

# MAKING A FUSS ABOUT FREEDOM: the

## Talking and listening

Why do South Africans subject their public broadcaster to endless scrutiny? And why do journalists, media players and various other civil society experts debate its structures, staffing and practices intently? Because, according to Zohra Dawood, executive director of the Open Society Foundation in South Africa: "Debate on the public broadcaster is good for the functioning of South Africa's democracy and freedom of speech."

In July the OSF hosted just such a debate which involved about 30 of the country's freedom of expression experts, media theorists, teachers, and senior journalists.

The intention was to hear from and talk to the current chair of the board and executive editor Dali Mpfu. Dawood set the scene by saying that the Open Society Foundation "believes in the value of divergent opinions and not in consensus" and therefore the value of the day was in the expression of points of view and in listening.

Here are the inputs made by the four panellists: Dali Mpfu, SABC Chief Executive Officer, Prof Tawana Kupe, media theorist from the University of the Witwatersrand, Karima Brown, *Business Day* Political Editor and former executive produce for SABC radio, and Prof Anton Harber, head of the Wits University journalism programme.

At the end of a session of tough give and take, Dawood then asked the panellists to each dream of a "blue skies" scenario for the SABC. ■



## Striving to serve the entire population

The SABC executive team and board have set themselves the goal of "broadcasting for total citizen empowerment", a strategic outlook which will be developed over a period of five years.

In order to situate the discussion on the SABC let's look at the context of the SABC's mandate as the public broadcaster. The SABC has its foundations in:

1. The Constitution of the country – which has a large bearing on even current controversies.
2. The Broadcasting Act – the founding law, which circumscribes and defines public broadcasting.
3. The SABC's corporate goals – 12 broad statements formulated by the current board (and available on the website [www.sabc.co.za](http://www.sabc.co.za)).
4. The strategic outlook of the current leadership.

"Total citizen empowerment" are the three words adopted by the board to capture the SABC's aims. The SABC is a cultural, educational, economic and political phenomenon, all these components must interact dynamically.

"Total" means that the SABC has a universal mandate – it must serve the entire population in all its diversity – race, religion, language, sex and age. This is the first distinction that sets it apart from its competitors. They have a choice of market, we don't have that luxury. Impossible as it seems, we have to strive to serve the entire population.

"Citizen" symbolises the public we seek to serve; unlike the commercial media, we look at our audience as citizens. And this word is used by the SABC in a sense beyond merely the legal one. It is a lens through which to view the public as people with inherent hu-

man rights and intrinsic worth which is the same and is an equaliser. The broadcaster is accountable to this citizenry.

"Empowerment" is taken to mean acting on many fronts: social, cultural and political.

Broadcasting is an "interventionist institutional practice" (MP McCauley) and to understand the SABC's mandate one needs to take the historical approach that situates the broadcaster in current day South Africa. We cannot use values, etc, from other jurisdictions without being mindful of this context.

On recent public debate about editorial decisions made at the broadcaster [including the pulling of the "Mbeki: Unauthorised" documentary and the investigation into a possible "blacklist" of certain experts] the statements being made have their ideological aspects and in some cases they were made without establishing the facts.

Debate itself is important and good, but the notion of shutting people up in the debate is disrespectful for the public itself, people can see through these things.

I have an acute awareness that public participation in debates around the public broadcaster is very important and necessary in order to achieve democracy. I tell people, "Be activists, participate, don't watch from the sidelines". I advise everyone to choose two causes for activism – one of which should always be the role of the media in a democracy – it is of such central importance. ■

Dali Mpfu, Group Chief Executive of the SABC



# OSF roundtable on public broadcasting

## The gap between values and practice

Public broadcasting is a value and a practice.

### As a value:

1. In the Constitution freedom of expression is unequivocal and freedom of the media is beyond argument – this is strongest in the wording of Section 16.
2. The Broadcasting Act then takes it cue from the Constitution (for instance when a previous Minister of Communication wanted to set editorial policy for the SABC this was struck down by the Constitutional Court).
3. SABC editorial policies themselves then attest to these values.

Now, do the practices at the SABC live up to these values? There are lots of debates in South Africa now on this very issue. But this can be somewhat hypocritical when only

the SABC has to live up to these values and only one institution is tested when others are let off the hook. This is fundamentally contradictory.

### But in practice:

1. Are the structures – governing and managing – at the SABC such that they enable journalists to work in the public interest? Do they constrain or enable? Is there stability in management? What we have seen at the SABC is that people are not in their jobs long enough to have this effect.
2. The funding mix is critical. The SABC does not have a secure form of funding. “Public” is a contested term and the SABC depends on commercial funding which means they, in their program-

ming, must seek out sections of the public which appeal to advertisers. Commercial pressures weaken political control and editorial control.

The SABC is between a rock and a hard place: trying to actualise the values of freedom of expression and of the media; putting the Constitution into practice is a very difficult matter.

The public broadcaster’s only reason for existing is public service, it must speak to everyone as a citizen, it must broaden their horizons and enable them to understand themselves. When I travel I make a habit of watching the public broadcasting service because it enables me to meet my fellow citizens in other countries.

Because of its history the SABC had a monopoly on broadcasting, now it is the

largest media organisation in the country with the greatest reach – it broadcasts in 13 languages and does not depend on literacy. With this power it could: 1. tell advertisers where to get off and, 2. tell politicians where to get off! It has intrinsic and explicit power, why is it therefore in a crisis?

My questions therefore are about accountability, whether the SABC understands its value and whether its practices go against its values. I think the news bulletins are lacking in confidence and independence. I think the President is too absent, he should show up more and liven the debate about what he is doing, I think the range of analysts who appear on TV should be increased. ■

*Prof Tawana Kupe, media theorist and head of the School of Languages and Literature at Wits*

## Norms and news culture

The question I wish to ask is this: why is that while the SABC may have put in place appropriate structures and policies and widely accepted editorial charters and codes, yet it continues to run into controversy over its editorial practices and output?

I would say it’s because of the news values and the news culture that permeates the organisation, which has to make the toughest decisions under the greatest pressures. Decisions which run the full range of the news process.

The culture of a newsroom is best demonstrated by the questions editors ask when presented with decisions. These decisions are answered very differently by the *Mail&Guardian*, *Business Day* or the *Daily Sun*. Each newsroom has different practices and norms, and different values.

The impression I have of the SABC’s operations is that despite its documents and policies the culture is one of trepidation, nervousness and a bureaucratic watch-your-back.

Editors ask: “Will this offend anyone in authority, within the SABC and beyond?” For example the coverage of the Zuma court case was a mere account, it was bland, dull and inadequate when all sorts of very important themes and issues were being raised by the trial. It is the nature of organisations to have an overriding respect for the party in government, and to have to ask how critical to be on national issues. Public broadcasters all over the world grapple with the state’s power. There are very few success stories here.

But the SABC culture doesn’t nurture good, creative and bold journalism. You can judge the culture of a media organisation by its relationship with lawyers. In the alternative journalism of the 1980s, journalists changed this relationship from one of self-censorship when the primary question posed to lawyers was “is this defamation?”, to asking two different questions:

1. “if it is defamatory is it defensible?” and;
2. “if not, how do we fix it so that we can use it?”

There are two stages in dealing with something potentially defamatory, the one is to take legal advice and the second is to make an editorial decision based on the public interest – this decision must be made by an editor, not a lawyer.

Narrowly focusing the debate on the “blacklist” and phone calls from the presidency does not concern me. I am more concerned with what may fall outside the scope of the commission to investigate the “blacklist” – values, culture, routine practices and procedures of the newsroom. ■

*Anton Harber, Caxton Professor of Journalism at Wits University*



## The price of freedom

I want to focus on the gap between values and practice and locate the debate [about whether certain commentators have been ‘banned’ from talking on the SABC] in the wider debate within broader society – in which factions within the ANC have fallen out thus making this debate possible.

*Business Day* columnist Steven Friedman says we must care about the SABC because it belongs to all of us. It has an obligation to field a wide range of opinions even if the news executives don’t want to hear them. As he says, the price of freedom is constantly making a fuss. If we don’t, our freedom is eroded slowly, through insignificant acts.

If there is a ban it shows that there is a range of black commentators independent and critical enough, who are not praise-singers, who insist on holding the powerful to account. But the organisational culture of the SABC promotes self-censorship, and journalists try to second-guess themselves. ■

*Karima Brown, Political Editor of Business Day and a former Executive Producer of AM Live*

## Blue skies

In response to Zohra Dawood’s question posed to the whole panel: What would you want to see if there were a “blue skies” scenario for the SABC?

### Dali Mpofu

The SABC should:

- produce quality programming (at the moment there are only 16 minutes of news in a 30-minute broadcast because of the adverts, we need a new funding model)
- not be in competition with other media
- promote a culture of deep, vigorous, informed debate

### Tawana Kupe

The SABC is a South African and an African broadcaster, the only one on the continent to take up this role:

- in theory and in practice the public broadcaster should set the standards
- it must open up the public sphere for all
- it needs a mixed, long-term, assured funding model.

### Karima Brown

The SABC should:

- be the desired platform for all of us to be on
- give access to all
- show respect for different views
- be a melting pot of ideas, and;
- in the wider media landscape it should not be separate and in competition.

### Anton Harber

The SABC should:

- nurture talent
- be a rich place for debate and discussion and new ideas
- be subject to less commercial pressure