

The Journalism Dialogues

Transcript of recording of 3rd frayintermedia Mail&Guardian Journalism Dialogue, 27 May 2008, Moses Mayekiso Conference Centre, Johannesburg

In May, the SABC was again shaken by yet another management power-play with the suspension – later overturned by the courts – of Group CEO Dali Mpofu, who had controversially hinted that the commercial media were “enemies of our freedom and of our people”. Despite the SABC’s best attempts to embrace a true public-service ethic, its content and direction remain strongly contested – yet it is a complex bureaucracy where position is not always equal to influence. What follows is a full transcript of May’s frayintermedia Mail&Guardian Journalism Dialogue on whether the SABC is being misused as a policy tool.

LIESL VENTER (frayintermedia Operations Manager)

Good afternoon everyone. Welcome to the third frayintermedia, Mail and Guardian Journalism Dialogues. The dialogues are a once-a-month debate aimed at journalists and other role players in the industry in an effort to get the media talking about issues, topics that are of importance to them and this is our third one. Today we’re talking about the SABC. I’ll ask Joe to introduce the topic and the panel to you.

JOE THLOLOE (Press Ombudsman)

Thanks Liesl. I have a feeling that I was once at this place doing exactly the same thing. If I remember well, in 1994, I went round the country talking to the 700 staff members of television news - SABC television news - and we were saying to them: “What should the SABC be doing?” And at the end of it, we did a very thick report which I am sure is somewhere in the archives of the SABC.

I remember doing exactly the same thing one day when we had an African Broadcasters’ Conference in Auckland Park and somewhere in the evening the people who attended that conference came into the control room and they watched what we were doing. And at the end of it, we had the question-answer session and the first question was: “Why didn’t you lead the bulletin with Nelson Mandela, because if I was in your position in my country and I lead with a story other than my president’s story, I’d be out on my ear the very next day.”

Now, let’s say 14 [or] 15 years after that, we are still asking the same question. Is the

“What’s the role of the public broadcaster in our developing country?”



Joe Thloloe

SABC a public broadcaster or a policy tool?

What’s the role of the public broadcaster in our developing country?

We’ve got an excellent panel here. You all know Jeremy Maggs. You all know Karima Brown and you all know Aubrey Matshiqi. If you don’t know any of these three people, then you don’t listen to radio, you don’t read newspapers [and] you don’t watch television.

This is a very informal discussion. We haven’t asked our panel to prepare presentations. Essentially it’s an interaction between them and yourselves. Ultimately we need to draw up, come up with some suggestion on what the SABC should be.

We try and answer the questions: What is a public broadcaster? Is the SABC a public broadcaster or a state broadcaster? And, what should it be? as well as; “in a developing country, is there a greater need for government to communicate with its citizens? And, are its radio stations and television channels not the best vehicles for

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doing that?

And we’re also going to look at the difference between Government and the ruling party. It’s become much more than just subtle in our country today and what they should be doing in our broadcaster and finally, we’ll try and say: Where do we go from here?

Especially after the circus we saw recently out at Auckland Park.

Jeremy, take a stab at a couple of these questions.

JEREMY MAGGS (Media Commentator)

I heard a very apt description of the SABC the other day, that they still very good at doing drama, which I thought was quite apt.

Let me just start off by berating Karima Brown, who is sitting next to me, because ten years ago she called me up and asked me if I’d like to stand in and present ‘PM Live’ which I did. I did one audition and she crapped all over me for pronouncing two names incorrectly. And then my career began as a result of that and I think that I



Jeremy Maggs, Karima Brown and Aubrey Matshiqi

want to start off by saying that I just left the SABC.

I spent nine years doing “PM” and then a year picking up the poisoned chalice that John Perlman left and doing “AM Live”. I think just to put our discussion in some sort of context this afternoon, I think it’s a great tragedy what has happened at the public broadcaster (the SABC). I think it’s a combination of poor leadership or poor governance and I think I can come at this discussion not necessarily from a political or from a policy level, but by certainly taking you into the coalface of what has actually happened to the journalism at the SABC - which I think is a disgrace right now. It’s journalism by omission. I also think it is journalism which has a complete lack of any gatekeeping procedures.

Is it a public policy tool.. or...what’s the question? I’m not quite sure what the other question was - was it a public policy tool or a broadcaster?

Yes, I think it has become a policy tool. I think there’s absolutely no doubt about it. Let’s not kid ourselves. Whether that is done by a direct intervention - and I must state for the record that I’ve never had any direct intervention saying you can’t talk to this person or you should be talking to this person - but it’s more subtle than that. That, to me, is the great tragedy. The metaphor is that you might be on the phone talking to someone and you will always be looking over your

“When I left, I was given the standard farewell party and my farewell party included 18 other people. Let me say that again. 18 other people.”

shoulder metaphorically and I don’t think you can operate in that environment.

I’ve moved to a new environment now and one of the things I found in eight weeks of being there is a sense of absolute liberation in doing what I’m doing. So I think this is a much needed speech or a much needed presentation that people are going to give today.

I think for me the other great tragedy is that there are lots of people that are still there, that believe in the power of public broadcasting who are going in everyday at half-past three in the morning and who are working very hard at trying to craft good radio.

And I think in the midst of all the mess that we hear and that we see, there is still some journalism which is being done, some good public journalism and I want to pay credit to them.

The other thing which really I find absolutely amazing is the exodus. When I left, I was given the standard farewell party and my farewell party included 18 other people. Let me say that again: 18 other people and we sat in a room much like this and there were the standard SABC snacks down the middle of the table - which are generally unpalatable - and all of those of us that were leaving. There was a great sense of euphoria and I just got the impression that the people that were left were like the girls at the dance that never got asked.

They were all sitting around in this

utter state of depression and I felt very sad for them and I feel very sad for the organisation. And I hope - dialogues like this will at least get people talking because it’s a national treasure, any public broadcaster, and I think that civil society and journalists and everybody else shouldn’t be shunning it but should be trying to work with it to make and affect some sort of change. I’m a broadcaster and I could talk for another hour, so let me give Karima a chance.

THLOLOE

Before we get to that. You decided to jump ship.

MAGGS

No Joe, I was made a very good offer.

THLOLOE

I won’t ask. Did you think it was possible to change it from inside?

MAGGS

No, I didn’t. Maybe I just don’t have the intelligence or the skills. I don’t think I had the energy left. You go into work every single day - and I think Karima probably would have experienced this to a much greater degree when she was there. It just becomes exhausting after a while and what tends to happen - and this is the worst thing that happened to me as a journalist - is you start... eventually the tide becomes so great against you.

I used the phrase “journalism by omission”. Eventually, you know when you suggested 25 times that you should be doing this story or talking to this particular

person and there's an obstacle everywhere, you just give up eventually. And that's what happened to me. It became... I think it affects one physically as well. I actually started putting on weight while I was there. I started comfort eating. Since leaving I've lost four kilograms.

THLOLOE

Karima?

KARIMA BROWN (Political Editor, Business Day)

Well, I can't beat Jeremy's tales. I think pretty much the same but I feel often when I speak on the SABC, which I've unfortunately had to do two or three times before this, it feels like a bit of a SABC support committee. I've just seen two of my former colleagues walk in through the door and I'm sure they are more imminently qualified than me to speak about the broadcaster. But I think the challenge is, what now? I think one can speak at length about what is wrong and we all have our ideas of what went wrong and how it went wrong.

I think that currently the implosion at the SABC challenges everyone to look beyond what is going on now and in many ways I feel the SABC is a microcosm of what's happening in other big parastatals, larger corporations and in some cases, the country. I think the battle, the political battle that plays itself out in the ruling party, is pretty much playing itself out at the SABC at the moment.

So where to from here and are we, are things, ever going to change [at the SABC]? I mean there is a part of me that says the SABC will always be a contested place and I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. I think contestation in our society between the forces and classes is a permanent feature.

I think it's precisely for that reason, that the manner in which the SABC's run, should take into consideration that diversity. What concerns me also, much more than the political interference at the SABC, is the growing and creeping relationship between people who work and serve on the board of the SABC and the enormous financial and economic resources at the corporation.

I think we haven't even begun to talk about that aspect of what is wrong with the SABC, and I think that as we've seen now with the tit-for-tat kind of fallout between two of the key players at the SABC - namely the MD of News [Snuki Zikalala] and the Group CEO [Dali Mpofu] . About six months ago these two men found themselves politically - supposedly - on the same side. And so how does one then explain the current fallout if the template is

the divisions in the ruling party alone? And clearly it's not just that.

I think the rush to employ someone other than Dali (Mpofu) as the Group CEO, has a lot to do with the fact that the SABC is also a place where millions of rands are at the disposal of people. I think we haven't even begun to look at the financial relations of past board members, current board members and the SABC at the moment.

Someone like Thami Mazwai, who was on the board before, is now on SABC 2. His company is presenting a programme on SMME's. So I think that whilst everyone gets excited about the political kind of imaginations, and rightly so, I feel that not enough attention has been given to the insidious link between corporate interests and the appointments at the SABC.

The other thing that is also problematic is the extent to which journalists are involved

concern me more.

When I had the opportunity to speak at the Sisulu Commission after the

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‘blacklisting’ debacle, that was one of the issues that I spoke on quite extensively, and asked that it be investigated because I think even if we work out a non-partisan - in a political sense - way in

which to appoint a board or a Group CEO or a Head of News, if we don't investigate the real commercial and financial links that people have when they serve at the SABC, I think we're going to have similar problems because for me, financial patronage is fast replacing politics as currency at the SABC. And we haven't even begun to speak about that. Ja, I'll leave it there at the moment.

THLOLOE

Aubrey, you probably have a bird's-eye view and you're not as intimately involved as we are, so you'll probably give us a less depressing [laughter] picture of what's happening... what should be happening.

MAGGS

That's the happier side we're giving you. We'll give you the sad stuff in a moment!

AUBREY MATSHIQI (Political Analyst)

Thank you and welcome to SABC anonymous.

[laughter]

In 1962, many things happened, many good things happened and I'm not saying this because I was born in 1962. One of them was the publication of a book by Jürgen Habermas called: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and the reason I'm evoking this book

is not because I want to talk about this book, it is because I want to borrow the phrase “the public sphere”.

The SABC is an important component of the public sphere. It is not the only component off course, of that sphere. So when we talk about the SABC, in part we must talk about it as a component of a



Nyana Molete

in private media work and who use their presence at the SABC as a springboard for their companies. You have a situation where you could easily have a presenter who would present a programme, interview a minister and be the publicity company for the minister at a ministerial event later in the day. And I think those are the things that

public sphere.

In part we must locate our understanding of its role in terms of the struggle for democracy which led to the 1994 breakthrough.

But in part, the SABC we want to see, must be a product of the principles and values which drew that struggle prior to 1994. But more importantly if the SABC is a public broadcaster - and I know it's been accused of being such - one of the things it must do is to give voice to those who lack political power, to those who lack corporate power and those who do not have state power.

In other words, those of us who do not enjoy the power of a political party or the power of corporations or state power... those of us who are ordinary citizens, rely on public opinion to defend ourselves against all these manifestations of power.

And therefore, I conceive of the SABC or any public broadcaster in the world in terms of performing the critical role of ensuring that public opinion is deployed effectively and is ranged effectively against the power of corporations, state power and the power of political parties - particularly the ruling party. Now of course, we can debate the question whether the SABC has been able to do this and if it has, since when has it been able to do this?

As far as I'm concerned, we must start by accepting that a lot has changed at the SABC. Start with the programming. I think we must accept that the SABC on TV is much more watchable than it was when I was a teenager in the 70s; that radio is much more listenable than it was when I was a teenager. And if you acknowledge this, then you must acknowledge something else: that when you are critical of the SABC it is usually in terms of news coverage; in terms of how it performs its news function. It is seldom about programming.

Now incidentally, one of my favorite programmes is *Generations*. We can never debate about what it adds or removes from our moral social and political content. But the point I want to make is that we must start by acknowledging that the SABC has changed a lot since 1994. However, its political instincts haven't changed much and this is because the relationship between the ruling party and the SABC has not changed.

The relationship between the ANC or elements within the ANC and the SABC is not dissimilar from the relationship the SABC had with the National Party in the past. Now of course both situations are a product of a particular understanding of hegemony. The National Party, through the SABC in part, sought to pursue an agenda that would re-enforce [inaudible] values

in South African society and help white society deny what was going on in the country then or help them rationalise what was going on at that time.

You have another hegemonic project that has been in place since 1994.

It is quite elementary in the sense that those who seek to be hegemonic are people you see coming. It is that hegemony [inaudible] in the sense that you achieve it without having to occupy particular centers of power.

But it's a product of our reality of single-party dominance and therefore, because of that single-party dominance, those who engage in this hegemonic project do not have to be sophisticated about how they go about it. They do it openly. They do it brazenly. They manipulate SABC content with impunity and what Jeremy calls 'journalism by omission' is what I call 'manipulation'.

So the SABC is not just a policy tool, but has also become a tool for manipulation. If the SABC is not omitting, they are engaged in an exercise that seeks to reflect particular political figures and particular realities in ways that do not coincide with how they are understood outside the SABC and maybe in ways that coincide with how some would think a ruling party would conceive of the post-apartheid reality.



Khaya Xaba

Now what that means of course, is that you also have seen the emergence of what I would call 'sub-hegemonic projects' in the sense that different factions of the ANC - particularly in the past two years - started

engaging in a battle for the soul of the SABC, because the SABC became one of the key instruments in the battle between the so-called Zuma and Mbeki camps and therefore became a key component of what I call the Zuma-Mbeki factional dynamic.

“Parts of the SABC have been cured of ills of the past. But political interference as I’ve been arguing remains a part of life of the SABC.”

And in a sense the embarrassing events of the past few weeks - being the suspension of Head of News Snuki Zikalala and CEO Dali Mpofu - are a product of how the SABC has become part of this Zuma/Mbeki factional dynamic.

Now is there a cure for the SABC? Well it depends on when you ask me.

At the moment I'm particularly depressed by the barbarism of the xenophobic attacks of the past two weeks. Therefore it's difficult for me to answer in the affirmative.

Parts of the SABC have been cured of ills of the past. But political interference as I've been arguing remains a part of life of the SABC.

And the question is whether the opportunity that has been presented by what happened in Polokwane will translate into an SABC that is politically impartial, an SABC that gives access to the different shades of opinion - particularly those of the ordinary citizen - whether it will become an SABC that promotes diversity. And by diversity I'm not only talking about cultural diversity or the diversity of opinion, but also ideological diversity - something that is often ignored.

Now whether the democratic space that opened up as a result of Polokwane presents us with that opportunity, I think is something we need to continue debating. My view is that it does. But ruling parties and the ANC ... as you can see, I can't separate the SABC from the ANC. I say ANC when I want to say SABC and vice-versa.

The ruling party is in a good space. It can play 'good cop' and 'bad cop'. Mbeki has become the 'bad cop', so you can blame Mbeki for the failures of the post-apartheid state and praise the ANC for being critical of those failures. And therefore the ANC is able to eat its cake and have it.

The good thing about it though, is that maybe the new leadership of the ANC must be taken at its word. I never take politicians at their word, but maybe we should. They're promising us an SABC that's going to be impartial and I hope that's what they deliver when they take over. But I'm not holding my breath because ruling parties have a tendency of becoming [inaudible] of their

governments and therefore it's quite possible that if or when Zuma becomes Head of State, the ANC will revert to its former role as server and endorser and extension of its presidents which means the SABC will continue being itself a server, a docile extension of either the presidency or particular factions within the ANC.

MAGGS

Aubrey, I don't share that hope either. I think what will happen is that the SABC will just default back to its natural DNA and I think you might have this hope now, but I agree with you. I don't hold my breathe very highly for that.

Just a couple of things that you've raised which maybe just bring it back to the practical... it was interesting, SAFm, and I can speak from my experience there. Someone said to me recently that the drama that they're doing on the radio station... I don't know how many people are aware that they now have a fully-fledged drama department that's doing plays all the time... that often drama is more edgy and more progressive and is asking more relevant questions than the news department is, which I find quite sad. You used a phrase which was giving voice and the problem that I have is that... or the question that I would ask is: How deep is the rot?

It's all very well to have these machinations playing out at executive level as you've very eloquently outlined for us, but what concerns me is back to this journalism by omission. You want to give people voice but when it comes down to the line-producer or the content producer who's sitting there at four o'clock in the afternoon and who's putting a program together, often that critical analysis and that ability to decide which voices to put on the radio, to put on TV are simply bypassed. I have two reasons. One is fear and the other is just plain ignorance and I think that if you're going to turn this beast around it's going to take a long time before you start attracting that kind of critical thinking back into the broadcaster. I think that's a process that could take five or ten years. Ja, that's what worries me.

THLOLOE

Let me respond to that, before you



Aubrey Matshiqi

respond Aubrey. In '93 we were poised at exactly the same position where we thought we are going to take over the SABC and we had all these dreams about a democratic tool. The same noises were coming from the ANC as they are now, that you need a better SABC and that failed. Perhaps if you look at that, and you look at where we are now.

BROWN

Sorry, I just wanted to come in around what the possibilities are given that this "Prague Spring" that we're all taking about exists as a consequence of the fallout of the ANC - or rather the President with his party. I think that the tendency in South African civil society is to give the ANC more power than it should have and I think that if we're going to sit and wait for the ANC to do the right thing, we're going to wait forever.

I think that what is important is that civil society organisations organise themselves in such a way that we actually occupy the space that is there and that is created by the Constitution, by the Chapter Nine institutions and so on. I think public participation processes

[are] critical, for example, even though the ANC has the majority in Parliament. Even though they took a decision at Polokwane, say for example around the Scorpions - and personally I would like to see the Scorpions incorporated - but in terms of the process they are being challenged by people who believe that they can use the space to go against [the] hegemonic party, to go against an organisation that is pretty powerful in

society.

And I think the failure on the part of civil society with the SABC comes back to these commercial interests. We have lots of people who are in the media who are either touting for working at the SABC, who are producers who have companies [etc] and as a consequence, collude with the power arrangements as they line up under each different administration.

And I think that if we are not going to bring commercial interests and its influence on how people make decisions into the equation, then it's easy to put all the blame on the political parties because they

are so obviously powerful. But I think that many South Africans that are occupying quite influential spaces, abdicate their responsibilities because they're looking to where their company is going to get their next tender from, where they're going to stand and so on. And I think that general people who interface with the SABC - and I'm not talking about citizens, I'm talking about this group of people who work there, that interface as producers, as content-providers and so on - I think you need a shake-up there as well if you're going to be talking different kinds of power relationships.

MAGGS

The challenge is how to flush that out, though...

THLOLOE

Shall we let Aubrey wrap up?

MATSHIQI

Well, I think one of the difficulties facing those who want to change the SABC, is the fact that a particular way of doing things, a particular way of doing news as an example, becomes a culture and to eradicate a culture that has taken root over a period of time is quite difficult. I think what we should expect in the most immediate period, is probably a period of decline. You can hear the decline already. You hear an element of juniorisation.

People talk about the juniorisation of newsrooms. A different dimension of the juniorisation of the newsroom is taking root at the SABC that you listen to certain current affairs programs - particularly during weekends - and what you hear is lack

of authority, journalistically and otherwise.

So in the immediate period we should expect some decline to occur.

What happened after 1993? I think broadly speaking, what you saw after

1993 is a change in the relationship between the ANC and the state power. Now in 1993, they did not enjoy state power and the change that occurred in that relationship is partly influencing not only the SABC, but other institutions of our democracy too.

Now Karima talks about inappropriate relationships between some who work for the SABC and money [inaudible]. That too we can explain in part of this change in the relationship between the ANC and the state power, because after 1994 access to political power is no longer an end in itself, but a means to an achievement of narrow economic ends of a personal nature. And the SABC is an example of an institution where people first accessed centres of political power and through those centres of political power they seek to access centres of economic influence...

What I hope will happen is that we are going to have a conversation as a nation about appointing the SABC board differently and also have a conversation about how we should insulate the SABC both from political interference and commercial interest that at times might have a distortive impact.

Because the challenges that face public service broadcasters all over the world, is that of remaining relevant, remaining credible and being seen to be credible by viewers and listeners in terms of their entertainment content. And in doing this, in meeting this challenge, they veer towards commercial interests. And that comes at a price at times.

How then are we going to insulate the SABC, which as we speak relies quite a lot on commercial interests and less on

the public input for its funding? And finally I hope what will happen with the board is that the board will become a representative of the citizens because this board and the previous one did not conceive of their

role as people who perform an oversight function over the SABC, in their role as representatives of the public interest. They saw themselves as the last line of defense against adverse public opinion that relates to the SABC and I hope that this is one of the things that is going to change.

“What I hope will happen is that we are going to have a conversation as a nation about appointing the SABC board differently.”

THLOLOE

Thank you. Jeannette, I think you were part of the 1990 struggle to change the SABC. Looking at that and looking at this, have we as civil society abdicated what went wrong and what went right in the processes?



Jeannette Minnie

JEANNETTE MINNIE (Head of Zambezi Fox)

Yes, I would agree with you Joe that yes, we did abdicate. We made mistakes, even during those processes of transforming the SABC and in fact the broadcasting regulator. And it all has to do with the appointment of the board. If I say a “mistake”, the mistake was not in what we wanted. Joe is referring to the campaign for independent broadcasting on whose steering committee I served and I did a lot of its coordination, along with Barbara Hogan interestingly, at that time.

At that time we wanted... we didn't want Parliament to appoint the board. We always said that we wanted this first kind of a panel, the panel of the wise and the wonderful Archbishop Tutu's and the others...

People of great integrity that were independent of political interests. We wanted them already to appoint the SABC board and in fact, that was how the first board was elected. After that, when the ANC came to power, they said they wanted Parliament as the legitimately elected representatives of the people to appoint the board. The mistake we made as civil society is given the sort of logic of that argument in the first place, we didn't fight the issue, we didn't keep on the battle for having independently appointed processes of the SABC board.

So that's one mistake we made. And

we're certainly living the whirlwind and reaping the consequences of it again now. The other mistakes we made were not to remain vigilant about governance at the SABC. That this was not being monitored pro-actively over all the years; not as consistently; haven't had special defense civil society groups in place to check all of this. So I agree very much with Aubrey's analysis of what has happened and I agree very much with Karima's references to civil society and so we are again at this stage, through meetings like this and more are going to happen and certainly me saying we have to form a new strong civil society movement. We have to reclaim the SABC. We have to change governance practices again at the SABC and we have to change the appointment procedures of the board and we have to win back that vision that we had in 1994, of what an independent public broadcaster actually is and what it actually does.

MAGGS

But Jeanette, what actually happens in the interim? This process could take years.

MINNIE

No, it didn't take years back in 1994. It took place at the speed of light. We started it in 1992. By 1993 we were already in the position that we were negotiating with the old apartheid government.

You must remember we brought about the first independent board of the SABC even prior to the 1994 elections. It was vital to do so. You need an independent broadcaster if you want to have free and fair elections in a country at any time, in all places in the world/ these things can be done extremely quickly.

MAGGS

You don't think the positions have become so entrenched now... the environment is so different?

MINNIE

No, no, no. That's defeatist. No, depression is not what will come out of this activism. We can speak as much as we like in rooms like this, but unless we organise strategically, organise tactically and we start building public critical mass, yes, nothing will change. We've have got to do the things, we've got to undertake the action. We've got to form the critical mass again. We've got to have feet on the ground again and we've got to have the right allies and I think they're around in South Africa. There are enough of them around. We can actually do it again. There are some like me who are more than willing to jump in into the deep

end and start doing it all over again.

MAGGS

God bless you [laughter].

BROWN

I think there's a perfect opportunity. There's a struggle around the board and the way the board has been appointed. I think civil society has been incredibly lackluster in its support. FXI was initially going to support Cosatu's action to litigate around the alleged executive manipulation that went on around the board and subsequently what - and this is the point I was making - the ANC had a discussion and sought political responses to the problem and not litigation. And as a consequence we are now putting the future of the board in the ANC's hands - in a faction of the ANC's hands - that could go either way. And it's very difficult to find out, so where's the Media Monitoring group? Where's the FXI? Where are all these other groups that are supposed to say 'there is a fundamental problem'?

In fact what amazes me in this political quagmire is that even the DA has suspended its supposed principled opposition to the board because it does want to give the Zuma camp in the ANC credence around its struggle for a different board. And this is exactly what I was talking about. If we leave it to politicians and to political parties, we are going to sit with what they give us eventually.

THLOLOE

Mr Molete, I'm sure if you require it, we will give you the right to say you will speak off the record [laughter]. If I remember you were part of the very first influx of new thinkers within the SABC. I think you were part of the crowd that was in Canada that came back to come and change our world. What went wrong? What can we do now? As I say, you can say you want to speak off the record if you so desire...

NYANA MOLETE (Telkom Media)

No look, I think a lot of things went wrong. A number of things went wrong. I think at a structural level and at the coal-face of work at the SABC, a number of things have gone wrong. A lot of people who understood that you require to... you need depth in your reporting etc, etc. left or did not have the space to exercise that kind of thinking. At the managerial level I think a lot of things also changed in a sense that the priorities changed over time. The kinds of things that we've been speaking about in terms of the funding of the SABC for



Karima Brown

instance. These kinds of things I think tend to influence what people do and how they do it. So, if a CEO at the SABC - and I think this also happens in other parastatals, or has happened in many other parastatals where you have a situation where a corporation is commercialised - and a CEO has to come up with a plan that is going to make an organisation financially viable, then their focus is not going to be on the integrity of journalism. I think they'll pay lip service to that kind of thing. But the main focus is going to be making the organisation financially viable.

And I wouldn't be surprised if the problems that Dali finds himself in now, are linked to the fact that the SABC is not making the same kind of money that the SABC was making when Peter [Matlare] was CEO. So, the problems are multifaceted. Another big problem is that the SABC as a broadcaster - whether you call it a public broadcaster or whatever

“We have to change governance practices again at the SABC and we have to change the appointment procedures of the board and we have to win back that vision that we had in 1994.”

name you give it - does not have a serious competitor. So what the SABC is going to do - and the SABC is financially much more stable than many of the radio stations, even e.tv. They have the resources to challenge everyone - the tendencies that people are going to be arrogant until someone

broadcasts stuff that the SABC should be broadcasting. That your audiences are going to enjoy and that your audiences are going to go to that broadcaster instead of the SABC.

Those are the kinds of things that as well as organising civil society and talking in forums like this, it is when the SABC is challenged through people migrating to other broadcasters that things will, I think, change in a very serious way...

MAGGS

But I contend that's happening already. Aren't they already migrating to that commercial space?

MOLETE

I don't know. I don't think they are in a significant way. I don't think they are. And all of us here, actually, complain about the SABC and the reason why we do that is because we still watch and listen to it and we get angry. I myself drive to work and I get to work very stressed, not because of what other drivers are doing, but because of what I hear on the SABC. And so Bra Joe, what I'm saying is that I think the problems are multifaceted and I don't think that you can look at one thing and see it as a problem.

But for me, the major one is that the SABC does not - at this point - have very serious competition. When I was at the SABC, I felt a lot of times that I'm not forced to think beyond a particular point by the competition. And if the competition made me think, I'm sure what I did would have been very different from what I was doing. Ja...

THLOLOE

Any of you want... oh?

KATE SKINNER (Freedom of Expression Institute)

Hi, I'm Kate Skinner from the Freedom of Expression Institute [FXI]. About what Karima was saying about FXI taking up this legal battle and then kind of seeming to drop the ball a bit.

There are a couple of issues here in terms of what civil society organisations are taking up and I think one thing which I think is quiet exciting, is that new legislation is coming out around the SABC.

Because the Electronic Communications Act came out and it significantly changed stuff from the old Broadcasting Act and now that old Broadcasting Act needs to be rewritten and redrafted.

So there is definitely a space now to rethink a whole lot of things, particularly around the board and around funding and I think that those are the two really critical issues. The governance issues and the funding issues. So linked to that issue around the legislation is that there is quite a lot of research being done by the Freedom of Expression Institute around how you could actually elect a board that would be more representative of civil society and simultaneously also, have the professionalism and the broadcasting knowledge and know-how.

Because I think with the board, there are two major issues. One is that it needs to represent the interests of civil society and the different groupings, but also the SABC is a huge complicated institution and it also requires people to be on that board that really understand broadcasting and management issues and finances.

So basically some of the findings that are coming out of that research are things that potentially, you could have a hybrid board as a component. These people with professional broadcasting and management experience and then simultaneously, as a part of the board, also representatives of various groupings within society.

Now it could be one board, but then it could also something which is similar to a kind of British broadcasting, the BBC for example, which is an advisory board with all the kind of civil society, constituency groupings and then the board itself being a board which has a lot of professional broadcasting people on it.

So there's some very interesting stuff



Jeremy Maggs

that's coming out around that.

Also there's some very interesting stuff coming out around this whole issue which Jeanette was raising and people were rising about: should it go through Parliament or should it go through a '93 route? And interestingly, most of the research is pointing to the fact that actually we've got to get Parliament to work.

Saying we can't actually abandon Parliament here and it does make sense that it goes through Parliament but then we need to look at how to ensure that the communications portfolio committee operates in a way that elects a board in a way that's not going to create all the problems that we've had up until now.

And so then there would be different clauses that you would need to add to the Act to ensure that it did represent those constituencies more correctly, plus, also had that more professional input.

Yeah, just some of the stuff that's coming out.

THLOLOE

Just for the record before you speak, the SABC was invited to be part of these discussions. We were expecting some people to come, but at the last minute they dropped us. So this should not be seen as

SABC bashing where they are not represented. Aubrey?

MATSHIQI

I'm just talking about competition and migration. On television, we have two monopolies in this country. The SABC and Multichoice - to the extent that migration has occurred, it has occurred because of current class dynamics.

If you are middle class, you have the choice. You have the option to migrate from the SABC to Multichoice to DSTV. But if you are working class and poor, that choice is not available to you. You remain a hostage of the SABC. That's the reality.

Now one hoped that there was going to be competition when other digital actors got licenses, but clearly for some time, I mean in the foreseeable future, Multichoice will be able to maintain is monopoly

through DSTV. It doesn't help that e-Sat has decided to align itself with DSTV when it comes to the e.tv 24-hour station.

Because the potential for competition is reduced even further by that and it reinforces the monopolistic role or location of Multichoice in that sector. So yes, Jeremy is correct that there has been migration, but it's migration that must be understood in terms of current class dynamics.

One hopes that we will look back one day and look at an SABC which represents the hegemony of the ideas that were dominant during the liberation struggle. Now unfortunately, those who were part of that liberation struggle are not fighting for the dominance for those ideas, those values, and

those principals. They are more interested in the day to day cut and thrust of party politics. So for me, the SABC will become a true public broadcaster when it begins to reflect those values - I'm talking about the values of the liberation struggle.

But that takes us to a point Karima raised about the SABC being a contested terrain.

Those values themselves must be a contested and the SABC must reflect how those values are being contested because it is in that contestation that you will have not only a better SABC, but also a better society. And finally just on leadership, we bemoan the fact that civil society

gives too much power to political parties, particularly the ANC. I'm reminded of arguments people have been making about lack of leadership when they talk about the xenophobic attacks.

What you must avoid is a situation where as civil society, as ordinary citizens, where we outsource our moral and other responsibilities to the state and/or our leaders. Because I think that's a disease that has been emerging since 1994. And maybe it's because of how we've been intoxicated by liberation. But we think it is okay to outsource our responsibilities to our leaders in the post-apartheid state.

It doesn't matter who the leader is. Whether it's Mandela or whether it's Thabo Mbeki or Buthelezi or somebody else, we must never reach the point we reached over the past decade where we almost completely outsourced our responsibility to a single individual.

MAGGS

Joe, could I just pick up a point. I want to come back to the whole short-termism of this whole discussion and to Aubrey's point about the contested space. It's also the ability to understand that contested space within the confines of the SABC itself.

What worries me, and again I'll give you another example. I was very privileged to take over Karima's 'After eight debate' for a year, which, my understanding was that it was the principal gathering and melting pot of South African society every single day. It was an important, precious product. Yet the person that was tasked with putting that together on a day-to-day basis was an 18-year-old student, fresh out of the University of Johannesburg.

We once asked for a representative of mainstream British political thinking on a particular subject we were discussing, and I had an hour of someone from the British National Party. And I was absolutely

horrified.

Until we get that right, until we come up with a solution of attracting the type of talent on an operational level, I think this debate is going to be stuck in the ground.

Of course I accept the funding model and the leadership model and the

“It doesn't matter who the leader is. Whether it's Mandela or whether it's Thabo Mbeki or Buthelezi or somebody else, we must never reach the point we reached over the past decade where we almost completely outsourced our responsibility to a single individual.”

commercialisation model and the migration model - and all of that's very important - but there is a practical short term crisis at the public broadcaster right now and I just don't know to what extent it's being addressed.

BROWN

I think one of the biggest problems at the SABC has also been that, and I think we demand more of the SABC because it's a public institution. But it has had to grapple with transforming itself and unlike commercial interests who can pay lip service, it has actually tried to do it with some measures of success and other horrible failures.

I worked in the most diverse newsroom when I worked at the SABC for nine years. When I went to the commercial media, I didn't see that diversity. So there's a lot of plusses about how the SABC's kind of tried to do things differently.

But I think one of the biggest failures in that transformation project, is the fact that it was never backed up in any kind of human resource capacity. I mean anyone who works at the SABC will tell you that it's like working in a jungle. There are rules, and

then there are rules. Rules get applied and then they don't get applied depending on the power balance at any given point, in any given department. Someone can be fired for not paying R7 back and someone [else]

can remain in the corporation even if they've committed murder. And I'm not making a joke about the murder bit. We did have people who committed murders who weren't fired, who shot their girlfriends in the

parking lot at the SABC.

The point that I'm making is that the transformation process was so enormous, you had a situation where someone who used to be a secretary of say a language-specific current affairs programme, suddenly became the head of public radio and the very people that she had to manage used to be her bosses and she got no support for how to do that. And the people that had to account to her, weren't taken through the process of how these power relations are now different. You had people who counted cards in some instances became news editors. And the other way around. Open faders of sound boxes, became really senior officials in news environments with absolutely no infrastructure support or any idea of how they were going to do this.

So you also had a cadre of people at the SABC at the layer of management that I believe remain in control, really. And that's a non-racial group of people, believe me. They are black and white and those are the people that frustrate any new arrangements or any new people with new vision that come in. And they're like sandpaper. They just wear you down eventually, nê?



Nyana Molete

And because they've been in the place for 10, 12, 15, 20 years, they know everything about how the system works. They know everything about how to get their way around the loopholes. And until we address that level in the SABC, we're constantly going to have problems. I mean, it's of late that we have black technical staff. Previously that was the domain of the whites in the SABC. It took a long time. You had fantastic journalists come in, new people. And then you had your executive produces, your floor managers, the people who put the product together from the technical point of view. Those resources remained with one group of people and people who were brought in, were brought in such a haphazard and unplanned way that their entry was often equated with incompetence as well.

So I think that just at an HR level, the challenge of transformation has never really been properly dealt with at the SABC. And in whatever studies are being conducted on how to transform the place if we don't deal with that as an integral part of how to fix that place, we will stay with the problems that Jeremy's speaking about.

VENTER

You know I've been a journalist for many years and I've never worked at the SABC so a lot of what you're speaking about for me, is privy information that you have from there. But as a viewer and a listener, we don't do it on that level.

You know, I switch on the radio and what I hear is just terrible, so I switch to something else. How do you get that back though? And how is the SABC or South Africa going to address that? You know it's difficult to get people to change channels back to something that's just degraded to the point where you cannot watch it anymore.

I mean the SABC news is just - in my opinion - I'm kind of bored with it as a viewer and therefore I switch to a channel that I can watch. And that might not be a South African channel.



Jeremy Maggs

I mean, the variety that we're getting is so wide. Or people just don't go for news anymore and I think that for me, is a very real fear. Is that the SABC is turning people

away so quickly that they're never going to get back.

THLOLOE

Paula, I think we're moving into your territory [laughs]. How do you meet this challenge? This short term problem and the long terms ones that lead to Human Resources?

MAGGS

Apart from hiring your company, Paula. [laughs]

PAULA FRAY (Inter Press Service)

Some of the problems at the SABC are not unique to the SABC. I think that's what we should acknowledge that those problems are probably throughout the media. But I think what makes the SABC difference is the topic of this discussion today, that you can have those issues at mainstream or commercial media but that's one thing.

But to have it essentially at the institution which we as citizens are owners or should be owners or key stake-holders in, is something completely different.

And for me the issue of bad journalism, or poor journalism or journalism by omission, is all the more critical because we need to understand, if the SABC is a public broadcaster then what are we supposed to be getting?

Because I don't even think it's sufficient to just fix up the journalism. Beyond fixing up the journalism, how do we get it to the point where it serves the public and not the state? And so I actually have no answers on that because I think that the problem is bigger than just fixing it up, whether you have an 18-year-old bringing on a BNP member as a representative of British politics, but whether or not you actually

serve your mandate.

THLOLOE

Jeanette?

MINNIE

Yes, I wanted to say that about the Open Society Institute. It's not just one, its all of those across Africa and in London. And I'm involved in this. It is busy conducting research at the moment into the issue of the transformation from state broadcaster into public broadcasters and in the course of this research, 12 broadcasters in Africa are being studied and surveyed in a great amount of detail.

Here in South Africa, of course, the SABC is one of them. I'm the editor of five country researchers in Southern Africa and then there's five countries being done in

“And in whatever studies are being conducted on how to transform the place if we don't deal with that as an integral part of how to fix that place, we will stay with the problems.”

West Africa and two in East Africa. The objective of this research as well, once it's been concluded, is that new advocacy initiatives should be undertaken on the basis of this very detailed and painstakingly gathered information.

Now being the editor of the Southern African research, I've picked up a few interesting facts. The one was about staff turnover at the SABC.

I don't have the report in front of me as I sit here... state corporations annual turnover is something like 18 percent but in the SABC it's something like seven percent.

Clearly there are problems of people leaving the SABC because on the other hand, we know that even the SABC board has met and discussed the gravity of the situation. I think particularly of senior and very experienced staff actually leaving so it's not that it's not an issue.

It's an issue that yes, when you talk to people who work at the SABC, they always remark on people leaving... and leaving in disillusionment for one reason or another. So although the statistics don't look out of kilter, there is a lot of circumstantial evidence that there is a problem.

You know Aubrey is predicting that we're going to have a further decline actually in standards through juniorisation and so on. So people are right here to say that they problems at the SABC are multifaceted. On the issue of the listeners, there are all kinds of devices in the world. There are listeners' groups that can be used

very seriously by broadcaster to learn from the public how well the broadcaster is actually being received in many ways. There's audience research that can be conducted. The BBC has this model of trust that very seriously engages with the public.

I mean there are ways and means. At the bottom of this although, we do have to start with the very big problems and I think the very big problems again are governance at the SABC, the loss of an independent public broadcaster.

We may have had an independent public broadcaster in the late 1990's. I think that was the SABC's Prague Spring.

We have to combat that issue again first of all. The issue of how do we return to being an independent public broadcaster in terms of the government's procedures, the appointment of the board... It always starts with leadership. Who leads? Who is the board? How well does the board lead? Who are the CEO and the top management and the chief of news? How well do these people lead? And what are their values actually?

We do have to start with those big structural issues and political issues again and then systematically all these other issues have to be brought into the discussions. How do we transform and keep on transforming.

If we can't transform it, we can't keep it. This is a dangerous scenario. If you look at how many people the SABC reaches... the millions and millions of people who it actually reaches in this country.

The other public survey shows the SABC is the second most trusted institution in this country after the Independent Electoral Commission.

So you sit with these huge contradictions of the SABC, so the SABC is trusted. But so the SABC must deliver and it must deliver on the value system that Aubrey was talking about. We must tackle this thing. If we can't save this thing, the strategy will become: "How do we kill it?"

Because it's become a danger.

Now the strategy is: "Let's try and save this thing. Let's try and make this thing work, really, in the national interest... In the national democratic interest. Not in the ANC's interest, not in the DA's interest, not in any political party's interest.

That's why I have so little confidence in Parliament. These are politicians, these are party politicians. How can they not behave politically? How will you get it out of them



Karima Brown

to behave politically?

How do you get them to make non-partisan decisions when they are deeply partisan?

That is what they are, they are political parties.

THLOLOE

Aubrey you have raised very deep questions about the values that we cherished during the liberation struggle. There were possibly transferred into the new constitution, but ultimately, to what extent are these just on paper and we've long moved to other values, other than those we are talking about? And that is seeping in to the SABC, to all other institutions as Karima was saying, where the money is the main question.

MATSHIQI

I think what we've failed to realise over the years is that their burden is eternal allegiance. And that is what you require. Our Constitution for me - by the way, I love our Constitution and some of my best friends love the Constitution too - I asked a question in Parliament a few months ago. And the question was why did we need

"If we can't transform it, we can't keep it. This is a dangerous scenario. If you look at how many people the SABC reaches... the millions and millions of people who it actually reaches in this country."

a Constitution? And people looked at me as if I was mad. And the reason I asked the question was because I have another question in my head. A Constitution for

which society?

And when I raised that question, people think I'm even more mad.

Because the interesting contradictions about our Constitution is that it reflects, yes, the victory of values that seek to put in place into society the antithesis of apartheid. On the other hand, it reflects the triumph of values that are not necessarily the values of the numerical majority.

I talk about how colonialism and apartheid resulted in the numerical majority becoming

the cultural minority and [viceversa]. And in a sense, the Constitution preponderantly represents the values of the cultural majority. Now of course, these majorities and minorities are in a state of flux.

On certain issues you'll find yourself being part of the cultural minority; on others the cultural majority. And the same applies on numerical minorities and majorities. I think we should be much more critical than we tend to be because there is a certain level of alienation by many South African's from the values - the good values that I support - that are contained in that Constitution and therefore a public broadcaster must be able to reflect these contradictions that I'm talking about.

It must be able to reflect that actually the Constitution may have been the triumph of a particular ideological project. And therefore these tensions will be reflected in how you seek to transform the SABC itself, so I am happy that so many of us are committed to the transformation of the SABC as a public broadcaster but the public space is populated by many contradictions and tensions that reflect the many diverse views and beliefs amongst those who constitute that public.

So in a way, a public broadcaster must in itself be contradictory in how we perform this function. That it must be embedded amongst these citizens, within this public. But at the same time it must be transcended, because if it is not, it will not be able to reflect the tensions and the contradictions within society successfully.

And in part, this is how I approach the Constitution; that I support its values, but I know that I'm part of a cultural minority... and the public broadcaster must help the nation engage in conversation about these contradictions and be embedded and transcended at the same time.

THLOLOE

Before I ask the panel to wrap up, is there

anyone here who's got a burning issue? You want to wrap up, what you're taking away from this session.

MAGGS

I like Jeanette's theory about you either save it or you kill it.

I think there's a third way though. I think it needs Botox or some serious cosmetic surgery.

Maybe the solution is to break it up completely. Maybe the SABC is too big. Maybe you follow the PBS or the National Public Radio model in the United States. Lots of strong little community stations; you have one great current affairs show in the morning and one in the afternoon. [That] either take or they don't want to take.

You have exactly the same things with the PBS. One PBS television station and sell the rest. Maybe that's the solution. Because while I really applaud and particularly the Open Society Foundation and all this effort in changing,

I'm still of this view that there is a lot to mend internally and I fear that we could be sitting here in 10 years time and be having this same discussion.

I don't hold out that it's going to fix itself.

BROWN

Well, I think the SABC's going to remain contested. I think the battle that the SABC - both at the macro and micro level - is a reflection of the contestation that happens in South African society.

We have not arrived, people, so there is no ideal state at the SABC. We can put the building blocks in place, but our

society is a contradiction. The class contradictions are increasing and will manifest itself in the years to come and believe me those battles are going to manifest in places like the SABC. What you need is an institutional setup that will mediate that contradiction. But you're not going to get rid of it. We're going to have more contestation.

THLOLOE

Thank you Karima. Aubrey?

MATSHIQI

For me debates about the SABC are debates about democracy and how to deepen it. And in having debates about the SABC, the disadvantage is that we become partially sighted in the sense that if I'm correct in saying that this is a debate about how to deepen democracy we must therefore broaden our focus beyond the

SABC and ask questions about what impact on our democracy the marketisation and commodification of our media is having.

If we are going to succeed with the institutions of our democracy, including the SABC, then we must settle for the idea that

there must be multiple centers of power - civil society, the media, the state and so on. And contests between these different centres of power must result in the idea South African society.

THLOLOE

Before I hand over to Liesl, just a little commercial. In your little packets, you'll see



Aubrey Matshiqi

the South African press code is included.

Please read that, because my strong belief is that a society deserves the newspapers and magazines and radio stations and television station it gets, because people don't stand up to say this is the line, you don't go beyond that.

So please read the code, and as you read the newspaper, keep your code in mind.

VENTER

Thanks Joe, just to add to that also in the pack, is the draft constitution of the Professional Journalists Association which has been endorsed by Sanef.

We're distributing this to as many journalists, media commentators etc, so please feel free. I think there are some extra if you want to take for your newsrooms or your organisations. And yes, we're open to comments on this draft so please contact Michael Schmidt, whose email address is on the front.

Thank you to our panel - Jeremy, Karima, Aubrey. It was insightful, it was interesting and I think it was a much needed discussion which is by a long-shot not over. Thank you so much and we'll let you know when the next dialogues take place.



Obakeng Mooke, Nontobeko Mtshali and Kemogetswe Mphaka