

What is in the public interest?

*In a debate hosted by the Harold Wolpe Trust in Johannesburg about the function of the SABC as public broadcaster, **Tawana Kupe** made these points.*

The Public Interest

- Embodies the “national interest” but is not reducible to it and is not to be conflated with it.
- What is in the “public interest” is in the “national interest” but what is in the “national interest” is not always in the “public interest”.
- Claims by politicians that some information is not in the “national interest” can often turn out to be an attempt to avoid transparency and accountability.
- The “public interest” is definitely broader than the “national interest” in that it speaks to and reflects the values that no single social organisation or individual or entity can claim sole ownership of.
- The “public interest” embodies values of justice and equality, which individuals and groups seek to attain and engage in struggles to achieve. The “national interest” is often the interests and values appropriate by particular groups in their attempts to achieve hegemonic domination in a society.
- Consequently the “national interest” can often be a narrow set of justifications, policy choices and strategies of implementation that undermine the “public interest”.
- With regard to questions of security – especially national security – the “national interest” can often be used as a cover to undermine civil liberties including curtailing freedom of expression and of the media.
- A genuine public broadcaster is therefore the best communicative and discursive space for advancing the “public interest”.

Public Service Broadcasting

Defining public broadcasting in the 21st century is a difficult exercise because the broadcasting environment and practices have changed as result of political, economic, cultural and technological changes. These changes are also true of Africa especially since the early 1990s where the “liberalisation” of broadcasting has ushered in an era of, not only new privately-owned broadcasters, but a predominately commercially-driven process of transformation of the broadcasting environment and state broadcasters.

The World Radio and Television Council (2000) defines public service broadcasting thus: “Neither commercial nor state-controlled, public broadcasting’s only *raison d’etre* is public service. It is the public’s broadcasting organisation; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life.”

They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.

- A public broadcaster is a means to constitute public communicative space free from political and commercial control. It acts as an open public sphere for debate and discussion.
- A public broadcaster is central to satisfying a range of public information and communication needs in a holistic manner on the broadest possible range of issues and topics.
- A public broadcaster is a means to represent society in all its complexity facilitating desired social goals including promoting freedom of expression and other universal human rights.
- A public broadcaster should address the public as citizens who have rights, duties and responsibilities. (A commercial broadcaster addresses audiences as consumers and delivers them to advertisers.)
- A public broadcaster must allow for multiple communicators across the social spectrum without privileging some voices over others.
- A public broadcaster must allow for meaningful feedback and interactivity in its programming.
- A public broadcaster requires funding which is consistent with its nature as a public service and critically, that does negate its distinctness and identity.