

*"This was probably the last chance we had to capitalise on national goodwill and prove ourselves a true national broadcaster."*

## The Mother of all Broadcasts

The election was the test of the SABC's credibility in the new South Africa, writes **GEORGE MAZARAKIS**.

**E**LECTION '94 proved to be the most remarkable experience for every one of the 3 000 strong team involved with the broadcast.

No-one had ever done anything like it in South African broadcasting history. There was no precedent to examine, let alone improve on. This meant we had a unique opportunity to set new standards and to establish the SABC's credibility. A noble task, but one fraught with problems and the legacy of what we were hoping to leave behind. This was probably the last chance we had to capitalise on national goodwill and prove ourselves a true national broadcaster.

A good deal of groundwork had already been done by working according to an editorial code and defining clearly what the corporation's perceptions of its public responsibility would be. A lot of the impetus for this came from management, but staffers empowered by the appointment of a publically-accountable board took an active role in defining editorial principles which would prevent a future government from taking the liberties of previous regimes. Most important was the need to establish editorial and professional independence.

Codes of foreign broadcasters were examined and it was decided that the Australian model served our purposes almost as well as it served their's. And so, the SABC found itself with a new editorial code, which not only contained all the principles of fairness and right-of-reply that one would expect, but also, for the first time in the corporation's history, defined the source of editorial decisions — as coming from the editorial staff as opposed to management. To long-suffering staffers, this finally meant the right to take decisions on professional principles and within an accepted journalistic ethos — quite separate from the exigencies of either political or commercial interests.

The cherry on top of the entire preparatory phase was management's decision to bring in foreign expertise to assist both the radio and television components of the Mother of All Broadcasts.

We were visited by the British Thomson Foundation, the Danes, the Australians and the Canadians. They all had a different opinion on how to do things best, and none was shy to express it. At first they scared us, later they confused us and in the end we really could not have done most of it without them. They were a godsend — particularly from a technical point of view, since we really seem to have lagged behind most of all in knowing how useful the technology we possess can be.

By the time the election actually happened, more than 70 journalists, from the most junior to at least middle management level had been through refresher training courses. For most these were the first courses they had attended — another legacy of the "old" SABC. The fact was that people were often brought in so raw that they had absolutely no idea what the medium was about and literally learnt their craft on air — with little if any regard for the viewer or listener they were serving.

So here we finally were, at the brink of the greatest event this country had seen, with little experience, little training, but a great deal of enthusiasm.

The task was awesome.

**W**ith some 9 000 voting stations, we clearly couldn't cover them all, but which were we to choose? The "traditional" thing of sending outside broadcast units to town halls in white cities simply would not do. This was the election of the people and the majority did not have convenient access to these hitherto white bastions of civic and political power. We would have to go to the townships. At that stage, before Inkatha had entered the process, certain areas were inaccessible and we had learnt from bitter experience that it was

simply not worth risking the lives of journalists and crews. Community halls or business premises had to be identified. Some had inadequate facilities and others reneged on agreements at the last minute for fear of reprisals.

**T**hen the IEC went and outlawed us to the perimeters of the voting stations, depriving us of the all-important access we would need for those close-up shots of ordinary people casting their first vote. They eventually relented in some cases, but the IEC's now legendary lethargy and indecision left us ill-prepared at best. We didn't even know the exact location of some stations until the last minute.

The mode of the broadcast, by microwave link, was a further problem. In most Western countries satellite technology is used to beam the signal from virtually any point into the network and then the viewer's home. That's how we got to see the Gulf War as it was happening. Unfortunately, our South African satellite will only be available in July 1995. This meant we were expected to transmit the broadcast on a land-based microwave system.

When we got to the point of deploying our staff, we had set up logistics for a 28 point outside broadcast source — meaning that 28 units were deployed with the capacity to go "live" into the mother broadcast. In addition, we deployed a further 12 Electronic News Gathering (ENG) teams, with the capacity to feed into the broadcast. Four airborne cameras were deployed on helicopters which could also feed material.

When Arnold Amber, the most senior Canadian advisor and a man respected throughout North America as an elections expert, heard our plan, he said we South Africans were crazier than he thought. The interesting thing was that most of us, while realising the enormity of the task, knew our goal was important and therefore had to make it work.

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The problems were more challenging on another, more emotive level. We had to decide how we would interpret the TEC's decision to declare 11 official languages. Did this mean that they would all receive equal air time?

We knew that this would prove impossible. We simply did not possess the resources. We only had two channels to work with in the first place, as the corporation's third channel, NNTV would have to be available for non-election material.

After much deliberation and heated debate, we decided on seven main languages, with English as the lingua franca and broadcasting across two channels, to give greater access to a wider audience. The Nguni languages, Xhosa and Zulu, would go out on the same channel and thereby serve a larger audience footprint, and North and South Sotho would also be grouped together, with Tswana on the same channel. It was also decided to give each language group at least one airing an hour.

This meant that each indigenous language received an average of 10 minutes in every hour, including Afrikaans, while English would be available through every hour, but split into two channels — making the information accessible to those who did not speak indigenous vernaculars.

The decision to place Afrikaans in a 10 minute segment gave rise to much protest in the Afrikaans-speaking community and several Afrikaner cultural organisations went as far as seeking a Supreme Court interdict to prevent such a division. The fact that the broadcast went ahead is significant in itself as it represented a new phase in communication which levelled all South Africans as equal partners in democracy.

The multi-lingual coverage brought about a world first in broadcasting. We had limited studio space and massive logistics to deal with. This meant that the largest studio available, Studio 5, was commissioned. The team transformed this studio into a massive communications nerve centre, the floor space was divided in two and a double presentation set was constructed, allowing us to broadcast in seven languages

from one studio and in at least two languages simultaneously.

Communication lines were vital because the production teams who were actually transmitting the various languages on SABC 1 and 2 (as the channels were known) were situated in two completely different control studios in another building! This in addition to a third studio which lined up transmission signals from outside units and fed them to the two final control studios.

The control studios were the final arbiters of news value and line-up. This was where the executive producers were and where editorial guidance was taken from editors, news teams in the field and the like. It was from here, through something like a kilometre of cabling, that we communicated with our presenters on the studio floor, giving them information at the last minute and sometimes while they were actually speaking (using an ear-piece system).

News editors, situated in a fourth venue, briefed reporters in the field, giving them the wider picture of what we were hoping to capture.

**W**hen we went on air for the first time on voting day, things flowed beautifully as the politicians turned out on time, giving us some of the most memorable pictures of the entire election. Long queues of people dressed to the nines or the invalid octogenarian who was carried in a blanket will remain the ultimate visual symbols of freedom after decades of repression. Aerial shots of seemingly endless lines where voters waited for up to nine hours to make their mark, or a rickety home-made wheelbarrow bearing a frail but determined voter will stay with me for ever.

These pictures were transmitted across the world and reached an estimated audience of 850 million people when CNN and a host of other foreign broadcasters fed our transmission to their viewers.

South Africa breathed an audible sign of relief as feelings of hope and nationhood filled voters' hearts and the harbingers of terror were ignored. We stayed with our good news story, but the huge CNN crews, sent here to cover what they expected

would be a bloodbath, began to leave, disappointed, and made for Rwanda.

We got the pictures and our prayers were answered, South Africa was on her way to a bright future. And then the bomb went off at Jan Smuts. No sooner had we aired our pictures of that incident than it became clear that absolutely nothing was going to dampen the excitement of the people. And so the story rolled — until we heard that the IEC was inadequately prepared and voting had hardly started in some areas until a few hours before voting stations were due to close.

**G**etting information out of the IEC proved to be our biggest problem. At first they seemed to have no idea where the voting was going to happen, then they didn't know how. Later still they were inadequately prepared and when the results were due they simply couldn't get them to us.

Some stories broke on air. The IEC had neglected to furnish many voting stations with the necessary ballot papers and the IFP stickers which were to have been affixed at the bottom of the page. We interviewed Chief Buthelezi who was threatening to pull out of the election, quoting several incidents which he said were compromising the fairness of the election.

In no time at all, we crossed to then-President De Klerk and got his reaction, followed immediately by crossings to ANC headquarters, the IEC and back to Chief Buthelezi. The story literally unfolded before our eyes as we moved from one point in the country to another. Even the Canadians said that this had never happened on their station in many more years of broadcasting. Newspaper journo's complained that we were leaving nothing for them.

The delays experienced in the election have now become legendary. But no amount of standby material could ever have prepared us for them. Having planned a three- to four-day broadcast, we landed up going on air for a week.

There were times when we came off air before we'd planned to, simply because we had exhausted available stories and resources. At other times we went on air in

## ELECTION FOCUS

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the hope of sustaining what promised to be a strong flow of results, only to find that what was coming through was a dribble.

Music videos and rambling presenters were our only salvation. The latter proved remarkably resourceful wafflers. Backed up by a team of researchers, the anchors soldiered on when crossings failed and microwave links collapsed. They filled in information where reporters left it out and entertained the nation for hours on end when there was nothing left to say. Those who were experienced sailed through the bulk of the exercise and at times soared. The newer anchors who had been thrown in at the deep end, learnt to swim very quickly and visibly grew as the days passed.

Tensions often ran high and tempers flared. But we stayed the course.

Did we succeed? In some respects (technically for example), I'd have to say an unequivocal yes.

**J**ournalistically, we could have done a lot better. We missed most of the rural story and tended to neglect all but the major metropolitan areas. Journalists in the field were stretched to the limit, often without adequate research or journalistic support. They found themselves fixed at broadcasting points, limiting the possibilities of wider stories in a given region.

But they worked hard and gave of their best.

We learnt more about television news in this one exercise than most of us had learnt in careers spanning several years. I believe that this experience shows on the news bulletins today. Journalists have grown in

leaps and bounds — in the way only an experience of this scope can teach one.

No sooner had we come off air than detailed planning for the opening of Parliament, the nine provincial legislatures and the inauguration of the President were upon us. Let no one say that broadcasting is ever easy or relaxed!

But, best of all, the opportunity to be part of history and to convey these historic events to the people of South Africa was not only a privilege, but a rare pleasure indeed.

■ *George Mazarakis was executive producer in charge of television coverage of the election. He joins the Department of Journalism and Media Studies in September.*

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These are just some of the ways in which we are committed to building a better future for both our own employees and the wider communities within which we operate.

We have learnt that by combining our skills with the natural talents of our fellow South Africans, we can all move forward into the future with confidence.



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