

REGULATING for a range of voices

Three members of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, Dr Sebiletso Matabane, Lyndall Shope-Mafole and John Matisonn, toured the country to conduct hearings about broadcasting policy.

LARRY STRELITZ asked Matisonn about freeing the airwaves.

Q: You can grant temporary licences to community stations, so why the delay for commercial broadcasters?

A: The day before we took office there was an amendment to the Broadcasting Act which allows us to grant temporary community licences. However, the Act prohibits us from granting public or commercial licences until we've drawn up a new frequency plan for the country and completed our enquiries into the funding of the public broadcaster, local content, and cross-media ownership. To do a frequency plan requires us to develop a broadcast policy which will allow us to allocate part of the spectrum only for community radio, part only for private radio, and part for public broadcast. So, for example, we probably won't be able to grant all the community licences because that would use up part of the spectrum reserved for commercial radio.

Q: Aren't you still moving too slowly?

A: South Africa has never had a policy other than "the SABC is baas and M-Net can also come". So we have to take a step-by-step approach even though many people want us to grant them licences without our doing any of these things. Those people that argue that we are dragging our feet simply haven't read the Act. In my recent discussions with these potential broadcasters, they seem to agree with me.

Having said this, we have prepared an amendment to the Act which we have sent to the Ministry of Broadcasting to be put before parliament which would make it possible for us to grant licences without going through all the processes called for in the Act.

Q: Doesn't a broadcast policy need to be part of a broader national information policy, covering the use of



JOHN MATISONN

fibre optic cables, computerisation, satellites, etc.

A: South Africa has waited a long time for community and private radio and we feel the urgency to address this need quickly. The country can't wait and the country shouldn't wait. Because of this we can't address these larger issues that are being faced by the rest of the world at the moment.

Q: How do you interpret the provision in the Act to "develop and protect a national and regional identity, culture and character" with regard to broadcasting?

A: The role of a national public broadcaster such as the SABC is to develop a national identity. It can focus on subjects that make South Africans South Africans from the point of view of the different cultures in our country. So it has a conscious focus, both in fiction and non-fiction, on what it is to be a South African. Regional television is a

whole related area that needs to be developed.

Q: Isn't there a danger that this identity-building proviso could stifle diversity and could open the door for quite narrow controls on content?

A: That is a danger. However, apparently if you ask people in Canada what institution it is that makes them feel most Canadian, they answer the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In some respects Canada, with its proximity to the United States, this giant spewing out programming, has a similar problem to ours with regard to cultural encroachment. So for me this is an interesting analogy.

We are trying very hard not to get into the political debate. Some people have said that licences should not be granted to people who do not support the RDP. Our board was quick to say that the RDP is a political programme of a political party which happens to be in government and that while we support reconstruction and development, the RDP programme of the government is not something we are telling people to back or otherwise. We don't want to be tied up with any political policy.

Q: With your Canadian example, are you not expressing a xenophobia about American programming and its influence on South African identities?

A: One of the enquiries we have to conduct is into local content. I really can't judge how we will go on that. However, if a policy with regard to local content is managed correctly, it can foster not only local culture, but also local industry. In Australia, for example, certain community radio stations have been very successful in building a lot of rock groups. So we need to develop an intelligent policy which can encourage both the culture and the industry.

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LYNDALL SHOPE-MAFOLE



DR SEBILETSO MATABANE

Q: Have you learnt much from broadcast regulators such as the FCC in America?

A: In the past the FCC used to set a condition that news and current affairs were required of broadcasters. They don't do that now because there is such a plethora of public affairs programmes. Here we don't have that and therefore it has been argued that it is still appropriate for us to stipulate that anyone who gets a licence should be expected to provide public affairs programming. Ten years down the line it may be different. Right now, South Africans haven't had access to a range of different voices providing news and current affairs programming. In the past most of this came from one source, from one building.

Q: With the scarcity of frequency space on the FM band, are you encouraging applicants to consider the MW band?

A: While we are not telling people what band to apply for, we are telling them to consider MW as an option. This is because we fear that the limited availability of FM band space will force us to turn down many good applicants. Some people see MW as akin to second-class citizenship, as the ghetto-isation of their particular station. We point out that in Australia, for example, MW is the predominant wave band for ABC, and in America a lot of the stations are on MW. So to be on MW is

not a terrible thing. It is very successful in some circumstances as Radio 702 has proved.

Q: What is the chance that you may cut some of the frequencies currently available to the SABC?

A: At this stage we're not planning to move anybody. However we do reserve the right to move frequencies in the process of developing a new frequency plan because that's what the Act tells us to do. It's not going to happen very quickly, but that has to be an option down the road.

Q: At present the SABC is synonymous with public broadcasting. Any chance that may change in the future?

A: The Act says that the public broadcaster must be a statutory broadcaster and that includes the SABC as well as some of the TVBC broadcasters. The SABC is a national asset, so anything the corporation says to us in their submissions we will take extremely seriously. It's hard to build things and it's easy to destroy things. The IBA is supposed to open up the airwaves and provide the listener with the widest possible range of voices and choice so there will be plenty of scope for broadcasters other than the SABC. However, the SABC is the national public broadcaster. What still has to be looked at is the future of regional public broadcasting and this role could possibly be filled by the TVBC broadcasters.

Q: The insistence by SABC-TV that programmes meet certain minimum technical requirements has excluded potential programme producers without access to costly broadcast-quality equipment. In your drive to encourage more voices will you encourage a loosening of these technical requirements?

A: I was in Hong Kong this year and had access to a three-chip High-8 broadcast-quality camera. Because this camera costs a fraction of the price of a conventional broadcast-quality camera, it is revolutionising television. It can be operated by one person doing everything; the camerawork, the sound and the reporting. With a journalistic background and this camera, you can become a television journalist very quickly. It changes the financial dynamics of television production and makes 24 hour-a-day news production at a local level possible. There are already a number of overseas television stations operating with this equipment.

Q: How will the growth of satellite broadcasting affect the watchdog role played by the IBA?

A: At the moment that's not a problem. However, if we start to get a lot of international stations coming in on the KU-Band (satellite signal distributor) for example, there will be a point at which we lose control. The public broadcaster in a number of countries, such as India, has suffered as a result of this. The way to protect local broadcasters is through quality local programming because that is where the foreign satellite stations cannot compete.

Q: This begs the question: what is "quality"?

A: I don't have a definition for quality, but obviously the viewer will decide. If the viewer is used to watching BBC, CNN or Sky and they switch over to local stations, they will decide whether the quality is good enough to keep watching. The viewer doesn't need to feel that the South African television broadcaster is providing equally good or better coverage of Bosnia. But they do need to feel that what they are getting about southern Africa is of sufficiently high quality to be worth watching.

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Q: How do you see the future for broadcasting in this country?

A: I am a strong believer in all three of the broadcast sectors — public, private, community — in both television and radio. If we do our job right, a lot of people will get very rich and that's good. Some of the community broadcasters could become quite powerful and that will also be a sign of success. With the growing affordability of broadcasting equipment, technology is increasingly less of an obstacle to potential broadcasters.

Because there will be more and more stations, all with a voracious appetite, the future challenge will be in the area of programming. The success will go to the people who can produce the programming, the creative people, both for local consumption and for export to the rest of Africa and overseas. Both from a cultural and commercial point of view, this is potentially a huge area of growth for South Africa. That's what must be developed here as fast as possible.

Q: You're consulting with aspirant broadcasters before making IBA policy on community radio.

A: It's an extraordinary learning experience as it gives us an opportunity to get the community's sense of the relevant issues. We want them to understand that we have to be responsive to them because it's their process as much as anybody else's. What we've found is that there are people around who have been wanting to get into radio for a long time ... some for years, some for decades and many of them have done a

lot of research. We are even visiting towns where nobody has asked to see us in order to talk to communities about radio. That gives people the opportunity to attend the hearings and to realise that there is an authority that wants to encourage a process of which they can be a part.

Q: How do you define "community radio"?

A: It must be a non-profit organisation. While it can make money from adverts, that money must go back to the station itself or to the community. Quite a lot of people have said, "I'm sure I won't make a profit". That's not the point. The ownership structure must insure that profits cannot be distributed to individuals.

Q: What constitutes a "community" in the term "community radio"?

A: It could be a community of interests or a geographic community. For example, we've had an application for a classical music station in Cape Town. There have, for example, also been applications from religious groupings.

Q: What criteria will be used to award licences to community broadcasters?

A: The Act says that we have to create an environment which, when viewed collectively, considers ownership and control by historically disadvantaged groups, and that provides a range of news and current affairs programming. We want to put at least some of these stations into the hands of black people and women, and we are also fully entitled to consider very highly an interest in news and current affairs.

Q: What's needed to run a successful community station?

A: Because broadcasting has always been in the control of the SABC, people think that vast amounts of money are involved. In radio this is not true. Today you can buy a portable combined studio and transmitter for under R50 000. There are various national stations, would-be commercial stations and overseas trainers willing to provide training, so that's not a problem.

Furthermore, there must be the sense that this is a genuine community-wide project in order to attract volunteers who will remain committed and who will be able to fill the schedule. This means that you only need a few salaried personnel. Because it is community-based you don't need extensive marketing. One of the benefits of such a station is that you will get new advertisers from those who would never advertise on a national station — such as local shopkeepers.

Q: Could the IBA play a developmental role by subsidising fledgling community stations out of income derived from licence fees?

A: I think it's possible. But we don't want to get into the position of managing the stations. So while we will be able to come up with some money, we probably will not want to make the decisions about the use of that money or the allocation to individual stations ourselves. That could put us in a position of conflict of interests. In other ways we can also facilitate the process by putting people together in terms of skills or money.

Between state and commerce

GRAHAM HAYMAN reports on the 'little guys' making representations for licences.

MAKHAYA Mzongwana and Happy Tom are part of the Grahams-town army of unemployed marginalised youth. As the Grahamstown Community Radio Forum, they gave evidence to the IBA when it came to town in July. When they had finished, IBA co-chairperson Dr Sebileto Matabane turned to

them and said they were the first students who had presented evidence to the IBA. The preliminary list of submissions for temporary community radio licences published by the IBA shows that applications are dominated by those who already have the skills and knowledge. Those for whom the act has a specific "help" clause, the historically

disadvantaged like Happy Tom and Makhaya Mzongwana, are conspicuously absent. There's a gap here between the Act's principle and practice.

On the one hand the IBA is requesting fairly sophisticated licence applications, in line with its stated aim to be sure that those who get community licences are not going

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to fold quickly. They are prepared to see a high mortality rate among commercial stations, but they want to see that community stations have some solid chance of surviving. On the other hand many community applicants need to use the temporary licence as a learning curve.

The IBA is also offering conduits to money for start-up needs. But it is precisely small groups like the community radio forum who need help. Clearly there is a need for intermediaries, and more than just the high-cost lawyers who are handling some licence applications.

Cooperating in just this way is the Rev Bob Clarke, head of the Albany Council of Churches (ACC), who wants to set up an ecumenical communications centre (including a radio station) to distribute news about developmental work done by ACC's constituent churches in the Albany region. Although Clarke, Mzongwana and Tom differed a little on process and exact aims, their broad goals are essentially the same, and one of the benefits of the IBA's visits was that everybody got a larger view of their own specific intentions within the whole process of re-regulation.

Also making a submission to the IBA was Bernard Roebert of Trinity Broadcasting, the Christian television station that broadcasts from Bisho to the East London/Queenstown region ("the first independent, privately-funded broadcaster in Southern Africa..."). His religious station is evangelical, very different from the ecumenical, socially-orientated work of the ACC, but still a community station. His tale of exclusion from national TV coverage was almost as sad and unjust as Mzongwana's and Tom's.

He was asking for a temporary community television licence. Strictly speaking, he is not catered for by present legislation, since the IBA hearing was conducted only in terms of temporary community radio. But Roebert's case was obviously an exception, so the IBA had asked him to make another submission in Grahamstown, having first heard him in Cape Town — another encouraging example of the willingness of the IBA to see beyond the confines of the present act to the actual and potential needs of communities and broadcasters.

Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN) regularly applied for a national TV broadcast licence long before the arrival of M-Net.

M-Net got a channel but Trinity has always been refused — without public review, and without comment from the press. M-Net is a powerful nexus of influences: the English press with its corporate associations with the mining houses and the old PFP; the Afrikaans press, strong bastion of Afrikaner people's capitalism, with many of the old Nats on their boards. Who would — or could — oppose that? Adding insult to injury, the SABC later sneaked the TSS transmissions onto the airwaves — a lucrative source of advertising money — on the so-called "spare channels".

Trinity Broadcasting's case is a classic case of the shrinking of the public sphere: a small broadcaster, neither commercial nor public service, being squeezed between the state and the commercial sector. The result is a contraction of what German analyst Jurgen Habermas calls the 'public sphere'.

Bernard Roebert's account is tailor-made for a consumer activist's diary. In response to one of his many applications, the Minister of Home Affairs gave him a temporary UHF licence in Port Elizabeth for one month, the date of the licence being the last day of the previous month. One day's notice before the clock started ticking...

This is such offhand treatment in a TV broadcaster's terms that it was almost not worth the paper it was written on. This is especially underscored by the nuts and bolts problems that have to be solved before broadcasting happens. Sentech, transmission arm of the SABC, had an old UHF transmitter lying around (TSS had moved to the more far-reaching VHF channel). No other SABC channel was broadcasting in the UHF band, so no-one had UHF aerials. TBN had to find broadcasting premises, to buy components to adapt their programme output to Sentech's transmitter (parts for transmitters aren't available from supermarkets). Then Sentech needed seven days for set-up and test. TBN had little time to publish programme schedules.

Given his different scale of operations, Roebert was as disadvantaged as are Mzongwana and Tom.

Having been frozen out under the previous government, he may now have to wait still longer for the IBA's proper allocation of TV frequencies. That could be anything up to two years, since the IBA may not at present allocate any new TV licences before drawing up a frequency map for the

whole country — a gigantic task that took the old SABC a few years to do, even when the Vorster-Meyer axis gave them a simpler political formula and generous government loans.

But even if Roebert gets a signal distributor's licence, (assuming that Sentech can't do it) he has to find and buy a good transmitter site, put up a mast — and how many appropriate transmitter sites are there in any given city? Does Sentech have all the best sites inherited from Oupa SABC? What say does the municipality, or Civil Aviation have, about mast location and height — far more than against the might of the old SABC, I am sure.

TBN arrived in South Africa almost like the radio pirates of Europe of the 60s and 70s, operating offshore on political islands — Ciskei and Transkei. They had an audience, but no blessing. Now that the islands have rejoined the mainland, they seem destined to have to join an even longer queue, even though obviously professional and adequately funded.

According to Roebert local programming is established policy of the TBN head office in the USA. TBN now operates in effect as a community access station, carrying broadcasts free from its member churches. The competing claims of these churches are arbitrated by Roebert and two Americans on the board. If needed, he told the IBA, he would find local board members, local businessmen with an interest in religious broadcasting but no denominational attachments: in effect, set up a public service type board.

The IBA also heard motivations for licensing a different category to fulltime community and religious broadcasters. I proposed that non-broadcast organisations — like the Red Cross, SANTA, the Black Sash Advice Offices, and others — should also be considered.

Not only do they have some expertise and organisation, their performance in representing the interests of the community (the Act mentions "criteria to be prescribed") is probably easier to monitor, given the relative respectability and effectiveness of such community-based and community service organisations or NGO's.

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