

COMING UP FOR AIR TIME

With deregulation of broadcasting now seriously being discussed, the battle for the southern African airwaves has only just begun write

DON PINNOCK & LLEWELYN RODERICK

WHEN SABC head Christo Viljoen toy-toyed up the aisle on the arm of a black woman in a wild Afro at the Jabulani 'Freedom Of The Airways' conference in Amsterdam recently, it was noted he did so with some reluctance. Adjusting to the demands of the new South Africa has its problems. But when his Task Group report on broadcasting came out, it was clear that some major adjusting *had* been going on at the SABC.

The Task Group's report – sporting the new 'democratic, non-racial and non-sexist' vocabulary, surprised many broadcasters with its proposals for an Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to regulate the broadcasting industry and all aspects of telecommunications.

There were other surprises

Other surprises were the report's emphasis on educational broadcasting, local radio and the training of local broadcasters as a matter of priority. The report suggested that the SABC be transformed into a Public Services Broadcaster (PSB). The SABC, says the report, "should be seen as belonging to the public". The report also recognised the need for encouraging independent production to boost local content. Could this mean fewer American soaps?

The SABC Task Group attracted controversy from inception early in 1991. Its non-representative composition – all men hand-picked by the government – attracted a good deal of early negative publicity. It even occasioned the first march on the SABC's headquarters in Auckland Park, Johannesburg. Concern over what Viljoen would deliver also provoked a large gathering of independent broadcasters in Holland. This meeting, at the Jabulani conference, put out its version of the future broadcasting structure shortly before Viljoen's Task Force presented its own report.

Of course both reports are merely suggestions – Parliament may still accept or reject some or all of Viljoen's offerings. It will probably choose to ignore the Jabulani report. But in its slow, formal South African way, the debate on the future of broadcasting has begun. And the process seems likely to speed up as the ANC starts thinking about the agenda for next year's All-Party Conference.



Superficially, there are many similarities in the demands made in the two reports: the call for an Independent Broadcasting Authority, for more local content, for educational broadcasting and for more training. But there are fundamental differences as well.

The Task Group seems to have attempted a double defence of the *status quo* by ensuring that the SABC keeps its hands firmly on the microphones in the run-up to elections, while planning to deny control of the airwaves to any future government. The Jabulani report and the Film and Allied Workers Union (FAWO), while demanding an IBA, say this cannot be created by the present government. "There are no guarantees that SABC news reporting will be fair, impartial and balanced during the interim period", says the Jabulani report.

FAWO suggests that an All Party Conference appoint an Interim Broadcasting Consultative Committee to do the job until a new constitution is drafted. The Jabulani report adds that the All-Party Conference should appoint a commission of inquiry which "will survey public opinion and produce recommendations on the re-regulation of broadcasting in South Africa under a democratic constitution".

Though the Task Group agrees that an IBA would only function properly under a new constitution with an entrenched Bill of Rights, it is silent on an interim arrangement to monitor or regulate broadcasting.

More criticism than praise

Since the Task Group report was made public, it has has been praised and criticised by media academics. An initial criticism was over the report's language: it said things which sounded revolutionary but added up, some claim, to more of the same old stuff.

According to Roy Williams, head of Communications at the University of Bophuthatswana, the report "tries to hijack and pre-empt democratic debate on broadcasting by incorporating the ways in which broadcasting may be articulated". The effect is to "occupy the field (of discussion) before any of the other players have even got dressed for the game".

Eric Louw of Natal's Centre for Cultural and Media Studies says he finds "a serious contradiction between the report's call for broadcasting to be de-politicised

PLEASE TURN OVER

while at the same time calling for a system based on the principles of free enterprise and commercial competition. Explicitly advocating a preferred economic model is hardly a depoliticised position".

FAWO notes "with pleasant surprise" language such as "democratic, nonracial and nonsexist". But it points out that FW de Klerk "uses terminology which would have been unthinkable two years ago, yet it is clear from the NP's constitutional proposals that what is said is not always what is meant".

Broadcasting types are concerned over more material contradictions in the report. Michael Markovitz of FAWO says that while the Task Force report suggests the establishment of the SABC as a public service broadcaster, the corporation has been steering in the opposite direction. In the last year it has set up a number of private companies such as Television News Production, SAFRITEL, SCENIA, COM-TV, TV Facilities and TV Production Services, all of which are profit-based and are run as commercial ventures.

This cuts right across the idea of public service broadcasting, which should be state funded and run in the public interest alone. This new SABC brood, with full and free access to the Corporation's immense facilities, are competing aggressively with the struggling independent film and television sector. According to Markovitz, the Task Force report is also silent on how the public would get access to SABC transmission and production facilities.

The appointment of members to an IBA board has been another point of concern. The Task Group suggests that this powerful regulatory body consist of five people appointed by the State President. "Why so few members?" asks Markovitz. Also there are no checks and balances to ensure that the President's final appointments are broadly acceptable. And if the recommendations become legislation next year, as the Task Group hopes, the IBA will be De Klerk's appointees. According to Markovitz, "it would be another example of all the President's men, and the broadcast sector in this country cannot take that chance".

An interesting silence on M-Net

An interesting silence in the Task Group report settles around M-Net. Markovitz notes that the pay television service is not criticised for failing to comply with local content percentages negotiated in 1986. He says that Ton Vosloo, chairman of M-Net, "was the vice-chairman of the Task Group and obviously had blocked any explicit recommendations around cross-ownership or specific mention of M-Net with regards to local content".

Another silence envelops community radio. In a press release, some staff of the Rhodes University Journalism Department welcomed the Task Group's recommendation that community radio should be

The Task Group seems to have adopted a double defence of the status quo by ensuring that the SABC keeps its hands firmly on the mikes in the run-up to elections, while planning to deny control of the airwaves to any future government

deregulated. But they asked why no subsidy arrangements had been suggested for this vital sector.

Community radio could be the biggest broadcasting growth area in the future – the Jabulani report has rightly declared it to be a priority focus. In recommending that deregulation start at the "bottom", however, the Task Group got no further than suggesting that local operators pay a licence fee. Community radio is obviously being seen by Viljoen as being commercial and not a community service.

'Com-radio' is already rolling

Initiatives in the area of so-called 'com-radio' are already rolling. 'Bush Radio', University of the Western Cape's proposed station, is aiming to broadcast to its immediate community and has been consulting extensively with civic and other organisations in the Western Cape around structure and future programme content.

If deregulation takes place (and perhaps even if it doesn't) 'Bush Radio' might be the first of many community-specific broadcasting projects.

Another radio concern, this time from students, is the Task Group's silence on Campus Radio. This was raised at a National Campus Radio conference held in September under the auspices of the South African Students Press Union. It was also pointed out that the report failed to distinguish clearly between commercial and non-commercial broadcasting. The report's emphasis was on "market forces" and financial viability in considerations about granting licenses to new radio stations. Did this apply to campus and community stations as well, students wanted to know?

There is also concern about the Task Group's suggestion that community radio be allocated the medium-wave band. This would ensure good reception at night but poor reception during the day.

The debate around broadcasting is now rumbling on two tracks. One heads towards Parliament, the other to further debates and conferences within the extra-parliamentary movement. The Minister of Home Affairs, Gene Louw, says that "after the consideration of all comments which may be received, legislation will be drafted for submission to Parliament, hopefully during the 1992 session of Parliament". But if the legislation follows the recommendations of the Task Force report, as it probably will, independent broadcasters and political movements are guaranteed to launch a campaign against the government's hand on the tiller. It is probable, therefore, that the battle for the airwaves is just about to begin. ●

DON Pinnock is a senior lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes and Llewelyn Roderick is a student in the department.