



Beyond state and first economy

*South Africa needs a social movement around public broadcasting if the people of the second economy are ever going to get the media they deserve, says **Jane Duncan**.*

“The developmental state has both progressive and repressive impulses.”

Recently, advocate Dali Mpofu was appointed as the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s seventh Chief Executive Officer since South Africa’s democratic elections in 1994. While he takes over an SABC that boasts the highest profits in the past 70 years of its existence, he faces tough challenges given the growing crisis around the independence of the SABC.

The significance of these gains and challenges can best be understood against the background of the SA Cabinet’s concept of the “two economies”.

According to Cabinet, the first economy has stabilised and is starting to achieve significant levels of growth, so its priority has become delivering to the second economy. This formulation is problematic, as in reality growth in the first economy has been premised on the increased pauperisation of the second economy: a reality that has been captured in the notion of “job-loss growth”.

Owing to the commercial nature of its financial base, the SABC has been largely a first-economy broadcaster, and risks marginalising the second economy even further unless prophylactic action is taken to correct this bias.

Since 2001, the government has been attempting to take such action, but in the process is being caught in a web of contradictions generated by its highly-unpopular macro-economic policies.

As a result, it wavers between progressive attempts to extend public broadcasting to the second economy, and reactionary attempts to erode the corporation’s independence.

Such are the contradictions of the developmental state in the context of neo-liberalism; it attempts to use its outward-focused growth strategies to generate resources for inward development, yet at the same time it must ensure internal stability to maintain investor confidence.

Hence the developmental state has both progressive and repressive impulses. In a global economic downturn, the latter impulse may override the former, as the state struggles to keep a grip on its increasingly frustrated citizenry. In such circumstances, the repressive impulse can creep like a virus into various levels of the social formation, including public broadcasting.

Most of the public controversies around the SABC’s independence have focused on overtly positive coverage of government-related stories on SABC news: an increasing bias that news chief Snuki Zikalala has been blamed for.

Flashes of brilliance

These controversies have overshadowed many flashes of brilliance in the corporation, especially in current affairs. However, it is important not to indi-

vidualise the independence question, as such an approach masks the extent of the erosion of the SABC’s institutional independence since its incorporation as a public company.

According to the corporation’s Articles of Association the shareholder (that is, the government) appoints the Group Chief Executive Officer (GCEO), and the Minister approves his or her contract of employment; in addition the Minister must approve the appointment of the Group Chief Financial Officer and the Group Operating Officer.

Particular resolutions of the Board cannot be passed without a representative of the Minister having voted in favour of the resolution. These resolutions include the SABC’s business plan, training programme, annual budget or strategic objectives, and the establishment by the SABC of any subsidiary, joint venture or partnership.

So in spite of the fact that the battle was won in 2003 around the right of the SABC to adopt its own editorial policies without ministerial approval, the documents that enable the SABC to give effect to these policies have to be approved by the Minister.

Add to this the problem that the GCEO, as a Cabinet appointee, is in terms of these policies the Editor-in-Chief of the SABC, and it is possible to draw a straight line between the government and the corporation’s content.

These developments have also stripped the SABC Board of its ability to take decisions independently of the Minister on the really key issues affecting the corporation.

While it would be silly to argue that the SABC's editorial content is being approved in a smoke-filled backroom of the Department of Communications, the structural conditions now exist for content that puts government in a poor light to be censored in future.

In a climate of rising mass discontent on questions of service delivery, where thousands of people are taking to the streets to protest, these developments do not augur well for the SABC reporting on these matters without fear or favour. In fact it is likely that impartial coverage of these second economy struggles will suffer the most, as they constitute an emergent threat to the ruling party's hold on power.

This shift in the balance of power will most probably be felt first at local government level, where social movements, as well as a host of crisis committees and emergent civics outside the fold of the South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco) may begin to run independent candidates.

After all, it is at local government level where the contradictions of the government's neo-liberal policies are felt the most keenly, as communities reel under ongoing disconnections to basic services, inadequate access to free water, electricity and telecommunications, coupled with the aggressive roll-out of "self-disconnecting" pre-paid technologies.

If these spontaneous struggles were to coalesce into an organised form, then the conditions may be laid for a revolutionary overthrow of the very ruling party that brought about the transformation from apartheid to democracy in 1994.

Already there are worrying indications that the SABC may not be up to the challenge of covering impartially the unfolding contradictions of South Africa's pro-first economy negotiated settlement.

Last year, the Anti-Privatisation Forum won a case against the SABC for skewed coverage of the controversial Johannesburg Water programme to roll out pre-paid water meters in Soweto.

Out of quasi

On the positive side, last year the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) released relatively-progressive licence conditions for the SABC. These conditions mark an important step in transforming the SABC into a true public broadcaster, rather than remaining the quasi-commercial, quasi-state broadcaster that it is at the moment.

What is particularly significant about these conditions is that they will make the SABC take its most popular and accessible services much more seriously than was the case in the past: services that target audiences in the second economy specifically. The SABC has tended to segment audiences into what an Umhlobo Wenene programming conference in 2000 termed "Primary one listeners" and "Primary two listeners": the first being urban, upwardly-mobile listeners aged between 16 and 38, and the second mainly rural, poor listeners (usually women) over the age of 39.

When the SABC's profitability has declined – as was the case between 2000 and 2002 – it has prioritised the first set of listeners above the second.

So the SABC's argument that it has succeeded in stabilising and growing the finances of the corporation since these bleak years must be treated with extreme caution, as stabilisation has arguably been achieved on the backs of the poor.

In fact the SABC's 2005 annual report attests to the fact that its profits have been buoyed by a growth in television advertising expenditure following a rise in consumer spending primarily in the first economy.

Icasa's proposed licence conditions set a good basis for addressing some of these first economy biases, as the regulator has lacked an instrument to measure

the performance of the SABC in realising its mandate, and to hold it accountable for its decisions. This gap has allowed the SABC to get away with murder, particularly with respect to the services that are supposed to target African-language speakers.

Initially, the SABC fought hard at the time of the public hearings into the licence conditions to prevent Icasa from imposing conditions as it saw fit. What was at stake was the interpretation of section 22 of the Broadcasting Act, which states that within six months of the incorporation of the SABC into a public company, the SABC must apply for amendments to its licences that were necessary to reflect the reorganisation of the corporation into two divisions (public and public commercial).

The SABC interpreted this section in a minimalist way. In fact, it tried to get away with simply writing the designation "public service" or "public commercial service" into the licences, followed by a cut and paste of the requirements for both services in the Act. If the licences merely reflect what the Act says, then why bother to have licences at all?

The problem with this approach was that these requirements were not measurable, as they were broad statements of intent: so for instance the Act requires the SABC to "strive to offer a broad range of services targeting, particularly, women, children, the youth and the disabled".

Icasa, however, wanted specific conditions to be met in the various programming genres to give effect to this statement. Now, public radio must carry at least one hour of childrens' programming per day, five hours of education programming per week, at least 30 minutes of drama per day, and so on.

The setting of such conditions is an extremely important development for public radio, as the SABC will no longer be able to drop programmes or even whole genres simply because they are unprofitable.

The decision to compel SABC1 to provide a minimum of 80% of all programming in Nguni languages, and SABC 2 to do the same with respect to Afrikaans, the seSotho languages xiTsonga and tshiVenda is also very encouraging move, as it will start to break the stranglehold of English on public television.

Possibly the silliest argument the SABC made at the time was that Icasa would violate the SABC's independence by imposing strict licence conditions, and that the SABC Board alone should be left alone to set these conditions through the editorial policies. If Icasa did not treat the SABC like other licencees and impose detailed licence conditions, it would be abdicating its responsibilities and allowing the SABC to infringe on its own independence to regulate the whole broadcasting system in the public interest.

It is instructive to compare the SABC's vigorous defence of its own independence in the hearings with the way that it has accepted without protest the contents of its Articles of Association. Unfortunately, the SABC defends its independence when it shouldn't, but fails to defend its independence when it should.

The second economy stakeholder

The one stakeholder that has largely been absent in what has largely become an elite contest between the government, Icasa and the commercial media is the second economy.

It is time for the second economy – especially the "Primary Two" public with the least to lose and the most to gain from proper public broadcasting – to strike back and contest the SABC to ensure that it is not a mouthpiece either of the state or the first economy.

This is especially important ahead of the local government elections, when struggles around service delivery may well escalate. In short, South Africa needs a social movement around public broadcasting. ■