

WHAT TO DO ABOUT BROADCASTING

*While there is a great deal of discussion around the question of control of the print media, the overriding question of the future of the SABC in the new South Africa remains unresolved. **RAYMOND LOUW** looks at the problem*

THE nation's broadcasting systems, the "freeing of the airwaves" and the State's monopoly of them have become the focus of political attention as the transformation process to the new South Africa gets into its stride and there is the prospect of elections within a year.

Codesa Working Group 1 has proposed that an IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) should be established to regulate the allocation of broadcast frequencies and to lay down standards which licensed broadcasters would have to comply with. It has apparently rejected proposals for an interim or temporary structure to be set up during the period leading to a new government.

These proposals came from the Campaign for Open Media (COM) which, in conjunction with the Centre for Development Studies at the University of the Western Cape, held a three-day conference of more than 100 media-interested organisations and persons in February to formulate them.

The position taken at that conference was that all the decisions affecting broadcasting in SA had been based on a model which had been shaped to the government's needs by white political administrators who did not take the needs of the black majority into account. This white administration recently conducted a secret two-year investigation into broadcasting with a panel heavily larded with civil servants from the State security departments and came up with a

series of recommendations which the government appears determined to implement.

The inquiry, under the chairmanship of SA Broadcasting Corporation chairman Professor Christo Viljoen, published its recommendations in the so-called Viljoen Task Group Report.

COM is highly critical of the report. Apart from the unrepresentative nature of the inquiry panel and the selective nature of the evidence before it, its recommendations will bring about even tighter controls on broadcasting and closer links with government than exist at present. Broadcasters who now have merely Statute Law to contend with, rigorous as that is, will be expected to comply with another set of rules and regulations that will reduce their freedom.

COM wants an interim structure during the transition so that before a permanent regulatory body is established, a full and open inquiry into all aspects of broadcasting in SA should be conducted by an impartial commission.

Unlike the secret Viljoen Task Group, this inquiry would hold public sessions which would be reported in the media. This will enable organisations and institutions which refused to give evidence before Viljoen – such as the ANC, COM, FAWO (Film and Allied Workers Organisation) and others – to present their views. The conference insisted that the regulatory body should be free of political influence and

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that a public broadcaster such as the SABC should be under the control of a similarly non-political body. It suggested a mechanism of appointments by a group of eminent persons selected by Codesa and after nominees had undergone a public vetting process. The board would be charged with replacing the current SABC chief executive with an independent, non-political officer who would ensure in the first instance that news and current affairs broadcasting is fair and impartial.

It also recommended that a moratorium be placed on a unilateral restructuring of the SABC of the kind that has been occurring over the last two years.

Codesa has adopted some COM proposals – the requirements that IBA members should not be office-bearers in political parties and should not have a financial interest in the media. But Codesa's main recommendation that there be an immediate IBA indicates that it has been influenced by the Viljoen Report. Should it persist with a permanent structure, it is unlikely that a fresh, independent inquiry will be made into broadcasting and all the present undesirable features of broadcasting will be allowed to continue.

Despite the discussions at Codesa, the SABC has consolidated its position as the monopolist public service broadcaster. It has ensured that competing services such as *Capital Radio*, *Radio 702* and *Bop TV* are unable to expand into more effective competitive services. *Radio 702* and *Capital* are prevented from obtaining FM station outlets – they are forced to use the less efficient AM waveband – by the SABC which uses its statutory veto right over other services ruthlessly.

It has also colonised the TSS (the so-called “The Spare Service” TV channel) by taking it over for sport and educational broadcasts and effectively blocking its use by other independent broadcasters.

With its tight grip on all public TV and radio broadcasting – which includes the commissioning and selection of material – the SABC has also broken up its departments into so-called ‘business units’, ostensibly to improve their efficiency, but in reality to ensure that should there be a need, these can be hived off into the private sector. In addition, the Task Group Report has proposed that an IBA has a five-year life span and the power to grant TV licences for 15 years and radio licences for seven.

This ensures that the current political control over SABC TV can be maintained for the next 15 years and, if the ANC comes to power, it will have great difficulty in changing that. Imagine the international (and local) row that will break out if the ANC should try to interfere in the media



immediately after assuming power in “the new SA”? If the Bill of Rights did not prevent it, fear of losing much-needed foreign investment could.

The Task Group has provided options. If the present government, by some miracle, retains power in a one-person, one-vote election, it will control the SABC as it does now; if the ANC assumes power, National Party nominees will be in the driving seat at the SABC to ensure that they control that organisation for 15 years for TV.

The only competitor to the SABC is *M-Net*, the cable-TV type service which is controlled by a consortium of newspaper interests. When the government gave *M-Net* the green light, it ensured that the management would be sympathetic to its political and other aims by imposing the express condition that government-supporting Nasionale

Pers run the operation. Thus the chairman of *M-Net* is Nasionale Pers' managing director, Ton Vosloo, and its chief executive officer is a former employee of Nasionale Pers.

M-Net was set up to compensate the newspaper industry for advertising revenue lost to SABC TV and it has succeeded handsomely. Newspaper ownership of *M-Net* breaks all the rules that have been introduced overseas to reduce cross-ownership in the media, but those rules conveniently do not apply in SA and ownership was seen to be the only means of ensuring compensation.

A possible alternative is to turn *M-Net* into a trust, the proceeds from which would be distributed to the newspapers according to a formula, while their direct control of the medium would be reduced. This would allow an independent management and operatives to ensure that the service is impartial. It could also allow possible inclusion of the alternative press in the benefits.

So much for the politics of control. Up front other political considerations are only too apparent. The government and the SABC, encouraged by the overwhelming success of the concerted campaign by almost all the media for a “yes” vote in the March 17 referendum, have begun a new campaign for the election of “the new SA” government and the SABC has resumed its dutiful role of pushing the interests of the National Party. Those all too few heady days when the SABC professed to be free and impartial, have gone. ●

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