period, hence it became progressively more dependent on commercial revenue: 72 % of revenue came from advertising while only 28 % came from licences (ibid.,). By 1998, figures were as follows: 76 % of revenue coming from advertising, 17 % coming from licence fees and 7 % coming from other sources, for example sponsorship or state funding (see SABC website). Updated figures on the SABC website show 78 % of revenue coming from advertising and sponsorships, a further 16 % from licences and 6 % from other sources of revenue. The SABC's financial position has got progressively better since the mid 1990s, as the amount of money per revenue source has steadily increased:

| Revenue (in millions) | 31$^{st}$ March 1998 | 30$^{th}$ September 1996 |
|---|---|---|
| Advertising | R 1 698 963 | R 1 140 626 |
| Sponsorships | R 231 677 | R 152 534 |
| Licence Fees | R 396 975 | R 288 485 |
| Other | R 146 004 | R 70 103 |
| Total | R 2 473 619 | R 1 651 748 |

Revenue figures from the financial year ending 30 September 1996 and 31 March 1998 (SABC Annual Report 1998/99, see SABC website).

Public and commercial interests need not necessarily be seen as opposing one another, however, if the fulfilment of both public and commercial roles leads to a focus on a commercial set of priorities, obscuring public responsibilities, the interests become oppositional. There must be a clarity between how a broadcaster sees itself within the broadcasting field and its official mandate as either a public or a commercial broadcaster. Currently the SABC prides itself on its 'business ethic':

> "The SABC, like many companies today, places strong emphasis on *quality* and *customer satisfaction*, in an era of change driven by *market forces*, the *customers perception* of our organisation is most important" (own italics) (Zwelakhe Sisulu, Group Chief Executive Address, see SABC website).

The SABC sees itself as a public broadcaster in an increasingly commercial environment catering to customers rather than audiences. This is a direct result of its inability to rely on securing stable groups or categories of audience members. Public broadcasters become businesses as a response to the threat they are enduring in the current media environment. Bearing in mind the fact that the SABC does not feel that it is a 'true' public broadcaster, it is safe to assume that commercial imperatives often seem to be overriding public imperatives at the SABC. Mpofu's (1996) study of the role of public service broadcasting in future policy-making recognises that commercial aims, as opposed to public aims, are entirely seductive, requiring none of the effort involved in public broadcasting and providing the operational means to be a successful broadcaster. Opinions of executive staff inside the broadcaster tend to suggest that the combination of public and commercial responsibilities is seen as a temporary arrangement, a transitionary phase of the broadcaster:

> "I am in favour of the SABC fulfilling the hybrid role of public-cum-commercial broadcaster. The public broadcaster which has to be financially self-reliant until clarity has been reached on its funding" (Zwelakhe Sisulu, then CEO of the SABC, cited in van Wyk,1995:14).

Fulfilment of both responsibilities during this transitionary period has created an ambivalence inside the SABC regarding its role as a public service broadcaster. When examining the public service mandate within the current SABC it is necessary to assess whether or not this transitionary phase is over, and if this is the case, how does the present SABC feel about its public service mandate today? It is also vital that in the next few years broadcasting policy clearly articulates the role the SABC will be playing in the future broadcasting environment.

Chapter 6

# The SABC: Fulfilling a Public Service Mandate

**Obstacles Facing the SABC's Fulfilment of its Public Service Mandate:**

**1. The SABC as a Highly Political Organisation: the News Base**

South Africa's history has had a powerful effect on the success of the SABC's public

mandate as a representative of South Africa's 'rainbow nation':

> "We should be suspicious, certainly, of any forms of nationalism in a country which
>
> for forty years suffered the ravages of Afrikaner sectional domination and which
>
> remains susceptible to a volatile Zuluness" (Chapman, 1997:23).

Issues of 'public' and 'community' are highly contested in the South African environment

and this is why it has been very difficult to pin down an inclusive definition of a public

service broadcaster (Mpofu, 1996) .It is essential that the SABC recognise that it is a highly

politicised public broadcaster and through this awareness will come an ability to guard

against it. This guarding against political interference manifests itself in the production of

news within a broadcaster, the ability of broadcasters to resist political interference lies in

their ability to remain in control of the reporting of news and current affairs (Tomaselli,

1994). Likewise news and current affairs reporting is very susceptible to political agenda-

setting by media workers like journalists, editors and executives, as well as social influences

outside of the broadcaster. This is an extremely contentious issue within the SABC due to its

past practices of political bias in the news structures and its current restructuring towards the

bi-media process, which will create a single position for the control of radio and television

news and therefore decrease possibilities of different views from television and radio news.

With regard to the reporting of news and current affairs, the SABC is South Africa's only

news-based broadcaster: MNET doesn't provide daily news coverage while e.tv is a newly-

formed broadcaster with a immature news base and therefore takes much of its footage from

the SABC news base. This means the SABC is the dominant secure source of visual news in

South Africa, this has serious implications in a country with a large literacy problem. A

larger proportion of the African population, of all ages and all incomes, watch television than

read newspapers (Paterson, 1994 cited in Paterson, 1998) and more recent surveys find that this level of viewership is steadily increasing. During the 1980s at the height of the apartheid era, when there was widespread distrust of the SABC, use of electronic media was still very high, even among the poor (ibid.,). The South African public rely strongly on one primary source of visual news. This secures the SABC's position in the current broadcasting environment.

## 2. The Political Framework in Which the SABC and its Staff are Placed

By 1994 the SABC was facing three major challenges to its transition: Firstly, changing the face and structure of the SABC in order to reflect the 'New South Africa'; secondly, to provide development and educational facilities to meet the needs of the people; and thirdly, to create an awareness that South Africa is part of the African continent, through the use of programming and scheduling (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994).

Naturally, an important part of changing the face and structure of the SABC was through changing staff content and appointments in order to promote the policies of affirmative action and employment equity. By the end of 1993, the majority of the employees remained White while the majority of senior employees remained White Afrikaans-speaking men. The 1994 figures were no different. (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994; Mpofu, 1996) This prompted an outcry, which grew ever more pronounced as a lot of the new Black appointments to the SABC were high-profile members of the ANC. Media critics of the SABC are currently complaining that the broadcaster has replaced its White 'Broederbond' elite of the 1980s with a new Black ANC elite in the 1990s. These rumours have been fuelled by the resignation or firing of several high profile members of the SABC opposed to this new elite: Govin Reddy, Mandla Langa, Max du Preez and Barney Mthombothi (Du Preez, 1999; Sulcas, 1999; Vapi, 1999). This highlights the fact that internal organisation at the SABC is placed within a highly political framework by other media sources. The SABC needs to draw up goals and timetables in order to address racial content regarding staff. It is possible that affirmative action will replicate discriminatory appointments due to an incorrect application, and piecemeal appointments are insufficient to radically change the composition of the staff (Mpofu, 1996; Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994). The SABC has taken steps towards

doing this through setting itself certain targets, it now claims to have a 50% White and 50% Black staff content. This claim has since been refuted by internal sources at the SABC (see SABC website). The SABC needs to focus on the level of appointments these race groups hold, it also needs to ensure it is representing not just different race groups, but different cultural and ethnic groups within South Africa. A representative staff composition is an essential safeguard against political hegemony and thus should be the major priority of a broadcaster in transition. Within a broadcaster like the SABC, that up until six years ago was a puppet of the state, there is always

> "the danger that the ingrained habits of the previous official broadcasters will linger on subversively or simply switch the same apparatus to the new party in power" (van Zyl, 1994:62).

The decision of the government to fund specific projects has led to an increase in political tension surrounding the broadcaster. The current broadcasting system in South Africa is highly politicised, thus increasing the number of obstacles in its path. For example, nonpayment of licence fees is considered to be a political stance by conservative white Afrikaners [8]. Other examples are the coverage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was emotionally, racially and politically charged: 99 % of the victims were Black while 95 % of the perpetrators were White, Max du Preez's 'TRC Special Report' had a predominantly Black audience while Jacques Paauw's 'Prime Evil', a documentary on Eugene de Kock, had a predominantly White audience[9]. In CASE's 1995 study of the attitude towards the SABC's programming changes (Everatt & Samuels, 1995), attitudes were divided along racial and class-based lines: White English-speaking and Indian viewers saw television along more commercial lines as purely a medium for entertainment. Afrikaans-speaking Whites and Coloureds and African people believed that television should be both entertaining and informative. English-speaking White and Indian viewers seemed to want a consumerist approach to broadcasting, in other words you pay for a particular channel to satisfy a

---

[8] See CASE's 1995 qualitative study of public attitudes towards new programme schedules.

[9] See Burton & Ryan(1998).

particular choice of programmes. Other viewers, Afrikaans-speaking Whites and Coloureds and Africans felt that a public broadcaster should satisfy their viewing needs. This was both a cultural and a class-based response: White, Coloured and Indian viewers all felt that the SABC no longer catered for their needs, in other words attitudes to programming changes were based on class differences. Reactions to these changes were also divided along class lines: English-speaking White and Indian viewers were subscribing to MNET (bearing in mind they are able to afford it), while the Afrikaans-speaking White viewers began to watch less television. Issues like this make us aware of the fact that it is important for us to place the discussion of a public broadcaster's nature into a broader framework which takes into account its social, political and economic context. Socio-economic factors have a large effect on media policy (Mpofu, 1996): a public service broadcaster's operations are greatly influenced by the political, social and economic issues of the society in which it is embedded. Likewise, the social context a broadcaster operates in has a powerful effect on its character. As a part of a functioning democratic public sphere it is the broadcaster's duty to make sure it is an effective representative of the wider society. This representation relates back to building a national 'collective consciousness'.

## 3. Constructing a National Identity

Berger (1998) identifies a divide between public service objectives in the North and the South: in the North, protection of culture and language and concentration of private ownership are public broadcasting issues, while in the South the issues are more basic: fostering a national culture gains precedence over protecting different cultures and the weakness of local production capacity inevitably means that national culture is constructed through foreign media content. We can see that the role of the SABC in South Africa is that of a Southern hemisphere broadcaster, in other words, its main aim is to overcome past differences and divisions through fostering a unified national cultural identity.

Media is essential to the construction of a new national identity in two ways: Firstly, it serves as a carrier of political discourse on a new national identity. Secondly, it participates in identity politics which aims to create a particular national identity based on what it imagines the ideal national identity to be (Seleti, 1997). A search for a national identity should not be as exclusive as a search for global identities has proved to be. National identity is an

important construct in the South African climate in the late 1990s. While theorists may claim that they are on the decline in Western countries, countries that are still developing or have troubled political pasts may benefit greatly from the use of a national source of identity. Public broadcasting will be able to use this constructed identity to its benefit as long as it does not subscribe to an exclusive, closed definition of 'nation' that fails to recognise the role it must play will be on the level of the local and the regional, on the basis of language, culture and ethnic differences. Many in fact feel that since the country has democratised, there has been a reawakening of tribal and ethnic loyalty in South Africa's political life (Hartley, 1996). This plurality does not necessarily equal a threat to the concept of nation but will rather serve to strengthen the democratic practices of the society (Seleti, 1997). Hence the SABC's attempt to capture a new subjective 'rainbow' identity (Chapman, 1997). This new identity has taken the form of 'Simunye', or 'we are one', which the SABC has been attempting to promote. Simunye has become a magnifying glass for South African society: we cannot accept a universal notion such as 'nation-state' without looking at the plurality underlying it and simunye attempts to do this: "Political alliances might be forged where in South Africa 'Simunye' or 'we are one' is a political identity to encourage economic stability, a hegemonic play to achieve consensus." (Roome, 1997:88). The cultural group in South Africa most resistant to constructing this identity is the older, White, English-speaking South Africans: 'South Africaness' is something that is situational and strategic, done in order to placate the reality of the Black government. This inability to relinquish English codes and symbols is the direct result of facing ones own cultural demise:

> "The interaction with diverse cultural groups can provide new experience's, modifying fears and prejudices and recognising the Other, as a culture apart, not an extension of the same culture. This promotes a cultural dynamism, but any negative stories that are created about the Other before evolving into myths, need to be confronted" (Roome, 1997: 86).

It is harder for these people than it is for other cultural groups to change their identity because it was inconceivable that they should want to change their cultural identity, they have always operated from a very secure power base.

These are the type of obstacles facing the 'Simunye' culture in South Africa. Many theorists feel that a democratic constitution is capable of operating on a specific level and surviving as long as certain guidelines are followed:

> "Hence the ethical integration of groups and subcultures with their own collective identities must be uncoupled from the abstract political integration that includes all citizens equally" (Habermas, 1994 cited in Brunn Andersen, 1997: 37).

This requires catering for specific cultural identities separately from catering for citizens in a democracy, something which is very difficult to achieve if you are attempting to present an image of unity over and above specificity. Other theorists feel that the possibility of building a singular identity, especially in South Africa, is unlikely:

> "Taken together with the gross disparities in wealth, education, living standards, and denial of access to social resources which have been caused by an active process of underdevelopment through apartheid, the possibilities of a single post-apartheid consciousness seem slim" (Teer-Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 1994:50).

If the SABC is to become the site of democratic representativeness within the South African environment, stimulating the development of a vibrant civil society, access to basic technological means of communication needs to become more equitable among the South African public (Barnett, 1998). If this does not occur there will be no 'national collective consciousness' within the South African environment. This lack of equality manifests itself in issues like the popular demands for a broadcasting environment operating purely in the interests of the emergent Black-dominated hegemony (Roome, 1997). This identifies the tensions that exist within the concept of citizenship. These tensions usually arise from social inequalities between individuals and groups of people: wealth, education, standard of living and many other factors contribute to social inequalities. These substantive qualities are opposed to formal citizenship which emphasises equality between audience member in terms of being citizens in a democracy and therefore does not account for social differences between groups and individuals. Nevertheless South Africa is a society which consists largely of heterogeneous cultural groups and therefore it is very important for the media to contribute to the development of an identity of citizenship which binds the majority of the population together. This identity should be neither too formal, nor too substantive in terms of citizenship (Brunn Anderson, 1997). The SABC needs to operate on two different levels in

its attempt to create a national cultural identity in the South African environment. appealing to our relationship to the wider national society through the use of tools like 'simunye', while at the same time appealing to our specific cultural and social backgrounds through the use of a variety of different media like television, radio and print and through the type of programming and the language that is used in these programmes. Cultural access is as important as technological access in ensuring that the SABC is able to build a national collective identity (Barnett, 1998) Therefore, public broadcasting should incorporate elements of universalism and particularism in its attempts to create a binding national identity.

Many theorists have argued that catering for a new national identity will require a more participatory, community oriented form of broadcasting as changes in the broadcasting environment should mirror political changes in the society itself. The SABC's lack of experience and expertise has led to an inability to commence structural change and hence a continuation of the old style of one-way, top-down communication:

> "An important political factor..is a rigid, centralised and bureaucratic system of administration. This tends to shape a communication system with the same defects. It is *weighted down by inertia, resistant to innovation, hierarchical in its outlook, and unresponsive to the needs of the audience*" (Van Zyl, 1994:67).

Communication could rather be enhanced through deinstitutionalisation, a horizontality of communication and a multiplicity of information centres (van Zyl, 1994). At worst, this implies an increase in size and therefore domination, while at best it suggests a rechannelling of resources into new areas and a restructuring of the SABC internally. This, unfortunately, is much easier in theory than in practice: to encourage the SABC to de-centralise and multiply into a number of smaller centres would effectively render it impotent in terms of its ability to be a national public broadcaster, to serve in strengthening a national will and consciousness. To use either one of these alternatives would be the equivalent of losing all the reconciliative benefits of using a public broadcaster in a newly formed democracy. Instead we should opt for a less extreme alternative: organisational structures involving less hierarchy and more horizontal interaction within the broadcaster, as well as intensive training in order to ensure a pool of highly-trained producers, writers and directors who will be able to deal with public service issues. A public broadcaster should attempt to incorporate elements of both a single

centralised and a more plural model. Community radio and other more localised media forms play a large role in serving local, as well as national, needs. However, it is important that the SABC retains a national level of influence:

> "Although community radio stations and other forms of more localised media will play an increasing role in public life over the next decades, the SABC remains a potentially unifying force - both in the nation-building sense and for its ability to transmit a unified campaign with certain central key messages, allowing others to tease out the localised nuances" (Fenyves, Everatt & Jennings, 1996).

van Zyl (1994) points out that NGO and CBO activity from 1990 had the positive effect of changing both the SABC Board and the IBA as policy-makers and forcing the institution to become more transparent and accountable. Thus there is room for both national and grass-roots approaches in the broadcasting environment and keeping the SABC as a more national communication force does not necessarily spell the demise of a more grass-roots approach, as long as there is more than one voice involved in policy making decisions regarding the broadcasting environment. However, there are several challenges to this approach:

Firstly, South Africa, as previously mentioned, has a highly underdeveloped civil society. This translates into a lack of grassroots activity and suggests the role that grassroots approaches could have in curbing overly national approaches will be limited. The commercial imperatives which currently dominate in the South African broadcasting environment will not encourage the development of civil society.

Secondly, this would not essentially be a problem if we could effectively arrange "a democratic media alliance, initially comprising an informal grouping of international NGO's then possibly of national ones, for the basis for a deepening of understanding within and between specific media." (o'Siochru, 1996). However this could prove to be problematic as many of the local-based NGO's previously involved in community policy-making are disappearing due to an inability to secure international funding. International funding is bypassing civil society and instead going straight into state-led initiatives.

Thirdly, an unequal distribution of wealth in South Africa has meant the diversity of representation in new community radio, other radio stations, production tenders and television channels has not been that great. Lack of money has meant co-financing deals with international companies, for example e.tv and Times Warner. This is dangerous because: Firstly, it does not effectively stop international influence as the IBA hoped its legislation would and secondly IBA legislation still makes it impossible for many to be players in the South African broadcasting field due to the strict legislation passed on cross-ownership[10]. Once again, the poorest level of the population gets the least access to broadcasting and communications.

Although this does not provide the ultimate solution, national legislation has taken steps to keep levels of international interference low in order to encourage local development. This leads us once again to the same logical conclusion: the inequality of wealth and representation in the South African broadcasting field necessitates a certain amount of state intervention and regulation in order to even it out. Broadcasting policy needs to incorporate an equalisation clause in order to ensure that market-driven broadcasting does not perpetuate and perhaps even amplify the inequalities that exist between audiences regarding wealth and power (Collins, 1992). We can draw several conclusions: Firstly, the SABC should remain as the national broadcaster cultivating the new 'Rainbow nation' identity. Secondly, other players, within civil society and in the form of competing broadcasters, need to enter into the broadcasting field. In other words, it is vital that the South African broadcasting field become completely open and democratic, especially if we are to ensure that the public broadcaster remains politically accountable and pluralistically representative (Collins, 1992). It is important that intervention encourages democratisation of the broadcasting field. This will ideally ensure a

"range, depth, quality and independence of programme output that other

---

[10]The IBA Act forbids foreign companies from owning more than 20 % of a licence (IBA Report, August 1995) and due to a lack of capital, Black investors were forced to look into buying smaller stations which the foreign companies were simply not interested in. Therefore, an alliance between foreign and local investors, encouraged by the IBA as a solution to the financing problem, often did not work.

arrangements simply would not support" (Rowland jr. & Tracey, 1990).

This is especially important in a communications environment as underdeveloped as South Africa where one is dealing with a finite range of broadcasting frequencies (Dison, 1994) and thus must regulate their allocation. We can conclude that free market principles would not be ideal in nurturing a democratic public sphere in South Africa, however, it is equally wrong to assume unsupervised state regulation would be ideal for the broadcasting environment. What would be ideal is a situation where the state becomes merely one of the many players in the broadcasting environment, along with civil society, NGO's and CBO's, private industry, all with a vested interest in the broadcasting field, none of which would then dominate to the detriment of another. This is an ideal situation and at best what we can hope to achieve is a situation where neither the state, nor more private interests, are allowed unmitigated control of the broadcasting industry. This can be achieved through the growth of civil society. The overwhelming obstacle to the growth of civil society in South Africa is the current trend towards commercial values which has led to audience categorisation and the targeting of narrow elite factions of society:

> "The SABC's ability to cater for the full diversity of South African society has been severely constrained by its particular funding structure. If it is to maintain its financial viability, it must compete with new broadcasters for a relatively small and only slow growing amount of advertising revenue, which involves duplicating programming in trying to attract affluent audiences. If it targets wider and more diverse audiences, then in strict commercial terms this is not cost effective because they do not attract the same level of advertising revenue" (Barnett, 1998:567).

The SABC's funding structure is directly interfering with its ability to build a national collective consciousness involving the majority of the South African population. This supports Paterson's earlier view regarding broadcasting policy in South Africa: western pressure to commercialise will come with a high price, mainly the erosion of broadcasting support of national development. Commercialisation and the elimination of a stable, non-commercial source of funding for the public broadcaster has led to a failure to fulfill a mandate of eleven official languages and therefore a failure to reflect the diversity of the national context in which the SABC operates.

## 4. Language

Language has become a primary issue in terms of nation-building and ensuring that a broadcaster is democratically representative (Barnett, 1998). Language is an important part of cultural representativeness of the broadcaster, and in the SABC's case, it is being used symbolically and ideologically as a unifying agent, a difficult task indeed when a country has eleven official languages, all of which need to be incorporated in order to ensure that the majority of the public feel that they are being represented within the SABC.

> "Given the multi-lingual nature of the South African society, (made up of eleven official languages, and many more unofficial languages, for example Tamil) delivering programmes that have relevance and cater for various language groups should feature as the central issue in determining the failure or success of the public broadcaster." (Hwengwere, 1995:2).

CASE's (1995) study of public attitudes towards new television scheduling found that opinions towards transformations of the SABC's programming were divided along race, language and class-based lines: the responses of Afrikaans speaking White viewers were primarily a reaction to language content changes. Language was, and still is, a critical broadcasting issue, with language on television influencing viewers attitudes towards the SABC as much, if not more, than the kinds of programmes it screened. All participants said they did not want to change channels in order to track their language preferences. All participants also said that all the official languages should be represented on television. However, Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking viewers were not prepared to accept the consequences of this for their own languages (Everatt & Samuels, 1995).


The representation of all of the eleven official languages has become a measuring stick for the success of the SABC's public mandate (Hwengwere, 1995). The issue of language cannot be separated from earlier debates during the Triple Enquiry into South African broadcasting over the scale at which future broadcasting in South Africa should be organised. Reformulating language policies was primarily important because old language policies were central to the old SABC's policies of separate channels and programmes for different ethnic and racial groups (Barnett, 1998). Therefore any organisation that was willing to channel funds into the existing divided languages infrastructure was seen to be reinforcing and perpetuating

tribalisation. The division into eleven languages in South Africa, Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele, North Sotho, South Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga, Afrikaans and English, was instigated during apartheid in line with its separate development policies and has largely contributed to the lack of multilinguality and multiculturality in the South African context. Through social institutions such as the school and the media, this separatism was given a material form. So in itself, the recognition of eleven official languages was a duplicitous approach, its basis being the apartheid recognition of separate languages while at the same time, a promise was made by the Interim Constitution to upgrade the nine African languages to a national, as opposed to a regional, level and to emphasise the rights of the individual, over and above those of a specific language group (Barnett, 1998). Hwengwere (1995) acknowledges that South Africa has little expert or reliable data on which it is able to base its language policy.

The SABC used this need to broadcast in eleven official languages in order to argue that it should retain a large share of the broadcasting spectrum, larger than other private and civil interests wished it to be. These civil groups favoured the developing of a range of provincial and regional broadcasting services as opposed to national, based on the concept of public service broadcasting as serving a number of diverse public's rather than a single, integrated, national audience. They argued that the SABC broadcast in only four or five main languages and therefore broadcasters should be set up in the provincial regions to transmit the main language of that region. This was one of the strongest arguments in favour of provincial, as opposed to national broadcasting, its suitability in terms of catering for a large number of languages. Hence the reason why an updated assessment of the SABC's fulfilment of all eleven official languages is important: this is a vital part of its public service mandate which to all extents and purposes, it seems unable to fill. However, the very existence of eleven official languages is a duplicitous decree which smacks of cultural separatism, especially seeing the upgrading of the nine African languages seems highly unlikely in a country where economic, political and media policy has been greatly influenced by western interests. Likewise, these civil groups overlook the extent to which the South African environment is in need of a nationally-binding media force.

Louw (1992) believes that the solution lies in a focus on language clusters: for example, the Nguni cluster is split into four different languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and Ndebele, while the Sotho cluster is split into three different languages: North Sotho, South Sotho and Tswana. English should become the national language, for the convenience of international trade and relations, while Nguni, Sotho and Afrikaans should become the regional languages. This will allow for more efficient administration in the provinces and nationally, it will also allow for what Louw terms a 'de-apartheidisation' of language while still recognising that South Africa is a multicultural state and is thus less likely to offend anyone than a more exclusive policy, suggesting one dominant language, would. Catering for eleven official languages is both expensive and impractical, clustering languages would be far more practical while at the same time allowing for the formation of a fairly unified national culture. The SABC needs to deconstruct apartheid's ideological tools, rather than reinforce them, if it wishes to appeal to a 'rainbow nation'. Hwengwere (1995) points out that although it is important that the public broadcaster facilitate common ground between language groups, placing them on an equal footing, it is also important that the SABC avoid merely reversing apartheid's tribalising strategies by overemphasising a nationalist rhetoric which does not cater for difference or diversity among languages. The SABC needs to move away from the naive view of languages as tied to specific locales. If the SABC is to cater for an eleven language mandate whilst ensuring its own viability in the broadcasting environment, then it must 'concurrently seek ways to establish a common platform across languages as well as recognise the virtue of diversity contained in each linguistic community' (Hwengwere, 1995: 64).

It is the belief of this researcher that extension into a more provincial outlook is unlikely within the current SABC, primarily because of the centralisation of control of the broadcaster by the broadcasting ministry and the commercial trends within the broadcaster which focus on its business imperatives and its expansion as a broadcaster involving satellite links, into Africa. Forces within and outside the SABC will not allow for its provincialisation, the SABC has begun regional 'breakaways' at certain times during the day involving updates on regional and provincial news and current affairs. Currently, provincial coverage is likely to

come from community radio broadcasters and hopefully in the future, as the broadcasting environment opens up, from provincial television broadcasters.

## 5. Local Content and Language Coverage on SABC 1, 2 & 3

There are a number of important issues to take into consideration when dealing with the issue of local content: Firstly, it is important that broadcaster policies correspond with a national economic policy in order to ensure the aims of the broadcaster, highlighted through the programming they create, conform to national objectives. Secondly, training is necessary to ensure that the broadcasting environment is capable of creating local programmes of sufficient quality. Creating local content must also involve affirmative action for both small and local producers. Thirdly, broadcasting requires political support because the market does not translate into the primary base to support an initiative like local content, mainly due to the fact that local programming will not be the cheapest source of programming. This leaves the support of the state as the alternative source of revenue. Fourthly, the creation of local content requires secure funding through, for example, the state and not merely through advertising, in other words funding is required that has no commercial imperatives. It is also important that the programme resources come from a diverse range of sources, an issue which is heavily reliant on financial regulation, for example the IBA's cross-subsidisation laws. Fifthly, openness and accountability are important when creating local content: the broadcaster must be open and accountable to the public sector for whom the programming is created, and finally, cross-border co-productions with, for example other neighbouring African countries can improve and enhance the ability to produce local content (Mpofu, 1996).

A lot of these factors are heavily dependent on the ability to spend money. This is mainly due to the fact South Africa has an underdeveloped broadcasting industry. Local productions therefore become far more expensive to make and the easy solution becomes importing international programmes, hence the difficulty in diversifying programme sources. Training is also very important in the South African context and unfortunately:

> "South Africa sadly lacks this capacity, this reservoir of trained, talented people who can transform their social, cultural and political knowledge into effective programming" (Van Zyl, 1994).

Encouraging affirmative action through the use of local and small producers and diversifying programme sources both require an intense amount of training in order to ensure adequately qualified people that will be able to make these things happen. Cross-border co-productions, in the current environment, will be primarily between Western countries and South Africa, other African countries are neither developed enough, nor financially stable enough, to have developed broadcasting fields. Once again this will lead to a tendency to import bland, predominantly English-speaking American and European drama's and soap opera's. Although, as previously mentioned, most countries have a preference for local productions, over and above foreign ones, there comes a point where the benefits of indigenous production, comprehensibility and perceived relevance, are outweighed by the benefits bestowed through higher production values of foreign programming. For example, a low cost, high production value programme mix can be created through the use of foreign programming, something that would prove to be far more costly using local material, especially in terms of equal levels' of attraction to viewers (Collins, 1992). Fifty percent of the SABC's programming is locally produced, however most of the films, plays and series are imported (see SABC website). Films, plays and series make up the majority of prime-time viewing so essentially we are getting more foreign than local material during prime-time viewing. Figures from the SABC's 1997/98 Annual Report show that drama dominates prime-time viewing on all three channels to an exceptionally large degree, foreign drama's account for 46 % of prime-time while local drama's account for 5 % of the time. The SABC claims that its local coverage is increasing: latest figures show 41 % local content on SABC 3, the commercially-oriented English channel which has the smallest percentage of local material, and 81 % on SABC 2, the Sotho and Afrikaans channel which has the largest percentage of local material (SABC Annual Report 1998/99, see SABC website). However, it is important to remember that these figures are likely to include repeat broadcasts of local programming during the day and on the weekends and as a result are not an accurate representation of the amount of local material being produced.

American programmes tend to be popular imports because they are of a high technical standard. This can be seen in SABC programming, which has a narrow definition of 'quality' which does not include low budget drama's or soapies (Bird, 1996). Benefits of the

use of foreign programming include an increase in diversity and plurality of programming sources and content, as well as triggering innovation and creativity amongst local producers, ensuring that steps towards 'quality' broadcasting will be taken (Collins, 1992). However, much of prime-time television viewing at the SABC supports a heavy reliance on American programming for its 'quality': rather than ensuring diversity, innovation and quality, this suggests that foreign programming is emerging from one dominant source. In his analysis of the benefits of foreign programming, Richard Collins seems to forget the fact that the nature of the broadcasting industry in the late 1990s prohibits diversity with regard to programme sources. The oligarchic tendencies of large-scale media conglomerates means that most of the foreign programming developing countries like South Africa receive will come from more or less the same source: firstly, there are only a handful of developed nations that export most of their programming, countries like Britain and America, which have the added benefit of programming in the 'global language', English, and secondly the South African market is characterised by a large amount of cross-subsidisation and conglomeration which translates into a monopoly over programming sources, for example e.tv is a subsidiary of Time Warner, the fact that MNET is owned by the newspaper industry means it has the financial clout necessary to dominate the purchasing of foreign programming. Training and development requires a financial base, ideally state funding, as well as regulation and intervention in order to ensure previously disadvantaged groups do not continue being disadvantaged. This will not necessarily be the case if a broadcaster is operating alongside a national economic policy which emphasises free-market policies and reduced government spending. This does not bode well for the future of public service broadcasting in the South African environment.

One of the most vital parts of a public service mandate is the creation of local drama's, programmes through which people can identify with on a cultural and ethnic level, something which is rarely possible when viewing international programmes. Edward Bird (1996) highlights the importance of drama in the public broadcasting services, something which he argues that the SABC is not paying sufficient attention to. Bird claims that commissioning and selection procedures at the SABC's drama department inhibit local drama and lead to a centralisation of decision-making and programming imbalances. The selection process for programming is archaic, neither open nor accountable, with a lack of checks and balances that

ensure script selection is a fair process. Control of selection procedures is left in the hands of a small group of people.

Perhaps what is most important is that production companies are not paid out for a programme until after its completion, therefore the company would need to borrow money in order to actually make the programme (Bird, 1996). As a result, smaller production companies do not get the chance to compete against larger production companies because they do not have the funds required to do so. Selection procedures have come under fire in the press over the past year and there have been attempts to change selection procedures within the SABC in order to ensure that all production companies get equal opportunities. The channels continue to operate as separate business units, each of which is geared towards making profit and ensuring cost efficiency. The selection process of CCV, TV1 and TV2, nowadays known as SABC1, 2 and 3, occurs independently in all three of the channels and this leads to a lack of co-ordination between channels with regard to programming balance, for example gender stereotyping, racial representation, depiction of violence (Bird, 1996).

The original idea behind SABC 1, 2 and 3 was to move away from a conceptualisation of White channels and Black channels generating White audiences and Black audiences. The first step towards this was mixing different language groups in different proportions on different channels: CCV became SABC 1, the White channel TV1 became SABC2 and the third channel was upgraded into SABC3. SABC 1 had a broadcasting footprint which covered approximately half of the country and it dealt with the Nguni languages (Zulu and Xhosa), as well as English. SABC 2 had the largest broadcasting footprint and because of it, focussed on the Sotho languages (Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana) and Afrikaans and was primarily geared towards educational programming. SABC3 had the smallest broadcasting footprint, restricted to the more metropolitan areas. It was a commercially-oriented English channel there to subsidise public service broadcasting on the other two channels. Looking at the programming line-up on the three channels, it seems not too much has changed since then with regard to their different roles (Barnett, 1998). Channels seem to focus on specific languages and there is a suggestion of a focus on English to the detriment of other official languages: English accounts for over 50 % of all programming during prime-time viewing on

the three SABC channels (ibid.,). Overall there has been a decline in the level of Afrikaans-language programming at the broadcaster and a gradual change in audience profiles in response to these changes. This is due to the heavy reliance on foreign imported programming during prime-time viewing, the result of our underdeveloped broadcasting industry. The 1996 Annual Report figures from the SABC confirm that English is the dominant language on all three SABC channels. On SABC 1, 2 and 3 English accounted for 29 %, 23 % and 97 % of language coverage respectively. Although all eleven official languages were catered for by the three channels, multilinguality figures were relatively low, standing at 33 % for SABC 1, 27 % for SABC 2 and 2 % for SABC 3 (SABC Annual Report, 1996, see SABC website). Latest figures from the SABC's 1998/99 Annual Report show that English is still the most predominant language, with figures ranging from a 64 % coverage on SABC 1, 41 % coverage on SABC 2 and 100 % coverage on SABC 3 (SABC Annual Report, 1998/99, see SABC website). These figures highlight the increase in the use of English on all of the three channels since 1996, even though SABC 1 and SABC 2 are supposed to be entirely multilingual.

A division of channels into business units has led to a division of channels over programming and language issues. Also, because the major source of revenue is advertising, programming is targeted towards mass appeal. This suggests an erosion of minority programming and minority languages. The specificity of a channel's programming, based on its 'reach', coupled with the division of the channels into business units, means each channel is catering for a specific audience set, a class-based response towards attracting sizeable audiences. SABC 1 and 2 share the majority of the audience in the income bracket of R 1 400 - R 2 499 while SABC 3 shares the majority of the audience in the income bracket R 6 000 - R 9 999 (see SABC website). Seeing class and race are divided along roughly the same lines in South Africa, this translates into each channel catering for a specific class, culture and race in their target audience.

**The SABC's Approach to Public Service Broadcasting**
Very little research has been done on the SABC in its current capacity as a public service broadcaster. Munyaradzi Hwengwere (1995), whose work has been briefly examined,

looked at the relationship between public service broadcasting and language in South Africa, analysing a number of policy options submitted to the IBA by different organisations regarding language policies they believed the public broadcaster should adopt. The thesis explored the difficulty of catering for extensive multilinguality while simultaneously ensuring a future role in the broadcasting environment. Alum Mpofu's research, which examines the SABC's public service mandate in relation to policy-making in South African broadcasting, highlighted the minority role public broadcasting was playing in the SABC at that time. Public broadcasting was restricted to the NNTV channel (Mpofu, 1996; van Zyl, 1994) and was thus seen as a tedious obligation to be fulfilled through subsidisation from commercial programming. Mpofu's research also showed that SABC executives were uncertain as to how public services should be managed. Some proposed 'unbundling' the SABC and privatising its commercial services, ensuring funds for a public mandate and independence from advertising revenues. Other executives believed that public broadcasting should have commercial activities in order to ensure the SABC is of sufficient size and economically stable enough to fulfill its public mandate. The most commonly encountered vision was one in which NNTV would be established as the fully-fledged public service broadcaster, non-commercial and independent of both advertising revenue and audience ratings. SABC executives' past attitudes and actions regarding public and commercial broadcasting shows an inability to move beyond an elitist view of public broadcasting introduced through the Viljoen Report. This idea of 'public' is an idea reminiscent of Habermas's public sphere: a public devoid of popular and entertainment sentiments and equated with serious and boring programming. Hence, a large amount of stress is placed on the commercial ethic over and above the public service ethic. Mpofu's research is limited because of its datedness, Having been conducted prior to the SABC's restructuring in 1994. The view which SABC executives hold regarding public broadcasting has an important effect on the way a broadcaster approaches its public service mandate. The research wishes to continue exploring the theme of ambiguity in the approach to public broadcasting set up by Mpofu's work and assess whether executives still approach public broadcasting in more or less the same manner and therefore ultimately tend to place commercial priorities over and above public ones.

The above work suggests that SABC executive approaches to public service broadcasting, a

low level of local content and a continued reliance on Western cultural values in an African environment has led to the SABC not fulfilling its duties as a public service broadcaster. An analysis of language policy has shown that the SABC is also not fulfilling its mandate of eleven official languages due to a channel focus on specific languages. This researcher is of the opinion that continued political interference at the broadcaster by the government of the day and financial instability created by the Western-influenced commercial policies passed regarding the SABC's role in the broadcasting field has affected the SABC's ability to fulfill its role as South Africa's public service broadcaster, disallowing the formation of a national-collective consciousness and the representation of all ethnic groups in the South African environment. The researcher will set out to prove or disprove the hypothesis that financial instability and political dependence have led to an inability, by the SABC, to fulfill its public service mandate. Themes in the data analysis closely echo themes outlined here: language and cultural representation of all South Africans, the political neutrality of the newsroom and staff make-up. These elements are necessary to ensure the adequate fulfilment of a public service mandate and therefore the analysis will explore these themes and relate their fulfilment or the lack thereof back to the SABC's view of its public service mandate.

Chapter 7

## Research Methodology

**Research Methodology**

This research was an attempt to evaluate the success of the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate. Data was collected in an attempt to either refute or validate the hypothesis that the SABC has failed to fulfill its public service mandate due to an inability to remain politically independent and financially stable. The lack of significant studies around the SABC in its current capacity as a public service broadcaster and the resulting need to rely on sources of information outside of the academic field automatically makes this an exploratory study. The researcher wished to explore organisational approaches to the public service mandate. Only one other research project has attempted to explore issues of public service broadcasting in the context of policy-making, Mpofu's (1996) qualitative study of the concept of public service broadcasting as a guide to future broadcasting policy in the South African environment. Unfortunately Mpofu's research was conducted before the SABC's relaunch in 1994 and is therefore dated. Hwengwere's (1995) project on public service broadcasting and the importance of fulfilling an eleven language mandate also examined the concept of public service broadcasting and how it is to be implemented in the South African broadcasting field. Within this dissertation these two studies formed the basis of previous research conducted in the field of public service broadcasting in South Africa. Much of the information that the researcher gathered on the SABC came from the print media and on the basis of claims made in the media regarding problems the SABC was having which were effecting its ability to fulfill its public service mandate. The researcher isolated issues for discussion during the interviews. In this sense, the researcher wished to compare and contrast external and internal opinions regarding the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate.

A public broadcaster, as a public institution, remains firmly in the public eye and therefore remains a popular topic for public debate, hence the large amount of coverage afforded to the SABC through the print media. Because of this, it was very difficult for the researcher to enter the research field without holding any preconceived opinions. The researcher has been

working in this field prior to the research project and therefore was aware of themes and perspectives that would be used during data analysis. For a study of this nature qualitative research was used as the emphasis was on exploring the depth of understanding regarding the concept of public service broadcasting amongst staff. From this exploration, through the use of traditional principles of public service broadcasting, attempts would be made to evaluate the success of the public service mandate. Qualitative research was necessary in order to provide the information-rich data which would allow the researcher to assess subjects opinions towards the complex transformation taking place at the SABC. Qualitative research was also appropriate because the aim of the research was to explore concepts of public service broadcasting, this would be shown through descriptive words and associations. This research was about exploring and unpacking internal staff approaches to the complex and ambiguous subject of public service broadcasting, what public service broadcasting entails and what it means to be a public service broadcaster, and therefore was not something that could have been understood using quantitative research methods.

**Research Methods**

Research methodology was qualitative and so the most appropriate method through which to collect data was interviews. Interviews were semi-structured in order to allow the researcher to eventually shape responses into some sort of standardised framework. Semi-structured questions were used to allow the researcher to compare and contrast responses of different subjects. Interviews were also informal enough to include open-ended questions and probes, subjects were asked to elaborate on particular issues and each subject was asked different questions based on their specific field of work and job status within the SABC. Interviews were conducted in the field, in other words the interviews took place within the SABC itself. The context in which the interviews took place was noted and the order in which the questions were asked was tailored to suit each specific subject. The researcher did not want to invade the subjects' train of thought, primarily because the links made between concepts and ideas was essentially the most significant part of the data, for example, subjects equating public service broadcasting with more commercial principles. The researcher was not always in control of the direction which the interviews took, these were a joint effort between subjects and the researcher. This method was used because research was based around

subjects informed opinions regarding public service broadcasting and how successful they felt the SABC had been in fulfilling its public service mandate.

Fourteen semi-structured questions were given to each of the subjects, and as stated previously, the rest of the interview time was taken up with probes, elaborations and questions specifically geared towards respective subjects' fields. Interviews lasted approximately 1 - 1 ½ hours and were conducted at the Auckland Park headquarters of the SABC in Johannesburg on the 31st of March and the 1st April 1999. Of the nine subjects, two were from the Radio Division, two were from the Television Division, two were from the Human Resources division and three were from the Corporate Communications Division. Naturally radio and television personnel were asked questions regarding the fulfilment of a public service mandate in Radio and Television Divisions respectively, Corporate Communications personnel were asked questions regarding the relationship between the SABC and the media and Human Resources personnel elaborated on questions concerning the SABC's staff make-up. One of the interviews was disregarded during the analysis due to the poor quality of the recording, this left the researcher with eight interviews in the analysis. The unstructured nature of the interviews led to subjects elaborating on questions geared towards other fields, for example one of the television personnel gave their opinion on the relationship between the SABC and the media. Answers from different subjects regarding the semi-structured questions were compared, while answers regarding the specific fields in which the subjects worked were analysed separately.

One of the biggest shortcomings within the research design was the fact that the researcher had no control over the sampling process, subjects were selected by the SABC through the corporate communications division which sent out memo's to subjects they had picked asking if they would be available to be interviewed. The researcher controlled the level of the sample, specifically requesting subjects from the upper/middle management section of the staff. Unfortunately, all of the nine subjects came from middle management. This lack of control impacted on preparation prior to the interviews: the researcher was only aware of the status of the subjects two days before the interviews and many subjects waited until interviews were being conducted before replying to the memo and saying they would allow

themselves to be interviewed. Subjects also seemed to lack prior knowledge regarding what was expected from them in the interviews, even though it had been specified that data was being collected for a masters level dissertation. Overall, the researcher was disadvantaged by not being able to meet with, or communicate details of the research project to subjects, beforehand.

The sampling procedure was set up through the SABC and subjects were as a result, more suspicious regarding the researchers' intentions. There was an awareness amongst subjects that they were speaking in their capacity as members of the SABC staff and therefore they appeared to be rather guarded. Several subjects expressed their suspicion regarding the purpose of the interview to the researcher. It is also interesting to note that several subjects expressed suspicion of the researchers role as a possible journalist, or that the story would be sold to the papers. The fact that interviews were done within company times, subjects were speaking in their capacity as staff members and the interviews had been organised by the company itself all heightened the level of mistrust subjects experienced. Immediately the element of anonymity was taken away: both the researcher and the SABC corporate communication division was aware of the subjects names and positions. This level of suspicion can also be related back to the fact that subjects had more or less no prior knowledge of either the researcher or the purpose of the research. The researcher spent approximately the first five minutes of each interview explaining the purpose of the research to each subject. In conclusion a lot of control was taken out of the research method because the researcher was unable to set up the interviews herself: firstly, the fact that subjects were not chased up for responses before the field research took place led to the specified number of subjects not being achieved. Secondly, preparation time was lost because some subjects were very late in replying to the memo.

**Questions**
The semi-structured interview questions were divided into sections: section 1 included the first three questions asked. It centred around the exploratory issues of identifying a public service broadcasters role and what a public service mandate entailed. Section 2 concentrated on past research that had been done on the SABC and its public service mandate, focussing

on the issue of ambivalency regarding the SABC's public service role and exploring the relationship, in subjects' eyes, between public and commercial incentives. This included question four through seven. Section 3 went on to look at internal structural changes at the SABC in an attempt to fulfill its public service mandate. It attempted to assess the depth of the change that has taken place, in other words has a public service mandate resulted in structural change on the most basic level at the SABC? This covered questions eight through to fourteen. In section 3 many of the questions were drawn from issues reported in the media in order to compare internal staff opinions and external media criticisms of the SABC. This would give the researcher an idea of whether the media accurately reported information regarding the changes that are taking place at the SABC. Questions and answers were recorded on tape, this method was used because the researcher felt that it was the most unobtrusive way of capturing answers. Answers were lengthy and detailed and therefore could not have fitted onto any sort of structured worksheet. Notes were not taken during the interviews, the researcher felt that it was important to listen carefully to answers in case subjects were asked to elaborate on certain points they had made. The interviews were conducted within respective subjects' offices and were therefore sometimes subject to interruptions as subjects were asked by other staff members to act in their capacity as employees of the SABC. The fact that the research took place within and around an organisation is a drawback in that subjects are interviewed in their capacity as members of an organisation and are therefore never able to successfully separate the identities of staff member and subject.

**Tools of Analysis**

Data was fitted more or less into already existing themes and therefore a loose framework was fitted onto the data, even by virtue of the fact that the researcher had been working in this field for a period of time before the research project and therefore entered the research field with preconceived notions. An effort was made not to rigidly impose pre-existing themes onto the data, but rather to let themes come to light as the analysis took place. As themes emerged it became apparent they could be fitted into a pre-existing framework, because of this the researcher was often working from the 'bigger picture', breaking data already fitted into larger themes down into smaller categories of concepts. Analysis was complex in the

sense that the researcher cross-compared answers to the fourteen semi-structured questions and separately compared answers specifically geared towards each individual subject. It was hoped that the cross-comparison would allow overall trends within the data to emerge while open-ended questions would 'fill in the gaps' so to speak, providing the researcher with sources of information regarding the differences in opinion between different fields and different subjects in the same field. Subjects staff positions became an important element included in the analysis. Naturally the hypothesis guided the analysis as the researcher attempted to use themes and concepts to either refute or support the research hypothesis.

Data was analysed using specific tools:
Firstly, the eight principles of public service broadcasting. Data collection and analysis worked within the boundaries of these principles, the researcher had to work within a specific view of public service broadcasting if she was to evaluate the success of the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate. Success, or the lack thereof, was based on the SABC's ability to adhere to the sixth principle of public service broadcasting, that a public service broadcaster must remain distanced from all vested interests. Vested interests refers to political and financial interests, this principle states that public service broadcasters must remain independent of both the state and more commercial ventures, for example advertisers and sponsors, as they will inevitably end up reshaping the nature of the public broadcaster which will then lead to an inability to fulfill its public service mandate. The element of 'failure' within the hypothesis is thus defined as failure to remain distanced from vested interests, the failure of the SABC to remain independent of commercial sources of funding and the government of the day which would, when subscribing to the eight principles, lead to a failure to fulfill a public service mandate. The researcher is aware of the challenges facing this concept of public service broadcasting and the fact that operating solely within these boundaries is growing ever-more difficult in the current broadcasting environment.

Two elements used in the hypothesis were then used as tools for data analysis, financial instability and political dependence. Financial instability was defined by the researcher as lack of a reliable source of funding which has resulted in increasing dependence on

commercial forms of funding, along the lines of advertising and sponsorships. Political dependence was defined as the inability to distance itself from the government of the day.

The study dealt with the SABC as an organisation rather than dealing with specific parts of it. This is because the researcher was attempting to assess the uniformity of the organisational approach towards fulfilling its public service role rather than looking at how specific sections of the organisation have fulfilled their public service responsibilities. Research was not focussed on examining specific processes geared towards the fulfilment of a public service mandate, rather it was attempting to examine organisational attitude and opinion towards a public service role, currently and in the future.

# Chapter 8

# Results and Discussion

**The SABC has moved away from the role of public service broadcaster due to its inability to become financially stable:**

**The Relationship between Public Service Broadcasting and Commercial Principles: Public Service Broadcasting as Inclusive of Commercial Principles**

The predominant view of public service broadcasting amongst subjects was one which blurred the boundaries between public and commercial roles. This is a more inclusive definition of public broadcasting which has been encouraged by the organisation through tools like its 'entertainment, information and education' slogan which the majority of the respondents drew on to highlight their understanding of the role of a public service broadcaster,

*'that is what really appeals to the station, entertainment form.'*

Only one subject mentioned the division in terms of responsibility that exists between commercial and public service broadcasters,

*'cater for the niche markets whereas larger, more commercial stations needn't worry about them.'*

This view is in line with the traditional view of public service broadcasting. The majority of subjects hold a broader view of public service broadcasting as inclusive of a more commercial role:

*'let us not confuse commercial and public but yes, that element has got to be there, of commercialisation. 'Public broadcasting' I think one has got to look at it more broadly.'*

It is likely that this view is related to the dependence on commercial sources of funding to sustain public broadcasting responsibilities. It is the belief of this researcher that the lack of synonymity amongst subjects with regards to their understanding of the nature of public

broadcasting is the result of the lack of a stable source of funding at the SABC, namely television licence fee collection or government funding. This has led to an emphasis on commercial forms of funding which has resulted in the SABC attempting to fulfill both the traditional public and commercial entertainment roles and becoming increasingly confused in the process.

**Public Service Broadcasting as Exclusive of Commercial Principles:**

Although the SABC is organisationally geared towards this more inclusive definition of 'public', when discussing whether there has been a successful implementation of public service ideals at the SABC subjects began to make a conceptual distinction between public and commercial broadcasting, referring to public broadcasting as dreary and serious as opposed to more commercial, entertaining forms of broadcasting:

*'this channel used to be very serious, look at programming documentaries, uplifment programming, historical programming and it didn't perform.....what we decided to do was make it a mix, get the channel an entertainment, glitzy, show-case kind of programme and give it that entertainment-component programming and then gradually implement public service.'*

*'South Africa does not watch documentaries, workshops, you get small revenue from those, you get small audiences watching the shows...'*

*'The public broadcasting sort of demands are such that you end up getting little entertainment...'*

This suggests that SABC staff still retain an elitist view of public broadcasting despite the organisations attempts to combine elements of commercial and public into a single approach towards public service broadcasting. Staff still distinguish between concepts of public and entertainment, 'public' is seen as serious, dreary and boring, something that needs to be combined with more entertaining, popular programming in order to sell it to audiences. Staff place emphasis on the need for programming for the masses, and more importantly programming that can be *sold* to the masses, a niche which they do not see public programming as being able to fill. The fact that the concept of public is still captured in the same elitist manner as it was before makes it likely that commercial, entertaining

programming will begin to take precedent over the more dreary, public programming:

*'Research has shown when people watch tv, we lure them to the station with an entertainment promise and we catch them out by providing them with public service broadcasting.'*

So although the SABC is currently fulfilling dual roles, subjects continued reliance on more traditional concepts of public service broadcasting means that commercial principles and programming are likely to be supported by the SABC staff over and above what they see as public forms of programming.

### Financial Instability has Resulted in Public Principles being Replaced by Commercial Principles

Data shows that public ethics are no longer the most important thing that the broadcaster is driving towards due to more practical problems like financial instability:

*'At the moment the public service broadcaster here is battling so many other factors that isn't the most important thing that it's really driving its way to.'*

*'I think it's trying to fill a public service mandate, not always entirely successfully but the will is there, it's just battling.'*

*'It has to make money, previously it didn't have that overriding concern - there was a grant, there was money coming in so people could afford to say 'well, we're doing this for the sake of broadcasting or for the sake of integrity or for the sake of our principles, but we're OK.' Now suddenly we have to do things in order to pay our way and to make an profit and the commercial stations have to pay for the non-commercial stations. So I think that becomes an overriding concern.'*

*'you can't sustain it (public broadcasting) with a culture of nonpayment of tv licences and no funding, but no funding, from government - you can't sustain it.'*

Subjects seem to feel that public broadcasting as it previously existed, exempt from more commercial aims, is no longer feasible now that the broadcaster has to make money and generate profit. Therefore the need for funding is leading to a reconceptualisation of the concept 'public service broadcasting'. The SABC can no longer afford to be focussed on public ethics and public principles, it has to focus on profit-making. Once again this suggests

that commercial principles are likely to gain precedent over public principles within the SABC currently, primarily because of the financially unstable position that the broadcaster is in.

**Financial instability has led to the SABC fulfilling dual roles**

*'what they've done now they've divided the SABC into two, there are those stations that go out of their way to get money and those that stick, as much as possible, to the public broadcasting specificities.'*

*'in order for it (public broadcasting) to survive you have to have money through advertising and so on. I don't see a clash between the two, I see the other way around, I see the two hands washing each other.'*

*'Everyone knows that there's no money coming from government, they don't have any money so they came up with a clever plan: let one station be the milk cow, let it go for bubblegum programmes, let that station go for....for popularist programming and just deliver the audiences on bland, bland money.'*

*'It's complementing each other, it is helping each other in the sense that you get money and you're able to..to produce the news and you don't want to pay your tv licence and you don't want the SABC to..to commercialise! That's why we make money..'*

*'Public service on its own cannot survive so the money goes into our advertising and airtime people, sales and marketing, those who sell advertising and does have to sell for the public service broadcasting..'*

*'You divide up commercial to generate revenue, otherwise we will find ourselves cash strapped!'*

*'we're not getting money from government so we're not funded. We get our money from the few tv licence payers that are still paying, it's only the older communities..your younger people don't pay. So that's where we get our money from and then the rest of our money comes from advertising and sponsorships, that's why we have to be commercially-driven...'*

The overwhelming opinion amongst subjects is that this is a relationship born out of necessity, the lack of available funding from other sources like tv licence fees and government has forced the SABC to become increasingly reliant on advertising and

sponsorships as a source of funding. This is dangerous in the sense that the source of funding often begins to shape the nature of that broadcaster, the fact that the SABC relies so heavily on commercial sources of funding, *'..75 % of our income comes from advertising..'*, will have repercussions on the nature of the broadcaster itself, as we have already seen, public principles are no longer the SABC's primary focus. The SABC's fulfilment of dual roles as both a commercial and public broadcaster is a role borne of financial necessity. It has led to subjects confusion regarding the actual responsibilities of a public service broadcaster, subjects stress that entertainment can be a public service function however they then go on to categorise public service programming as dreary, boring and elitist. It is the belief of this researcher that there is still a large amount of ambivalence within the SABC regarding its role as a public service broadcaster. This ambivalence is caused by its attempting to fulfill two roles simultaneously.

## Business ethic

One of the main internal indicators of the change that has taken place is identified by subjects as the move towards financially viable, commercial business approaches which are geared towards self-sufficiency. Looking at the SABC's corporate image, its focus is the new business ethic, incorporating elements of delivery, creating good products, running it as a profit-making business:

*'the profit we then make we are putting into a better product, we create a better product.'*

*'People in business want deliverance, if a person wants to advertise his Toyota Corolla or his VW Charelle, he first goes and he sees which programmes deliver which audiences, we hand all that information over into our research company and then they tell us where they get the audiences.'*

*'We are client-driven, in other words we are there to service the client...'*

*'It's a pure business strategy that if you really to make a success of the core business that you're doing, people need to know what is happening..I'm sure you know recently about the 50/50 programme, that because we are saving the audience, the channel had to consider to bring it back because what does it mean? It might have an influence in terms of audience...'*

This business ethic is linked to commercial sources of funding and the increasing commercial nature of the broadcaster. Profit, deliverance, clients, audience size are all elements of a commercial broadcaster that is running along commercial principles and is geared towards fulfilling commercial aims. This ethic places at its centre the client, programming is judged on the basis of the size of its audience as opposed to its educational, informative merit. While it is a positive sign if a broadcaster is prepared to listen and correspond with its audience, it is not a positive sign if the relationship between broadcaster and audience is purely one of 'business/client'. This suggests a broadcaster running on commercial principles. A broadcaster running on commercial principles will be more focussed on clientele with financial power, over and above minority clientele. Thus we can see a reliance on commercial sources of funding has resulted in the spread of commercial values within the SABC.

## Employees

Changes amongst staff is identified as one of the biggest internal indicators of the change that has taken place within the SABC. Subjects identify staff representativeness and staff training as the two biggest changes amongst staff since the transition within the broadcaster. Both of these suggest a broadcaster attempting to fulfill its public service principles: trained staff will ensure a more diverse range of programming and a potential for programming to liberate the programme-maker, while staff representativeness is vital in ensuring that the SABC is able to claim it is representative of the vast majority of the South African population, all races, all ages and both genders. All staff agreed that representativeness has improved in the past few years and that staff content has changed dramatically, with a lot of emphasis being placed on the youth, on previously disadvantaged groups and to a far lesser degree, on females. Staff mentioned issues of employment equity and affirmative action, highlighting how the SABC is going through roughly the same changes as any private or public organisation in South Africa. Once again we can see that changes within the broadcaster are heavily influenced by its surroundings. However, another theme which emerges is the issue of staff losses to the private industry:

*'..we had a woman who was the chief of Human Resources, Bongi Langa, she left for I suppose, better pastures, but there's an attempt to get a replacement and because the SABC does want to make sure that balances are OK, they're struggling to get a woman.'*

*'You must remember that especially Black and Coloured and Asian senior positions are very sought after. We've got a high turn-over in senior management amongst your Black managers because everybody wants to affirm and because we've gone through the changes, now people have settled down, they've learnt the tricks of commercialism. People still think that there can be good Black mangers here, so we lose a lot of, a lot of good Black managers to private industry who are in the process of transforming. They don't want to train people from the start,...'*

*'SABC's good at training, they train and the person will be complaining about salary and then he applies for another job that gives a better package and now it's a skill that is lost..'*

*'..in 2 months time both females resigned -the one, Jill Chisholm, she retired, the other one took up a very similar position in Times Media Limited.'*

These losses are centred around the 'minority' groups, females, Black, Asian and Coloured staff and thus the SABC runs the risk of becoming non-representative. This encourages narrowly-focussed broadcasting which disregards certain groups of people. It is also a costly process training staff members who move into the private industry as soon as they're qualified. Many of the staff appear to be leaving when they are given better offers in the private industry, this could be the result of a number of different issues, the main ones being lack of adequate remuneration of staff; lack of security at the SABC caused by the ever-present threat of downsizing and the uncertainty of the SABC regarding its current and future status in the broadcasting environment. These can be related back to the SABC's financially unstable position - downsizing and salary cuts are the direct result of financial problems:

*'On the basis of how much do you have in your kitty that's where you'll be able to then say I grew, I increased my staffing, I built more capacity. Cost, cost determines your ultimate future.'*

It could also be the result of general changes amongst private industry. Increasing need for multi-skilling, decline of long-term positions, increasing contractual work and freelancing, all these changes are in line with global market changes in the private industry. Thus we can see that staff losses at the SABC may be the result of internal problems specific to the SABC, on the other hand it may also be the result of general changes in the private industry.

## The Global Broadcasting Environment

Changes taking place within the SABC mirror changes that have and are still taking place in public broadcasters the world over. These are the result of overall changes in the global broadcasting environment:

*'SABC finds itself in a transformation, in an era where globalisation is the case, is the main thing. So in globalization, you need to understand that change is constant, it's ongoing you know?'*

If this is the case, and judging by case studies of other public broadcasters worldwide, it is, then change within the SABC is dominated by more commercial, market principles because the environment in which the broadcaster functions is increasingly commercially, market-oriented:

*'if you want to ultimately achieve better investment you need to give into recent changes which are for the benefit of the commercial...'*

Therefore the trend towards commercialisation is not only the result of financial instability at the SABC, it is also the result of the changes in the global broadcasting environment. This can be related back to the growing outdatedness of the concept of public service broadcaster in the broadcasting environment of the 1990s: public broadcasters the world over have been forced to change their ways due to ideological shifts in the broadcasting environment, the SABC is no exception and is probably under more pressure from both government, and external sources, to transform quickly due to the overwhelmingly commercial nature of the environment in which it exists and the speed with which an underdeveloped, financially powerless South Africa broadcasting industry has been opened up to foreign influences.

## Competition

The impression is given that the role of a public service broadcaster is beginning to change in order to keep up with the changing environment. The SABC suddenly has to start worrying about competition from other commercially-based broadcasters. Although competition for the SABC is still very limited, subjects mention the need to respond to competitive forces:

*'It (broadcasting) was very easy when there were one or two channels...'*

*'we change mandate, first of all to keep up with competitive forces and to keep up with government expectation in terms of delivery, delivery of information.'*

*'broadcasting is becoming competitive and will become more competitive in future,...I think it's about technology, the way we're doing things...'*

There is a realisation amongst subjects that the SABC's role as a public service broadcaster is being forced to change primarily because of the changes in the surrounding global and national broadcasting environment. Hence there is a need at the SABC to modernise, to transform itself in order to suit the new broadcasting environment. This involves reconceptualising its role as a public service broadcaster and seeing the surrounding environment is dominated by commercial broadcasting, it is likely that this metamorphosis will emphasise the commercial.

## Expansion

Subjects discuss a desire not merely to exist in the future broadcasting environment, but a desire to grow. This growth will be provided through the exploitation of commercial principles:

*'It's a question of exploiting the real (commercial) avenues that need to be exploited in order to grow..'*

When discussing the changes at the SABC, such as the proposed change to a company under the Companies Act, subjects imply a certain amount of expansion. This is because as the SABC becomes more business-oriented its needs begin to change. Rather than being led by its need to provide a public service to the South African public, its needs now are to stay afloat in a commercial environment, generate profit and expand. The SABC is expanding because it wishes to entrench itself in the new commercial broadcasting environment as the African broadcaster. As previously noted, growth in an increasingly commercial environment will only be able to take place through the exploitation of commercial incentives:

*'...the aim is to become the biggest broadcaster in Africa which I think we are and then, go into Europe you know...so the future is bright and we're expanding.'*

*'..the issue to turning SABC into a company if really, this thing is really structured and*

*strategised accordingly, I see it actually putting SABC as the world class broadcaster in Africa and also in the world and especially with the introduction of the two satellite channels that is you know, it's another way of meeting the companies' needs.'*

Once again we can see that the concept of public service broadcaster is transforming in the current commercial environment, the SABC hopes to secure its future in this environment by pursuing increasingly commercial ventures. The fact that it is almost solely reliant on commercial sources of income is fuelling this rapid transformation from public broadcaster to successful commercial broadcaster.

**Language as a public broadcasting responsibility that is not being fulfilled due to financial instability**

Language is identified by many of the subjects as a key issue in representing all population groups in South Africa. When discussing issues of universality of appeal and provision for minorities, direct references were made to the importance of language representation:

*'Broadcasting in our 11 languages,...'*

*'..cover all the people in South Africa with the different languages.'*

*'To make sure that all languages are properly covered so all communities are covered in South Africa.'*

The fulfilment of an eleven language mandate is a costly process, requiring a steady source of income. This is where the necessity of the relationship between commercial and public values comes into play once again, the pursuit of commercial values allows the broadcaster to afford coverage for all eleven official languages: *'..those stations that make the profits are going to, in a sense perhaps, subsidise the ones that are not making the profit...our eleven language stations, many of them are small stations, they're very limited in the region that they serve because they serve a language. We can't say 'OK, that's a small obscure language, it happens to be one of the eleven official languages but it's small so we're going to leave it out. Consequently something has to pay and if it's one of our more successful sister stations so be it.'*

Commercial incentives allow public service initiatives. However, once again the source of funding effects the outcome, the costliness of an eleven language mandate suggests having a more solid source of funding than merely advertising revenue to draw on, especially if many of the languages are minority languages which are regionally-based and therefore not really consumer-related. The impossibility of fulfilling all eleven languages comes through during discussion, *'SABC is trying to broadcast some of the programmes, if not documentaries, in almost eleven official languages, even if it's not possible. But at the moment, the focus is on the main languages.'*.

This can be related back to the source of funding the broadcaster relies on, commercial funding is not a reliable source of funding because it is solely dependent on market forces.

Although language coverage was identified as one of the key roles for a public broadcaster to play in the South African environment, it was not identified as one of the main internal indicators of the change that has taken place, except for one subject who said *'...programming is changing as well, very good. All language groups are sort of covered..'*.

This can be related back to two things: firstly, sources of funding (commercial) prompt a focus solely on the major languages and secondly, changes within the broadcaster itself as it moves more towards a corporate, business ethic, for example the division of channels and stations into separate business units, each of which targets specific language and race groups. The regional languages have increasingly become the responsibility of radio: *'In nation-building SABC has got language stations that also cover much more along the lines of regional.'*

Within the SABC, there appears to be an increasing focus on television as the commercial earner, the business side of the broadcaster while radio is seen as the more public, regionally-based, grassroots side of the broadcaster *'...tv's the showcase so you know, certainly it's a perception even in this building that you know tv is what the world sees, radio is something that goes on and it's the blood, it's the lifeline, but nobody really is that interested in radio...I*

*still think though that because of the very nature of the business tv is the showcase. tv is our flagship, if you like, of the corporation. '.*

This division of responsibilities between the two would be fine except for the fact that radio is cutting back due to a lack of finances, national radio stations like Safm have cut back provincially in the past few years. What does this mean for the future of regional language stations? Advertising and sponsorships will favour the larger radio stations and television channels and the major languages in the South African context. This highlights the fact that with the commercial funding the public, there's the very real problem of commercial aims beginning to override public mandate.

**Audience Targeting**

Each television channel is focussed on a specific target market *'SABC 1 focuses on the young, the youth of South Africa lifting them, entertaining them, educating them in ways that appeal to them and they are extremely successful, they're growing day by day because they're so focussed. SABC 2 has got a bigger family market, their values are family oriented... SABC 3 looks at the upper income markets of all races, all South Africans, our aim is to have all politicians and all business people watching this channel...'.*

This can be related back to the fact that each channel is run as a separate business unit, responsible for their own finances and in order to generate a profit and get a large audience following, commercial ventures focussed on specific audience sectors will be sought. This can be directly contrasted with public service principles of universality of appeal and provision for minorities, because once again it implies that those groups without the economic power will be overlooked when each channel is being targeted towards specific groups of people.

**Discussion**

This research supports Mpofu's findings on the SABC's approach to its public service mandate, the SABC is ambivalent regarding its role as a public service broadcaster primarily due to the fact that it relies on commercial sources of funding in order to fulfill its public service mandate. Although attempts have been made within the SABC to successfully combine the roles of public and commercial broadcaster, this has not been the case. Subjects approaches to understanding the role of a public broadcaster highlights the fact that although the fulfilment of two roles is supposedly unproblematic, it has in fact not changed the way that subjects regard public broadcasting, as elitist, dreary and boring, and therefore, it is likely that commercial imperatives will be placed above public ones. In this sense, financial instability has led to a failure to fulfill public service responsibilities because the SABC, as a broadcaster fulfilling dual roles, is placing commercial responsibilities over and above public ones. Financial instability has also led to a failure to fulfill public service responsibilities because public principles are no longer the driving force behind the SABC, they have been replaced by more pressing demands such as the need for a reliable source of funding.

These findings also contradict the work of Mpofu, who argues that funding is not important in shaping policy-making within a broadcaster, the source of funding implies specific responsibilities to the funder which are capable of reshaping the nature of a broadcaster. It is the belief of this researcher that the SABC's conceptualisation of its public responsibilities is beginning to transform it in favour of more commercial responsibilities due to its increasing reliance on commercial sources of funding. Ideally, a public service broadcaster is dependent on a reliable, non-commercial form of funding in order to fulfill its mandate. With the SABC, as with many other public broadcasters the world over, we have seen that this is no longer the case due to governments refusal to fund public broadcasters and the inability to rely on television licence fee collection as a stable source of funding, especially in a country like South Africa where refusing to pay your television licence is taken as a political statement. Commercial funding implies a responsibility towards advertisers and sponsors which will naturally begin to reshape the broadcasting process and issues of quantity will begin to take precedent over issues of quality. Audience size, profit margins and programming geared towards economically-powerful consumers will begin to dominate the

programming process. Therefore commercial funding does not imply responsibility to public opinion, rather it implies shaping programming towards specific sets of consumers who can afford the products. Commercial tendencies introduce issues of class and economic power into the broadcasting industry.

This is having an impact on the internal organisation of the SABC, with emphasis being placed on business ethic, its transformation into a company under the Companies Act, and its vision of the SABC as broadcaster for the African continent. Commercial funding is leading to an increasing commercialisation of the nature of the SABC, not merely its programming. The necessity of the relationship between public and commercial imperatives is obvious when discussing the lack of adequate funding for the SABC, however the fulfilment of dual roles is also dangerous for the South African broadcasting field in general: the SABC, besides MNET, is the only well-established broadcaster in the entire South African broadcasting field. If it continues to pursue commercial broadcasting while receiving the protection afforded to its status as South Africa's public service broadcaster, there is a strong likelihood that it will dominate the South African broadcasting environment. The Broadcasting Act of 1998 claims that this will not be the case and discusses issues of downsizing and the division of the SABC into a public and commercial arms. Subjects, however, saw the future of the SABC as solely involving expansion and commercialisation, no mention was made of division and downsizing. The researcher feels that this focus on expansion and commercialisation is the direct result of a public broadcaster struggling to reconceptualise its public service ethic and stay afloat in an increasingly commercial environment. Subjects made reference to the increasing amount of competition they were faced with as a public service broadcaster, they also made reference to commercial changes in the global broadcasting environment and the need to adapt to these changes. In this sense, financial instability alone is not a sufficient reason for the failure to fulfill a public service mandate, it must also be seen as symptomatic of the overall ideological changes that have taken place in the global broadcasting environment. The domination of market values and the opening up of the national broadcasting arena has led to a need to transform the public service ethic to one more befitting the current environment.

Financial instability has led to a failure to fulfil a public service mandate. The difficulty in fulfilling an eleven language mandate, audience targeting and staff losses to the private industry are three examples of the negative effect that financial instability has had on fulfilling a public service mandate. As we have seen, language is a public responsibility which is identified by subjects as very important in terms of fulfilling a public service mandate. However, lack of stable sources of funding lead to a over reliance on commercial sources of funding in order to fulfill public responsibilities. Commercial sources of funding are unstable in that they favour larger radio stations, television channels and ethnic groups with buying power. This suggests that financial instability has led to a failure to fulfill an eleven language mandate. This increasing trend towards commercial values and ideals which is seen as the result of financial instability and the increasing reliance on commercial sources of funding can also be seen as the result of the extreme pressure the SABC has come under through global broadcasting changes. The constant transformation within the SABC since 1994 suggests that the broadcaster wishes to expand and transform itself in order to gain a secure foothold in the current environment. In order to do this it must transform its public service principles. Therefore it's very likely that commercial responsibilities will take priority over public ones. This is especially unfortunate in the South African environment because although the South African broadcasting environment is democratic and open and therefore part of the global environment, it is nowhere near developed. A traditional public service broadcaster is outdated in the western world but in a country like South Africa it is still necessary in order to construct a national identity.

**The SABC's failure to remain politically independent from the government of the day has led to an inability to fulfill its public service mandate:**

### Lack of Government Funding

References to government were made predominantly along the lines of their failure to provide funding for the broadcaster. Governments lack of funding was cited as a primary reason for the move towards more commercial forms of funding:

*'It relates to what I said, we're not getting money from government so we're not funded.'*

*'international entertainment which lets this (local programming) happen, we exploiting it, if the government funded it would not be necessary...'*

Even though government funding of specific projects does take place, only one of the subjects mentioned it:

*'we do get funded for instance for some projects like educational projects, crime prevention, we do get funded by the government.'*

The overall feeling from subjects was lack of government funding has led to a distancing of the relationship between broadcaster and government. Subjects focus was on commercial sources of funding and the commercial nature of the broadcaster, government was not a focus during discussion:

*'I don't think it (government interference) matters that much because now I think we'll have to pay our own way, so where we are paying for ourselves we are less likely to be given directives.'*

The general opinion appears to be that if the government is providing no reliable source of funding for the broadcaster then the broadcaster is not obligated to the government in any way. This supports the researchers belief that sources of funding effect the nature of a broadcaster, in the eyes of the SABC staff the fact that the SABC is now more reliant on commercial forms of funding has led to a distancing of the relationship between the broadcaster and the state.

**A Public Service Broadcaster is a State Asset**

The nature of a public service broadcaster, a broadcaster in the interests of the general public, looking after public needs and requirements and ideally funded through the state, suggests an institution very closely aligned with the state. Subjects recognise that even though the SABC is financially independent of the state, its status as a public broadcaster still results in it being closely aligned to the state:

*'I'm sure from an ignorant point of view, there is certainly a line with the government of the day and I can't see that ever really changing because we are a public broadcaster.'*

*'Being a public broadcaster yes, probably we are sort of in a way more linked to the government of the day but I mean will that ever change?'*

The SABC, by virtue of its status as a public broadcaster is a state asset:

*'It's a question of building relations, how should SABC operate inside the state? I mean the state would also like to have a stake out of SABC you know so that's the issue...'*

*'there are a lot of ANC influences around still, I mean like our educational programme, the ministers always come to...we had Jay Naidoo, we had Ben and from time to time they need direction and so they do eventually contact us and expect us to help them.'*

*'we're going to be an independent entity when I think there's's going to be even less (government interference) than there is at the moment...'*

This relationship with the state suggests that the SABC is susceptible to political influence and regardless of whether or not it is funded by the state it will still maintain a close relationship with the state. Although financially the SABC is independent of the state, its status as a public service broadcaster suggests otherwise. In the data, this manifested itself through legislative control by the state. The major contradiction that emerged within the data is that although the government refuses to fund the SABC, the SABC is dependent on government through its legislative decisions regarding the SABC's future. From answers given to questions concerning the future of the SABC, its transformation into a company and its proposed division, it became obvious that the SABC is not a broadcaster in control of its own destiny. Subjects put all decisions regarding division and transformation down to the government:

*'The decision was made by...well by the ministry, primarily because it was founded, I think, to enable the SABC to deliver more in terms of public service...'*

*'the Broadcasting Act made it very clear we should have a commercial and a public thing.'*

The general attitude is that of the government pushing the SABC to assume certain responsibilities and move in certain directions, *'I think that the Broadcasting Act is forcing us in that direction (towards fulfilling public broadcasting ideals).'*

Interviews were conducted at the middle management level, and therefore the researcher was surprised that the subjects knew so little about the direction the SABC would be moving in the future:

*'we (management) want to communicate but we're not quite sure of the certainty of what we're thinking so we really don't want to do that right now. I don't see these major changes taking place now, I mean the act hasn't even been approved am I right?'.*

It is likely that subjects at an executive level would have known more about proposed changes, however it is also possible that this lack of clarity is the result of the lack of authority the SABC holds over decisions regarding its future:

*'I think we are still very much subject to decisions..by the government ja and because there's the IBA, fair enough, which now supposedly looks at broadcasting...but government still makes broadcasting decisions you know...'*

This evidence suggests that the government still holds a large amount of control over the SABC regarding the role it will play in the current and future broadcasting environment.

**The SABC's Past Status as a State Broadcaster**

Subjects also suggest that the SABC's past status as a state broadcaster has effected its ability to remain independent of the state:

*'It's (political interference) something that again was inherited....for so long it was part of the government-type subsidised operation, obviously that we still have a hangover...'*
*'it's a perception as well that we're sitting with but yes there have been squabbles and certainly there are some politicians who believe that if a statement comes out that they don't like they can still pick up the telephone and call the newsroom and say "why did you do that? Broadcast a retraction immediately!"'*

So although subjects seem to believe that a lack of government funding leads to lack of government involvement in day-to-day operations within the broadcaster, evidence like this seems to suggest otherwise. The SABC's past role as a state broadcaster has conditioned it

into a close relationship with the government of the day, this will be a very difficult influence to remove.

**The Newsroom as the Site of Political Interference**

Within any broadcaster, the division that will be the most negatively effected by political interference will naturally be the newsroom:

*'There's more lobbying for particular programming and how things get covered pressure being put on us to cover this weekly story and that when we know it's not of national interest and things like that.'*

*'that (political interference) is mainly in our news environment, in other areas it's basically not happening.'*

*'journalists, I think, tend to make an issue out of it... There was this research thing about the ANC and it turned out that tv news and radio news people reported it differently...It so happened the story by radio news was done by a White person and the story by tv news by a Black person and obviously their perceptions are different.'*

*'I know that the newsrooms at the moment are battling to get their principles, to get their policies and stick to them...'*

There is an awareness among subjects that there is a high level of politicisation in the newsroom and that this is something that needs to be watched carefully. In order to ensure that news coverage remains objective the SABC needs to draw up strong principles and policies with regard to reporting. The susceptibility of the newsroom to political influences is to be expected from a broadcaster which until four years ago was fully state-controlled. The fact that the SABC is still struggling in a sense, to generate policies in line with its new-found status as a public broadcaster suggests that the broadcaster is still struggling to find its feet regarding its political independence. It also suggests that the SABC is not a public broadcaster wholly independent from the government of the day.

However, subjects also provide evidence of changes which have occurred in the SABC's internal organisation which have contributed to liberating the newsroom from its previously entrenched political biases:

staff training: *'we had to retrain our journalists, we had to reinstil certain ethics and to be able to say "but OK, how do we operate now as a public service broadcaster, we need to have a specific hat and we have to be very objective, we cannot pick sides here" and things like that...';*

staff representativeness: *'emphasis is on bringing young people into the corporation...they're not moving into a newsroom and saying "it's always been done like this we will continue to do it like that"...they're prepared to try new things and they come to report news with an open mind and a lot of healthy argument and a lot of healthy debate.'; '...it's the aim and objective of one of the people involved in news at the top who says there must be a young buzz around the newsroom because that's what gives it vibrance...'.*

So changes within the SABC geared towards helping to fulfill a public service mandate have proved to be liberating for the newsroom and its attempt to become politically neutral and objective in its reporting. This suggests that although the SABC is not yet fully independent from the government and past forms of operating, the steps it is taking towards more public forms of broadcasting are proving to be valuable in transforming its operations.

## Politicisation of the Staff

This is to be expected in any environment that is as political as the broadcasting environment: *'...the staff are quite political, everybody belongs to different political parties...the environment still being very politicised...the SABC has got a huge component of Black staff and this comes from the struggle and coming from a struggle background, highly politicised.'*

Political levels amongst staff also have a lot to do with the larger environment - South Africa is a very political country, having just been through it's first democratic elections six years ago. Naturally this is echoed inside any large-scale organisation like the SABC which as a public broadcaster, constantly reflects the general public sphere:

*'4 years ago when the election happened and the ANC had a victory, the staff in this place were running up and down the passage screaming "yeah-yeah!"'.*

A high level of politicisation amongst staff is more reflective of the changes in the greater South African environment and the nature of broadcasting in general than it is indicative of a greater political conspiracy going on in inside the SABC.

**Discussion**

The general attitude amongst subjects was that the government had no involvement in the day-to-day running of the broadcaster due to its lack of funding, this supports the belief of the researcher that a source of funding effects the nature of a broadcaster, a broadcaster that is not funded by the government will therefore not feel obligated to live up to its expectations. However, although lack of reliance on government funding seems to suggest an increasing level of independence from the government, the main contradiction which emerged in the data was the high level of dependence that the SABC had on the government regarding its future role and structure within the broadcasting environment. Government still controls the future of the SABC through legislative decisions, the fact that the South African environment lacks an independent regulatory body with the power to change government decisions places power overwhelmingly in the hands of the government. Therefore in terms of policy and legislation, the SABC is still dependent on the government. However, the nature of public broadcasting is such that it would be very difficult for any public service broadcaster to remain politically independent of the state. A public broadcaster is both set up and run within the boundaries of the state, it is in essence a state asset. This factor, coupled with the highly political environment in which the SABC operates, and the fact that it was the state broadcaster until four years ago, makes the SABC's continuing susceptibility to political interference understandable. Evidence shows that the SABC is not quite politically independent of the state, this is why it has come under fire from other public organisations like the print media and media monitoring bodies.

The data has proved inconclusive because discussion of political interference in the newsroom highlights the fact that changes the SABC has made internally in an attempt to transform itself into a public service broadcaster have proved helpful in liberating the newsroom from political constraints, in other words the SABC's attempts to fulfill its public service mandate have led to increasing independence from government interference. On the

other hand, subjects admit that the newsroom is still a site of political influence. This is worrying because the SABC is one of the strongest national news bases in South Africa and therefore there is no yardstick against which to measure its news reporting. Bias in news reporting could have very far-reaching effects in such an underdeveloped broadcasting industry. The data is also inconclusive because as with financial independence, political independence is a very difficult objective to achieve as a public service broadcaster - we have seen when looking at staff at the SABC, broadcasting is a highly political environment, politics tend to pervade a newsroom and it would probably be impossible to function as a broadcaster devoid of any form of political content. A public broadcaster within a national environment reflects social changes in the larger environment in which it operates, therefore political issues will always be an essential part of the broadcasting process. It is therefore likely that a public broadcaster could operate, attempting to fulfill its public service mandate to the best of its ability, without retaining total legislative and financial independence from the government. This challenges the practicality of public service principles.

During the interviews there was a very strong awareness of the SABC's prominent media status and the large amount of criticism directed against the SABC by the press. The press has taken it upon itself to become watchdog over the SABC and the success of its transformations. This is natural because as a public asset, the SABC is bound to be critically analysed to a large degree within the print media. Controversial issues examined by the press and the focus of subjects responses correlate to a certain extent, probably the result of subjects often being asked to respond to allegations made in the press. Therefore the correlation does not prove that allegations made in the press regarding the SABC are true. For example the press have seized on the story of political conspiracy amongst top management at the SABC, allegations have been made of political bias and the monopolisation of power on the newsfront by three top executives, all of whom are seen as ANC stalwarts. Political interference is not entirely a fictional problem generated by the print media, it has existed, currently does exist, and by virtue of broadcasting's political status, will probably always exist. However, data did not yield results of large amounts of political interference through and amongst executive staff within the SABC. In conclusion, internal opinions and external opinions regarding the SABC's success in fulfilling its public service

mandate do not correlate. This suggests that press reports are extremely critical when discussing the SABC's fulfilment of its public service mandate.

**Results**

It is the belief of the researcher that financial instability has led to a failure to fulfill a public service mandate. The SABC has been forced to rely on commercial sources of funding for its public mandate and as a result has attempted to combine elements of public and commercial broadcasting into its public mandate. However, staff still operate within the strict conceptual boundaries of 'public' and 'commercial' as binary opposites, therefore it is likely that commercial objectives will gradually replace public principles at the SABC due to its overwhelming need for a stable source of funding and the increasing commercialisation of the global broadcasting environment which the South African broadcaster is now a part of. Data shows a realisation amongst staff that if the SABC wishes to secure its future in the current broadcasting environment, it will have to place commercial values over and above public ones.

Attempts to prove that the SABC's inability to remain politically independent has led to a failure to fulfill its public service mandate are inconclusive. The overall focus of the data appears to be on commercial funding and commercial principles, as opposed to problems regarding the SABC's independence from government. Although subjects admitted that there were still attempts made by the government to interfere in the broadcasting process, for example in the newsroom, and political affiliations are still an important part of the broadcasting process, this is to be expected in a broadcaster that up until four years ago was controlled entirely by the state. The SABC's public service status has resulted in a two-fold effect: Firstly it encourages a close relationship with the state because a public broadcaster is a state asset, secondly internal changes geared towards fulfilling the public mandate have resulted in increasing liberation of the newsroom as changes signal a move away from past procedures and policies. Therefore data regarding political independence or the lack thereof has proved inconclusive. It is the belief of this researcher this lack of conclusive evidence does not necessarily mean that political interference in broadcasting is not an important issue. Political interference should be examined on both the level of the public broadcaster, and the

broadcasting environment in general, especially seeing current legislature around broadcasting in South Africa suggests an increasingly powerful role for the ministry in terms of control of commercial broadcasting in the South African environment. The liberalisation of the SABC does not necessarily negate increasing political control. The researcher feels that the data does suggest that the SABC's relationship with the government of the day is beginning to transform by virtue of the SABC's new-found status as a public service broadcaster. However there is a danger that should the SABC officially disregard its public service mandate, for example through its proposed division into public and commercial arms, and becoming increasingly commercial, it will never achieve full independence from the government and the relationship between the two will merely reconstitute itself along more commercial lines. The fact that public status has encouraged a distancing from the state is in direct contrast with the more popular, 'common-sense' view touted in the media that the SABC as a public broadcaster still enjoys 'special privileges' from the state. The researcher uses the term 'common-sense' because, as previously mentioned, public broadcasters generally do tend to have a close relationship with the government of the day and as a result are very susceptible to political manoeuvring.

The research highlights the problems that result in attempting to transform a modern structure to suit a postmodern environment. Public service broadcasting was in essence a concept created at a specific time and place and therefore its survival into the next century is dubious. The SABC is trying to fulfill a public mandate in an increasingly hostile environment, and threats to public broadcasting are also beginning to change. Current concerns at the SABC centre around its future in the commercial broadcasting environment and the process of liberalisation within the SABC and broadcasting in general being placed in the hands of the state. The SABC's continuing reliance on commercial sources of funding and resulting failure to see itself as a true public broadcaster, coupled with staff's narrow categorisation of 'public', suggests that the SABC has never been entirely comfortable with the switch to public broadcasting. This could be a result of the fact that the SABC as an organisation was transformed rather than liquidated, and therefore many traces of past practices still remain within the broadcaster. This is also a result of the increasing tend towards commercialisation within the broadcasting environment. Previous research has shown that the combination of

public and commercial responsibilities has always been referred to as a period of transformation by executive staff within the SABC. In this instance, the view can be related to a realisation amongst staff of the impracticality of the public mantle within the current environment, primarily due to the lack of stable funding from non-commercial sources. This view is in direct contrast with the original view of the SABC's role in the South African broadcasting environment as solely a public service broadcaster. The research has shown us that this transitionary period is still not over and although subjects outline a vision of the future firmly entrenched in commercial pursuits, broadcasting policy has not made it clear what role the SABC is to play in the future broadcasting environment, in other words, the SABC's ambivalence regarding its present role and uncertainty regarding its future will not be cleared up until broadcasting policy specifically outlines its future role. The SABC's ambivalence, and the fact that the changes it is going through mirror changes in public broadcasters around the world, tells us that the definition of a true public service broadcaster in the current environment needs to be challenged. Sources of funding effect the nature of the broadcaster, changes in the funding available to public broadcasters changes the nature of public service broadcasting as we know it, principles such as distancing from vested interests on which this analysis is based are no longer as applicable in the current global broadcasting environment. This is a weakness which future research must overcome.

# Chapter 9

# Conclusion

The research supports the hypothesis that the SABC has failed to fulfill its public service responsibilities due to an inability to remain financially stable: as with many other public broadcasters, the lack of government funding and the inability to rely on television licence fee collection as a stable source of funding has led to an increasing dependence on more commercial forms of funding, resulting in a failure to fulfill public responsibilities such as the equal coverage of all eleven official languages. This reliance on commercial forms of funding is coupled with an increased emphasis on business ethic at the SABC and this relates back to the major finding of the work: sources of funding effect the nature of a broadcaster, the ambivalence subjects felt towards a public mandate was a direct result of the SABC's reliance on commercial funding and the resulting need to combine public and commercial responsibilities within the broadcaster, to the detriment of public responsibilities.

The research did not support the hypothesis that the SABC has failed to fulfill its public service mandate due to its inability to remain politically independent from the government of the day. Broadcasting is by nature politically-oriented, especially in a country with a history like South Africa's and especially in a broadcaster with a history like the SABC's. While subjects acknowledged the high level of politicisation that exists within the broadcaster and the struggle to remain apolitical, the general attitude was that the role of public broadcaster has helped the SABC to distance itself from the government. Likewise although the most common accusations levelled against the SABC by the press involve political favouring and a top level, ANC conspiracy to control media output, evidence of this was lacking in the research. Thus we can conclude that although subjects did not isolate political affiliation as one of the most pressing issues the SABC is currently facing, public opinion as outlined in the South African press indicates that its past role as a state broadcaster under the apartheid regime has not been forgotten and is likely to haunt the SABC for a long time. If the government wished for a public broadcaster symbolic of a new age in South African broadcasting, ideally the SABC should not have been their first choice.

We can conclude that this emphasis which emerged in the data on financial constraints, over and above political constraints, is related to the global economic, political and cultural shifts of the past two decades. The selling off of state assets, the decline of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism has shifted concerns away from hegemonic, centralised control of broadcasting and towards the increasing commercialisation of broadcasting and the need to become globally competitive in the current environment. The necessity of finding a solid source of funding for public broadcasting in today's unstable environment has led to financial issues being given priority over political issues of control and ideological issues regarding what it means to be a public service broadcaster in the commercial age.

The move away from the role of public broadcaster is also a direct result of changes in the global broadcasting environment. Literature examined within the dissertation highlighted the ideological changes of the last decade that have led to public broadcasters falling out of favour and as a result struggling to survive. The need to commercialise in order to survive in the current environment was highlighted by subjects' visions of the future of the SABC in the current global broadcasting environment. Mention was made of the need to expand through satellite and pay-channels in order to become a broadcaster for the African continent, not just for South Africa. This need seems to be replacing the SABC's need to be an effective public broadcaster within a national environment. The SABC's focus on competition and expansion is worrying in the sense that its current status as public broadcaster affords it the protection necessary for it to pursue these goals while simultaneously remaining South Africa's only public broadcaster. This monopolisation of both public and commercial activities will place any other broadcasters that enter the South African environment at a huge disadvantage. Hence South Africa will have a public broadcaster that is stifling democratic content within the broadcasting industry.

The fact that South Africa is a newly-democratic country necessitates the presence of a strong public service broadcaster has been highlighted in the dissertation. Developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America need strong public broadcasters which will promote a sense of national consciousness whilst catering for diversity amongst citizens. They will also act as educational tools for the public and enhance understanding between

citizens. These aims will not be achieved through the use of commercial broadcasters. Problems with the concept of public service broadcasting have also been highlighted in the dissertation, especially with regard to the principle of distancing from vested interests on which the hypothesis was based. It is the belief of this researcher that we need to rethink principles of public service broadcasting like distancing from vested interests in order draw a balance between an outdated concept of what it is to be a public broadcaster in the current broadcasting environment and one which becomes wholly inclusive of commercial values of profit-making and consumer targeting, to the detriment of any other responsibilities it holds. The challenges that currently face the SABC and have, at one time or another, faced public broadcasters the world over, show us that it is virtually impossible to function as an effective public broadcaster devoid of commercial incentives in such an environment. However, this new definition should not necessarily see public as equated with the commercial values of profit-making and consumer targeting, an examination of the SABC's current status has shown us that this does not work, commercial principles ultimately override public principles and result in a broadcaster that is not fulfilling its role of informing, educating and entertaining all citizens in a democracy.

# References

## Published Sources
## Books

Dahlgren, P. (1995) <u>Television and the Public Sphere.</u> Sage: London.

Habermas, J. (1989) <u>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</u>. MIT Press: Cambridge.

Herman, E.S. & McChesney, R. W. (1997) <u>The global media.</u> Cassell: London.

Lull, J. (1995) <u>Media, Communication and Culture</u>. Polity: Cambridge.

Negt, O. & Kluge, A. (1993) Public Sphere and Experience: <u>Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere</u>. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

Stevenson, N. (1995) <u>Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication</u>. Sage: London.

Thompson, J. B. (1990) <u>Ideology and Modern Culture.</u> Polity Press: Cambridge.

Tracey, M. (1998) <u>The decline and fall of public service broadcasting.</u> Oxford University Press: New York.

## Journal Articles and Chapters in Books

Andersen, M. Brunn (1997) 'Television, political culture and the identity of citizenship' <u>Critical Arts.</u> 11 (1 - 2).

Baker, R. (1996) 'The impact of developing technologies on public service broadcasting' in Mpofu, A., Manhando, S. & Tomaselli, K. (eds.) <u>Public Service Broadcasting: Policy directions towards 2000</u>. Anthropos: Johannesburg.

Barnett, C. (1998) 'The Contradictions of Broadcasting Reform in post-apartheid South Africa.'. <u>Review of African Political Economy</u>. 78.

Berger, G. (1998) 'Media and Democracy in Southern Africa'. <u>Review of African Political Economy</u>. 78.

Bird, E. (1996) 'Drama Programming and the public broadcaster' in Mpofu, A., Manhando, S. & Tomaselli, K. (eds.) <u>Public Service Broadcasting: Policy directions towards 2000.</u> Anthropos: Johannesburg.

Chapman, M. (1997) 'South Africa in the Global Neighbourhood: Towards a method of

cultural analysis'. <u>Critical Arts.</u> 11(1 - 2).

Collins, R. (1992) 'Broadcasting Policy for a Post Apartheid South Africa: Some Preliminary Proposals'. <u>Critical Arts.</u> 6: 1.

Collins, R.; Louw, P.; Tomaselli, K & Teer-Tomaselli, R. (1992) 'Editorial: Broadcasting and Telecommunications Policy in post-apartheid South Africa'. <u>Critical Arts.</u> 6: 1.

Garnham, N. (1997) 'The media and the public sphere' in Calhoun, C. (ed.) <u>Habermas and the public sphere.</u> Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Massachusetts.

Mpofu, A. (1996) 'The role of the public broadcaster in a future South Africa: Broadcasting Policy Research: the framework report' in Mpofu, A., Manhando, S. & Tomaselli, K (eds.) <u>Public service broadcasting: Policy directions towards 2000.</u> Anthropos: Johannesburg.

Negus, K. (1996) 'Globalisation and the music of the public sphere's' in <u>Globalisation, Communication and Transnational Civil Society.</u> Hampton Press Inc.: Cresskill, New Jersey.

O'Siochru`, S. (1996) 'Strategies and opportunities for democratic media.' <u>Media Development.</u> 3.

Paterson, C. A. (1998) 'Reform or Re-colonisation? The overhaul of African Television.'. <u>Review of African Political Economy</u>. 78.

Robbins, B. (1993) 'Introduction: the public as phantom' in Robbins, B. (ed.) <u>The Phantom Public Sphere.</u> University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

Roome, D. (1997) 'Transformation and reconciliation: 'Simunye', a flexible model'. <u>Critical Arts.</u> 11 (1 - 2).

Rowland jr., W. & Tracey, M. (1990) 'Worldwide challenges to public service broadcasting' <u>Journal of Communication</u>. 40 (2).

Seleti, Y. (1991997) 'The transition to democracy and the production of a new national identity in Mozambique'. <u>Critical Arts.</u> 11 (1 - 2).

Teer-Tomaselli, R. & Tomaselli, K. (1994) 'Reconstituting public service broadcasting: media and democracy during transition in South Africa'. <u>Communicare.</u> 13:2.

Tomaselli, R. (1994) 'The mediazation of culture: John Thompson and the vision of public service broadcasting'. <u>South African Journal of Philosophy.</u> 13 (3).

Tomaselli, K. (1996) 'Introduction' in Mpofu, A., Manhando, S. & Tomaselli, K. (eds.) <u>Public service broadcasting: Policy directions towards 2000.</u> Anthropos: Johannesburg.

Turner, B. S. (1994) 'Postmodern culture/modern citizens' in van Steenbergen, B. (ed.) <u>The</u>

Condition of Citizenship. Sage: London.

van den Bulck, H. & van Poecke, L. (1996) 'National language, identity formation and broadcasting: The Flemish and German-Swiss Communities' in Braman, S, & Sreberny-Mohammadi, A. (eds.) Globalisation, Communication and Transnational Civil Society. Hampton Press Inc.: Cresskill, New Jersey.

van Steenbergen, B. (1994) 'The condition of citizenship: an introduction' in van Steenbergen, B. (ed.) The Condition of Citizenship. Sage: London.

van Wyk, A. (1995) 'Interview with Zwelakhe Sisulu'. RSA Review. 18: 1.

van Zyl, J. (1994) 'Civil society and broadcasting in South Africa: Protecting the right to communicate'. Communicatio. 20: 2.

Warner, M. (1997) 'The mass public and the mass subject' in Calhoun, C. (ed.) Habermas and the public sphere. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Massachusetts.


**Newspaper Articles**

Du Preez, M. (1999) 'I Smelled Mugabe in the SABC's Corridors' Mail & Guardian. 23 - 29 April.

Haffajee, F & Shapshak, D. (1999) 'Gloves off in the Battle of the Paperweights' Mail & Guardian. 5 March.

Hartley, R. (1996) Sunday Times. 22 December.

Sulcas, A. (1999) Sunday Tribune. April 18.

Vapi, X. (1999) 'SABC plays a new tune'. Independent on Saturday. May 8.


**Unpublished Sources**

**Theses**

Hwengwere, M. M. (1995) Public Service Broadcasting and Language: An Analysis of Policy Options for South Africa. Centre for Cultural and Media Studies: University of Natal, Durban.


**Unpublished Conference Papers**

Burton, S.I.R. & Ryan, G. C. (1998) 'The SABC's failure to fulfill a public service mandate.' Paper presented at the South African Sociological Association Conference, June 1998.

**Reports and Policies**

Delivering Value Part 1: Submission of the South African Broadcasting Corporation to the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

Delivering Value Part 2: Performance, Commitment and National Development.

Supplementary Submission of the South African Broadcasting Corporation to the Independent Broadcasting Authority

Delivering Value Part 3: Choice, Partnerships and Convergence. Supplementary Submission of the South African Broadcasting Corporation to the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

Everatt, D. & Samuels, T. 'New channels for a new South Africa: A qualitative study of public attitudes towards television scheduling' Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE), August 1995.

Fenyves, K., Everatt, D. & Jennings, R. 'Bringing democracy home: evaluating the SABC's multi-media voter education campaign for the 1995 community elections: Quantitative results' Community Agency for Social Enquiry (CASE), January 1996.

Independent Broadcasting Authority Report 'The Protection and Viability of Public Broadcasting Services, Cross Media control of Broadcasting Services, Local television content and South African music. August 1995. Published by the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

South African Broadcasting Corporation: Annual Report 1997/98. Financial Statements.

White Paper on Broadcasting and Policy. Published by the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting. Department of Communications. June 1998

**Internet Resources**

Sisulu, Z. 'The importance of our corporate image.'
Http://www.sabc.co.za/PULSE/PAGE_02.HTM

Green Paper for Public Discussion: Broadcasting Policy. Published by the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting. 1997.
Http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/green-papers/bdg.html.

SABC website: http://www.sabc.co.za/thesabc/thisis/thisis/homepage.htm

**Appendix A**

Semi-structured interview questions which were administered to all of the subjects:

1. What do you understand by the term public service broadcaster?

2. Has there been a successful implementation of public broadcasting ideals at the SABC in the past few years?

3. What are the main internal indicators of the transformation that has taken place over the past few years?

4. Has there been an ambivalency regarding the SABC's role as a public service broadcaster, in other words has there been a clash between commercial and public interests?

5. What is your opinion regarding the decision to divide the SABC into public and commercial arms? Has the division been implemented or is it still to be introduced?

6. Why is the SABC's corporate image so commercially-oriented?

7. The SABC is going to become a company under the Companies Act - how is its future seen? Is the SABC seen as a broadcaster still undergoing transformation?

8. Has there been a lot of staff shifting and retrenchment in the past couple of years? How has this impacted on staff attitudes towards their job security?

9. What is your opinion regarding the SABC's representativeness in terms of age, race and gender?

10. Newspaper articles have claimed that staff at the SABC have been disillusioned by the shallowness of the change that has taken place. Do you agree with this view?

11. The media claims that 'old-style, white guards of the past are merely being replaced by a new black elite' at the SABC's executive level. Do you agree with this view?

12. What is your opinion regarding accusations of a lack of professionalism amongst staff at the SABC?

13. Zwelakhe Sisulu, in an interview which he gave in 1996, talked about the desire to move away from a bureaucratic-driven organisation and towards a more programme-driven organisation. Do you think that this has occurred?

14. Enoch Sithole made a statement to the press about the politicisation of the newsroom in which he said that politics was interfering with the running of the newsroom. Do you think that the SABC in general is a very political environment?

**Appendix B**

SABC staff that were interviewed:

31 March 1999:

Joy Cameron-Dow, Manager for Radio News and Production Training

Zelda Tweedy, SABC Tours co-ordinator

Theo Erasmus, General Manager for SABC 3

Oupa Mahlangu, Station Manager - Ikwekwezi FM

Wiseman Ntombela, Manager of TV Licence Marketing

1 April 1999:

Mike Phalatse, Interkom Reporter (the SABC's internal newsletter)

Gladys Petje, Manager of Corporate Communications

Mannie Alho, Human Resources Manager: Television

Johan van der Walt, Human Resources Executive

All interviews were conducted in subjects offices at the Auckland Park headquarters of the SABC in Johannesburg.