

Q You worked for ITN news for 20 years. Did the move to the SABC require you to shift any of the journalistic assumptions you took for granted while working in Britain?

A: Only in the technological sense. I think journalism remains journalism wherever you are. I don't think in any sense I have either changed or compromised my views in this regard. However, technologically many of the facilities available to journalists at the SABC lag behind what is available abroad. For instance, in South Africa, because we have so few satellite inject points, raw material has to be sent physically to Auckland Park. In Britain, a significant proportion, if not the major portion of editing is done in the field because this allows the editor to extend the deadline tremendously by injecting right from the spot. We are hoping to budget for more inject points in the future.

Q You are on record stating that certain improvements had to be made in local journalism. Could you elaborate?

A: I don't think I ever said I was critical of local journalism, but I think there is always room for improvement no matter how good your news organisation is. We did not have, and we are beginning to build up, areas of specialisation and areas of expertise. For example, we did not have specialist beat reporters. Now we have a labour correspondent, we have a good political base, we have strengthened our economic base and we're looking to put other specialists in place. I don't think journalism is just working off a news diary. I think news is going out and finding what the news is, breaking stories and bringing in original material...not just bringing the same perspective that everybody is bringing to the story. If you build up specialisation in your organisation and you allow people to develop their contacts and their contact knowledge, then you're going to get a much better news service. I was not being critical of the people who were there, it's just we did not have the specialists in place. We didn't have systems in place which allowed people to really develop their skills.

Q You brought a number of print journalists into television news. Are there not fundamentally different skill requirements for the two media?

A: I will answer that in two ways - yes and no. No, there is not a difference in the sense that I believe all journalists have the same role. But how you express that in the two media is different. Television journalism allows you to do things that print journalism does not and vice versa. If you take a news broadcast, it usually lasts between 26 and 28 minutes. Because of this you can only cover any given subject in a fairly limited and concise way. This doesn't mean you can't cover it but it involves a different way of writing, a different way of expressing yourself. Print journalism allows one to set the story in a lot more context if you want to. It gives you more space to write and expand than television journalism does. In television you speak much more colloquially than you do



A vision for television

An interview with
JILL CHISHOLM
Head of Television, SABC

in writing, but a good journalist will make that adaption very easily and a good journalist will be able to function very readily in television within a short time of transferring. It requires learning how to use the medium, but it isn't changing the fundamentals of what you're doing which is trying to communicate information very clearly, very fairly, in a very balanced way. It's the same function. In fact, we haven't brought in many print journalists. The ones people point to most readily are people like Reg Runney who came in as an economics editor. But that is a high specialist area where it seems to me that the specialisation was more important than the medium in which he'd worked.

Q In another interview you stated that "the SABC lacks a distinctiveness apparent at other broadcasters. We need the type of television that is unique to South Africa." What did you mean by this?

A: If one looks at SABC television news, apart from the fact that you have black reporters and black specialist correspondents and presenters, you would not say that there is something utterly distinctive about this which tells you it is South African. However, if you look at the BBC, there is no doubt at all that it is entirely distinctive. There's no difference, for example, in covering news in Britain and covering it in South Africa, but it's the style, the way you do it, the way you communicate with your particular audience. We need to find the most effective way of communicating with our particular audience without assuming that if we adopt the same style as CNN or the BBC we are communicating effectively.

Q Is this in terms of both form and content?

A: Yes I think it is. For example, at a staff meeting I was asked if I would allow South African accents on the news. I replied by saying that I could not understand the question. How could we not allow South African accents? We are South African. There are a lot of South African accents and some have become acceptable and some of them have not. In my view all South African accents are acceptable provided that whatever

language is being spoken, is spoken correctly.

Q Do you think that before you arrived certain journalists felt self-conscious about their accents?

A: Yes, some certainly felt that way — which is strange seeing we have so many accents. I don't know if I have changed that, I would love to have.

Q Are the forms of the story changing?

A: If you are dealing with complex issues it often helps to concretise issues, make them real for people...show how these issues relate to their own lives.

Q Can you define further what you mean by a television which is "unique" to South Africa.

A: I think we've begun it in two ways. Firstly, we are producing, and we are going to produce, more local programming. I would still like to see this expanded significantly. Secondly, we aim to use more indigenous languages, not only on the periphery of our broadcasting, but in the prime times because these are the languages of the majority of the people of our country. So if we are going to become more accessible and more distinctively South African, we have to expand our language use. We're finding that if an African language news programme follows a programme accessible to all the language groups, a large number of English and Afrikaans language viewers will stick it. By and large an awful lot of the content is multilingual even if the presentation is not. We're also finding that we get enormous ratings within language groups for programming which is delivered in those languages.

Q As a Public Broadcast Service (PBS) broadcaster, what role do you think the SABC should play in our emerging democracy?

A: There are two roles television can play in an emerging or an established democracy. The PBS function is to bring credible, reliable information to people. This is critical as it allows them to make their own deci-

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sions and choices about democratic issues. However, public broadcasting cannot simply survive by being informative, but must also be entertaining as well. Even if we were entirely funded by licence fee or by fiscal vote we would still need to be entertaining – otherwise people simply wouldn't watch no matter how worthy we are. We need to offer people interest in a very wide spectrum. I think that what is most distinctive about the SABC at the moment is that we have three channels, which is a wonderfully huge resource allowing us to provide full spectrum broadcasting.

Q Yet you are in the difficult position of being a public service broadcaster, but reliant on advertising. Underlying this tension are two different models of broadcasting, one which addresses viewers as citizens with rights to particular types of information, the other as consumers with the broadcaster dependent on giving the viewers "what they want". How is this tension playing itself out at the SABC?

A: It's not a tension within the content but there is a tension in our ability to fully fund the public service programmes. The notion that if you receive your funding entirely from the fiscal vote frees you from other pressures is totally false. Governments would always love to influence broadcasters because broadcasting is powerful and important in our lives. The need to generate our own funding forces us to look far more closely at our programming and be less complacent if our viewers don't like our programming. We stand to lose, we can't simply go on dishing up anything. This will be even more true when we have terrestrial competition. I think that's healthy.

Q In the face of the globalisation of culture and the increasing domination of the television landscape by a few major corporations, do you think it is possible to 're-territorialise' the media, to establish a media which contributes to sustaining both the distinctiveness and integrity of local cultures?

A: Yes, I do think so because the local is very popular. The BBC and other broadcasters in Britain may have had their audiences reduced by Mr Murdoch's operation, but they seem to be holding their own...the BBC has not wilted into a negligible broadcaster. It is a broadcaster of a significant amount of high quality programming. Of course you can't retain the total monopoly of audience you've had in the past, but you can compete. Public broadcasters are competing in a lot of areas.

Q So do you think then that there is still a desire on the part of audiences for typical PBS material?

A: Yes, because typical PBS material combines a lot of things that you're not going to get on other stations because why bother. If your sole purpose is the consumer side of it you're not going to put on any programming which has marginal interest, or which is serving interests which are not clearly commercial.

Q According to the *Sunday Times* there is "panic in the corridors of the SABC", a result of the corporation not being able to attract advertisers. Is this true?

A: There isn't any panic. If there were, I'd be the first one jumping out of the window.

Q In your view why do you think advertisers are staying away?

A: I think they are taking their time, not unreasonably or unexpectedly, to look at things. We have made some fairly radical changes and it is new for them as well...the changes are only three months old. It's not a huge drop off, it's not disaster. In fact, the huge proportion of our advertising revenue is still there. I wouldn't pretend to you that we are making all the figures we would like to be making or that we projected we might have. We might have underestimated the significance in the scope of what we were changing. Advertisers will find their way around it pretty much as the viewers are doing and will advertise in a different way.

Q How?

A: In the past advertising was pretty easy in that you had a predominantly black audience sitting on CCV and a predominantly white audience sitting on TV1 and NNTV wasn't taking advertising. It was pretty easy to target a specific audience and it was done very broadly. Now I think they are going to have to target more specifically as our audience is moving across the three channels during any one night's viewing. They will have to do what advertisers are doing around the world, targeting by programme rather than by simply dropping adverts on racially divided channels. They will be much more discriminating in how they place their advertising.

Q You refer to "radical" changes. Besides language changes what radical changes have been made in terms of programming?

A: I think the most radical change is the language one and that was our first target operation. It was to introduce all our indigenous languages in prime time as part of mainstream programming. Other changes will take longer and include more local content, more indigenous languages...that's what we find our audiences want. Generally we need to strive for quality programming. Broadcasting is the same as print journalism...it should be about excellence. We need to make our broadcasting more accessible and relevant and this doesn't mean simply trying to shove factual programming down people's throats. It means looking at all the programming we're putting on air and asking if it is good programming, high quality programming.

Q This begs the question as to what you mean by "quality" programming.

A: I don't simply mean high brow. Quiz programmes can be high quality. It has to do with production values and content values. By production values I mean not having rocks that shake because they are made of paper mache. If you watch a good film the

camerawork is good, the acting is good, the direction is good, the script is wonderfully written. The 'Jewel in the Crown' is a good example. It is not crude and it is not obvious. That's what I mean. On the other hand I often see soaps on our screens and I think, dear God this is such stereotypical ordinary stuff. It isn't challenging, it does not offer any new perspectives. I've seen the same everywhere so it's not peculiar to us. You can be provocative, entertaining, funny, but let's see it in ways that are not always stereotypical and relying on the givens. It's about how much care you take with what you are doing. I think there are high production values in Felicia Mabuza Suttle's shows and in our news shows and sometimes in our GMSA. It's about how much care you take with what you're doing and that you don't simply put on stuff and say "it's crude but it's television". I don't believe in that.

Q What about other local television productions? Are we on our way to producing high quality television?

A: Yes we are producing high quality television, but I think there is always scope for enlarging it.

Q You stated recently that we have to address the gender issues in our programming. What did you mean by this?

A: This relates to the issue of stereotyping. I think we are still depicting women in stereotypical roles and styles and I don't think we depict accurately the full range of women's experience. Or men for that matter. Because if you stereotype women you are going to stereotype men because they are held in juxtaposition. I'm not trying to impose political correctness, but I do look at some of our own programming and feel that that does not relate to my own experience or my own life at all. I think this is true for many women today. We need to see different images of women on television besides showing them exclusively in the role of someone who works in the house and who has two and a half children.

Q How do you conceive of the audiences across the three channels?

A: At the moment the audience is not settled across the three channels and truthfully we are not totally defined in how we want to build those audiences. We need to look at it in a much longer scale than we've done at the moment. In our IBA submission we did say that SABC1 would be for the younger audiences, SABC2 for the broader family, and SABC3 for the specialist viewer. I now think these concepts are too broad and that we have to refine our views on this quite significantly. We need to define the characters of the three channels, how they are complementary and how they are different. We have to look at the very new audiences and get their response. We need to find out how we are being perceived, what they feel is right and what is utterly wrong in what we are doing. We still have a lot of work to do in this regard so I cannot be too definitive. At this point in time it would be arrogant for us to say that we know who our audiences are and what they want.

Q You are on record as stating that there would be ongoing monitoring of public reaction by the corporation. Has this in fact started?

A: On the advice of our research department we decided to give it eight weeks before we started this process. However, we've already received hundreds of calls from people trying to find particular programmes. They didn't say that they hated what we were doing, but they were finding it difficult to find their way around the new channels. We are now starting to do some initial research into viewer preferences.

Q Has anything interesting emerged from this initial research?

A: Not yet, except the flexibility of the viewers. They've got themselves around the new scheduling much more quickly than have the advertisers. Our viewing figures, while they do fluctuate by two or three points occasionally, remain fairly constant.

Q Are you on your way to achieving the IBA's requirement of 50% local content?

A: We are, without any doubt. We monitor it consistently and we're well on track. However, the local content debate needs to be continued — it's not cut and dried. For instance, the IBA stated that our local content requirement would have to take into account the overnight international feeds of BBC and CNN. In my view it is an over-demanding requirement to include those as we are putting them on as a service. If at the end of the day we have to take them off because we can't meet our local content targets we might need to do this. By including these news services, the IBA is skewing the balance of local content. There's still a debate around that.

Q Have you had to rethink your relationship with outside producers in order to meet this target?

A: Yes. We put together a draft paper on commissioning procedures. There had been a working group between the independent sector and the SABC last year. After much debate it had reached some agreement. We have had another workgroup internally which has been looking at how to implement the proposals. We do have a paper which we've discussed internally with our unions as well as with the external players. It's had a good response so far. We needed to do this as we were not responding timeously to people and I think this is important if you are trying to encourage new people and new talent. There was also a perception that our decisions were not transparent and that there were a favoured few who were getting work. It was not clear where and how we placed our commissioning. We have fundamentally changed our approach to this. SABC has always commissioned work but we are now restructuring to make it much more consistent, to give the commissioning editors much clearer lines of responsibility and authority. The unhappiness I was hearing from people in the industry had to do with the expectation that we

would say that all the people involved in commissioning in the past would no longer be involved and that we would fill these posts from the outside.

Q On this issue, one hardly ever sees posts within the SABC advertised. Why is this?

A: We have a policy at the SABC that we always first advertise internally. If you have

staff with career path ambitions who want to develop and grow then you must give them an opportunity. If you can't meet the needs within the organisation then you look outside.

Interviewer Larry Strelitz lectures in Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes.

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