

by Steven Lang

The embarrassing convulsions within the SABC spilling over into the courts and in the media are the visible symptoms of a multi-layered power struggle at the end of a 13-year interregnum. The layers include the obvious personal turf war between CEO Dali Mpofu and news head Snuki Zikalala, as well as the battle for supremacy between the Mbeki and Zuma camps. But there is much more to it than the obvious.

To understand the SABC crisis, let us roll back to 2 February 1990 – the first day of the interregnum when President FW de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela.

In the ensuing years, the National Party relaxed its grip on the SABC while senior members of the ANC formulated policies on how the broadcaster should be run. Debate intensified around the role of the SABC – should it serve the interests of the country or should it be an instrument of government and consequently a tool of the ruling party?

Dismayed at the way the National Party had used the SABC for its own narrow political interests, the ANC vowed never to follow that route. Cyril Ramaphosa, ANC Secretary General, said in November 1992, “The ANC believes that unquestioning loyalty by a public broadcaster to a ruling party is incompatible with democracy.”

A public commitment to this position was made in the Broadcasting Charter contained in the Broadcasting Act of 1999: “In terms of this charter, the corporation will... enjoy freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence.”

At the height of the Prague Spring, the influence of the old National Party had dissipated while certain senior members of the ANC were still looking for ways to subtly nudge the national broadcaster into the orbit of the new regime.

It is a little harder to put an exact date to the end of the interregnum, but when the Board of Vincent

# The nudge of ‘nation building’

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Maphai reached the end of its term in December 2003, the corporation tipped noticeably in the direction of the Union Buildings.

Board member Thami Mazwai had recently dismissed objectivity in journalism as a “delusion” that simply “does not exist” and the corporation was still smarting from the resignation of Mathatha Tsedu, arguably the most credible head of news the corporation has ever had.

The new board, chaired by Eddie Funde with Christine Qunta as his deputy, was far more pro-active in meddling with the affairs of the SABC. Soon after taking office in early 2004, the board bypassed CEO Peter Matlare to appoint a government spokesman, Snuki Zikalala, to head up its news division.

Zikalala rewarded the board with unflinching loyalty. At every meeting, bosberaad or workshop he insisted that staff members know and follow the letter of the board goals. At job interviews, he always tested the candidates’ knowledge of the board goals.

Zikalala also believes the broadcaster has a critical role to play in nation building. If he does not like a TV insert, he holds it up against the nation-building yardstick where it inevitably fails. In this way, a report critical of the method a minister uses to deal with an issue can easily be thrown out because “it does not contribute to nation building”, or “how does it promote the board goals?”

The real problem for many is how to define “nation-building”. How can a reporter reconcile criticism of the President with nation-building?

As the final nails are being knocked into the coffin of the interregnum, the war for control of the SABC manifests itself in small but spectacular battles such as when the CEO suspends the head of news, and when the board repeatedly tries to suspend the CEO.

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# The anomaly of SAfm

*SAfm – “your news and information leader” – is a unique station for many reasons. But perhaps one of the most curious being that top management in the SABC refuses to acknowledge that it is different from any other radio station, says Steven Lang.*

Rules that apply to SAfm do not apply to other stations, yet no one in the highest echelons of the corporation will publicly admit that SAfm occupies a unique position within the SABC radio portfolio.

In terms of audience numbers, the yardstick used to assess most radio stations, SAfm with fewer than half a million listeners is a featherweight among SABC stations. Ukhozi tops the scales with more than six million listeners while other heavyweights Umhlobo Wenene and Lesedi FM come in with 4.7 million and 3.7 million listeners respectively.

In spite of having by far the wealthiest audience profile, SAfm regularly makes massive losses while advertising sales executives consistently complain about how difficult it is to

sell airtime on SAfm.

The station has the biggest radio footprint in South Africa. This means that with its 120 transmitters, it can be picked up almost anywhere in the country – from Prieska to Pretoria. Kaya FM with only one transmitter has double the listenership of SAfm.

Being the country’s “news and information leader”, the station carries six hours of current affairs shows every weekday. The “Live” current affairs shows, *AM Live*, *Midday Live* and *PM Live*, take up one quarter of the broadcast time and all of the prime time during the week, yet the station manager Dennis O’Donnell, has absolutely no say about the content of these shows – that is the prerogative of the news division.

In spite of being the smallest station in the stable, at the morning diary meetings when all the assignment editors and executive producers around the country discuss which stories to cover, SAfm calls the shots. If SAfm’s *AM Live* wants an audio package on the story then it will be done. If another station wants it, they will cross their fingers.

This anomalous situation is not because SAfm is intrinsically superior to any of the stations, but rather because the decision makers within the SABC, in Cabinet and in most boardrooms in corporate SA choose to listen to current affairs in English.

The fact that top management pays so much more attention to SAfm than to other stations coupled with the fact that SAfm is better resourced than other stations does not go unnoticed by those other stations.

This apparently privileged position does however, have some serious downsides. If someone in the presidency, probably the President’s spokesman Mukoni Ratshitanga, phones the head of SABC news with a complaint about an interview, that someone will not have to say which station he heard the offending comments, it will be presumed that the station was SAfm.

The entire blacklisting debacle in 2006 happened because Snuki Zikalala, the managing director of the SABC’s news division, would not allow certain commentators to be interviewed on SAfm’s current affairs shows.

There never was any blacklist written on a piece of paper or an email that was distributed to editorial staff, but the producers at SAfm knew that if certain commentators such as Aubrey Mashiqi or Siphoo Seepe were put on the air, there would be a negative reaction from Zikalala’s office. They were discouraged from putting certain individuals on the line-up.

While this was happening on the current affairs shows of SAfm, other programmes on SAfm such as *Morning Talk*, or other stations, such as RSG were free to interview whoever they pleased.

It is highly unlikely that SABC CEO Dali Mpofu would have convened a high profile and probably very expensive Sisulu Commission to investigate the blacklisting saga had it boiled over onto any other station.

Yet SABC top management insist that SAfm has the same status as all the other stations.