

the (s)

of news

Building a new and diverse media requires that the national public broadcaster, which is mainly commercially-funded and which broadcasts locally, regionally and internationally, takes training very seriously. **The**

SABC is a complex media organisation delivering news on cell phones, via WAP and the Internet, through international radio and external radio services and on terrestrial and satellite television channels. In addition, special news services provide a service to several million viewers in the US.

What and how we broadcast – how we portray our reality – through the various vehicles and formats at our disposal plays a key role as far as our international image and standing is concerned.

Inside the country we are developing additional news and current affairs programming to cater for as many broadcast language needs as possible for television viewers. Provincial television programming is confined to one of the provinces, in seven languages. Radio certainly has the largest reach, nationally, and in addition to the 11 official languages, broadcasts in **two of our First Languages**, !Xhun and Khwê happen in the Northern Cape. A small team produces seven news bulletins and one current affairs programme daily. Come elections (once every five years) there is also special television programming to reach and inform as many voters as possible.

Who gets trained? Full-time staff and fixed-term contract staff have access to training. Journalism, production and operational and managerial training are the requirements of the day. Journalists, on-air presenters, camerapersons, sound recordists, technical editors, vision controllers, vision mixers and other disciplines enjoy short courses and other appropriate training. Internships are supported and **the demand for in-service training is growing** in a very popular and sought after profession.

Every department within each division of the SABC should have its Workplace Skills Plan, which lists the training requirements/interventions in line with its specific key objectives. The range of training includes **short courses, mentoring, shadowing and coaching**, which can be regarded as standard or generic training. There is also special skills training confined mainly to the use of specialised equipment. Much of this happens abroad where the stronger currencies play havoc with budgets.

Given the deadline-based nature of our profession, staff training is designed to fit in with staff schedules and takes a modular form. This is also designed to assess impact and outcomes of training interventions. A multi-skilled approach is desirable as far as television journalism is concerned, but this is mostly an ideal due to staffing considerations. Timeous training and **exposure to the latest technology** is also important. This should not be neglected because we need to be a step or two ahead of the rapid convergence of technology that we will soon be deploying.

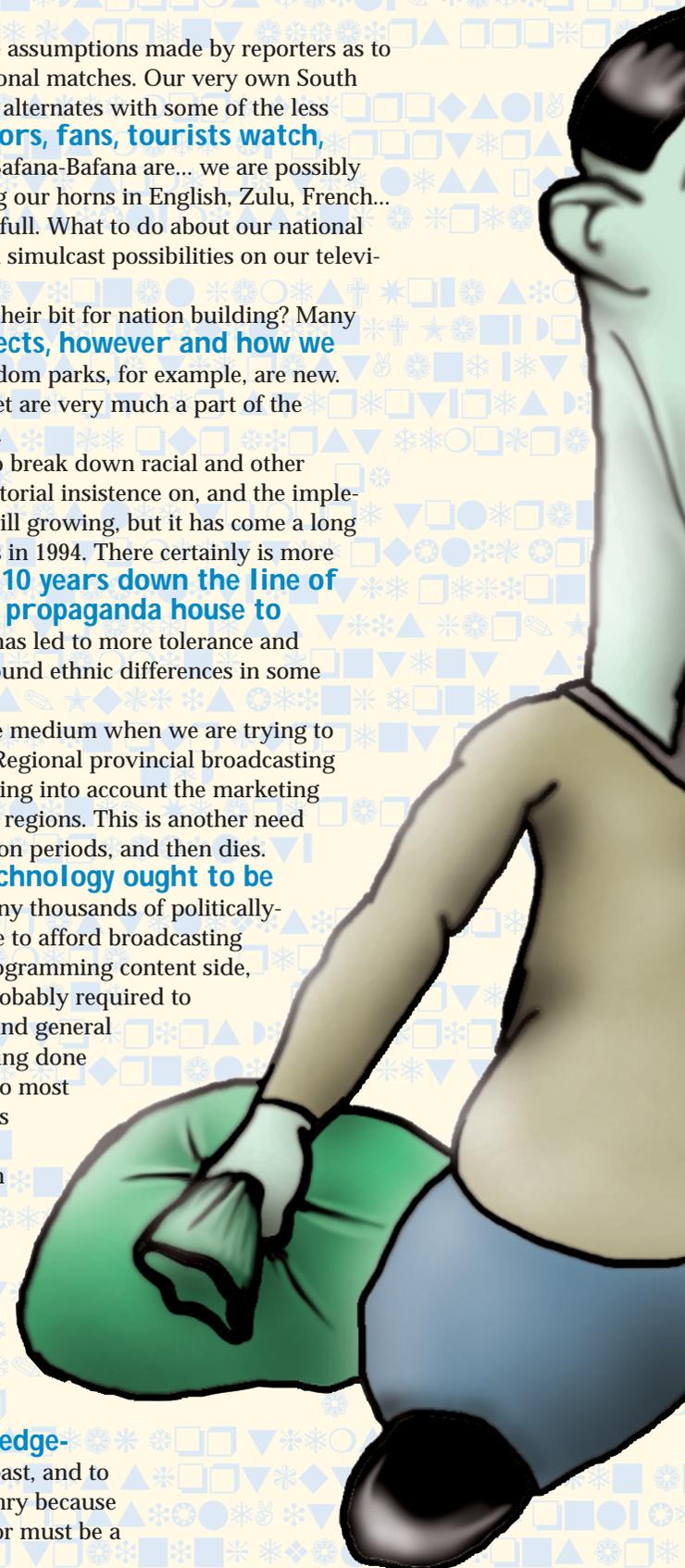
“The national interest” is defined and redefined in the newsrooms daily. Radio programming has many advantages, including language spread, which enables wider participation. The medium of television perhaps needs more current affairs programming slots to adequately analyse all the merits on particular issues of national public importance. **Personally I would like to hear the “Why” question being asked more vigorously**, without fear or favour, but then we are very polite.

Sport is a national interest and there are assumptions made by reporters as to loyalties, especially when covering international matches. Our very own South African commentary is done in English and alternates with some of the less universal of our 11 official languages. **Visitors, fans, tourists watch, applaud** and miss out on how good our Bafana-Bafana are... we are possibly missing a great opportunity by not blowing our horns in English, Zulu, French... exploring the simulcast possibilities to the full. What to do about our national interest during international games? Woza simulcast possibilities on our television screens!

Is it the function of journalists to do their bit for nation building? Many would argue not. **Our choice of subjects, however and how we report these, speak volumes.** Freedom parks, for example, are new. They recognise the ills of the past, and yet are very much a part of the current reality of moving into the future.

Concerted efforts are being made to break down racial and other stereotypes within the organisation. Editorial insistence on, and the implementation of, language equitability is still growing, but it has come a long way since our first democratic elections in 1994. There certainly is more sensitivity in the newsrooms, **almost 10 years down the line of transformation – from a state propaganda house to public broadcaster.** This in turn has led to more tolerance and even allows for a sense of humour around ethnic differences in some quarters.

Broadcasting is still an expensive medium when we are trying to meet the public broadcast mandate. Regional provincial broadcasting needs to be seriously considered, taking into account the marketing and commercial sustainability in the regions. This is another need that is only recognised during election periods, and then dies. **Making use of affordable technology ought to be explored** to address this gap. Many thousands of politically-free South Africans are still not able to afford broadcasting (televisions and radios). On the programming content side, the restructuring of resources is probably required to cover Aids awareness, education and general developmental issues. Much is being done nationally – there is accessibility to most of our politicians and the business and other sectors of society – but this is not adequately reflected in our current programming. More resources for public interest programming might alleviate the lack of adequate coverage. A new development plan that spells out information accessibility to all ought to be in the pipeline. **We are rapidly becoming a more knowledge-based society** than in the past, and to now exclude the entire citizenry because of a cost or affordability factor must be a



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training

by Amina Frense

Bottom Line, the left-brained accountant whose news sense is damaged by his Rands and Cents. Spreads gloom and despair by constant reference to a recurring rash in his nether regions known as "being in the red".

dangerous development for any nation, regardless of how progressive its constitution.

What works? A multi-disciplinary approach is good as far as television production, scripting and journalism training is concerned. The training courses, for example, include reporters, producers, camera people, technical editors and courses are designed in a multi-disciplinary way. The producers and reporters get to understand basic camera and editing principles and practice. Camera people and editors get to grips with scripting and storytelling, by doing scripting and stand-uppers or pieces to camera (where they would normally be behind the camera). The producers and journalists get to appreciate the basics of camera operations and best framing for editing purposes. The list of benefits is long with this approach.

They also gain respect for every aspect of what it takes to put together a good story. This training is followed up with **additional mentoring** over a period. Monitoring of a person's work progress and general improvement in the stories is done as part of the feedback and final course evaluation. This has been very well received and there is support for the continuation of this approach.

Workloads and staffing considerations get in the way, though. On-the-job mentoring is excellent and should be encouraged more in future. The !Xhun and Khwê radio services in the Northern Cape are such a good example – radio journalists from Gauteng and elsewhere went to train and mentor new journalists who speak a language that will die unless it is used.

The medium of communication including training, is Afrikaans. For all radio and television programming, **it would be good to hear more real South African people speak for themselves.**

Refresher courses are always good. Because of news deadlines shortcuts are taken and not much time can be spent on being creative with technical equipment. But at the SABC this is possible and should be encouraged. Exposure to other journalists does not happen enough within the organisation. The country is big, but whenever training evaluations are done, they reflect that the same people are meeting with, and talking to, the people they already know. Training evaluations are good for the corporation and the industry in terms of peer review. Putting the theoretical side of training together with newsroom experience in the form of custom-made certificate courses (SABC/Wits Public and Development Management and Rhodes) was tried two years ago and all the feedback from senior editors has been excellent. Programme review sessions of our stories will keep everyone sharp and on their toes!

Changing society and issues impacting on training: what is required here is decisive management – focused but not narrowly focused – evaluation and re-evaluation as to the relevance of training and programming. Multi-disciplinary approaches, differentiation in training methods, varying from basic, classroom, and on-the-job-coaching-and-mentoring, to modular half days or block release are necessary. Effective learnerships and retraining the trainers for refreshers and subject relevance are all required. It is important to resist taking shortcuts to preserve editorial fairness and integrity. We need to invest in appropriate technology and the training required to service and maintain the systems, as well as identifying and training good trainers. Exposure to **good international best practice has its values** and should be encouraged and explored in the best practical form.

In brief, we need our staff to be able to identify news stories, and to assign them timeously. We need to budget appropriately and avoid conflict – editorial, ethical, managerial, commercial – at all times. These are some basic ingredients for getting the story told and for effective newsroom management.

It is almost 10 years down the line since our transformation from a state to public broadcaster, and we face complex commercial imperatives but our latest leadership seems to have many of the answers.

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