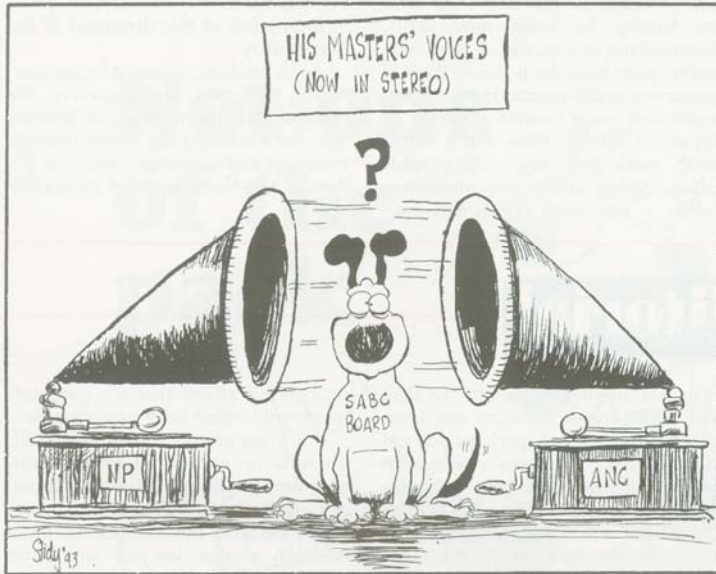


# THE TROUBLE WITH TELEVISION

**SABC risks reverting to old patterns, unless its journalists sound off against government calls for airtime – and improve their craft, says George Mazarakis former *Agenda* executive producer.**



## WHAT'S WRONG WITH RADIO

**George Mazarakis joins the fray over SAFM**

The language debate on SAFM is eclipsing the question of journalistic quality. The sound is not necessarily right, but the journalism is definitely not right. If it was, possibly people would not have responded with such passion to language. The product would have been giving them a great deal more than they got before.

SAFM's journalism is suffering because they are trying to grow audiences by shrinking budgets, and the only way to do this is through replacing real reportage with talk shows.

As a result, there is little evidence of reporters in the field, even though there are now offices in nine centres. If the SABC used its reporters for bi-media – radio and television it would be able to deliver sufficient reports. Without reportage, talk radio risks repeating opinions ad infinitum.

A second problem is whether SAFM's talk is even working. The station seems to have missed that talk radio works best in a regional context, tackling specific local problems – problems which often don't have the same interest to the rest of the nation. This is the case with the programme "Eavesdropping" that has become essentially a Natal programme. That's fine, but the point is that the show is in danger of running out of talk issues with a national interest and national perspective.

Which raises the question of what the point is of SAFM even trying for national talk radio. Talk, it seems, is SAFM's way of responding to 702 – by trying not to do something different, but simply to emulate it. Far from leading the media field, here we have

THE GOVERNMENT'S DESIRE for free broadcast time should set all alarm bells ringing. I fear it could portend a return to the SABC formula of old.

Pretoria's rationale is that we journalists broadcast only news, and not the mass of important government information that needs to be communicated. In short, those in power feel we don't publish what's important.

Some journalists say this is an insult to the profession. I think it's a compliment. It demonstrates our independence. If journalists broadcast information that was not news, we wouldn't be doing our jobs.

What does government really want with its own prime time broadcast slot? It knows that surrendering communication to journalists will get it less mileage. That's logical, because we as journalists are in the business of selecting, evaluating and presenting information in terms of our own professionalism. We are not in the business of propaganda, education or social marketing.

Some broadcasting may be in that kind of business. Many areas require no critical journalistic principles: sports, music and education needn't be done by journalists. Yet even here, judgements about what should be communicated, and how it should be done, ought to be left in hands independent of government.

There is no other way, if broadcasting as a whole is to escape becoming a state apparatus and to keep its credibility as being politically impartial.

There is an argument that although government shouldn't take over the work of broadcasters, it should still be allowed to buy television advertising time to get its message across. Yet this would be a case of government spending millions in taxpayers' money to tell the public what it thinks they ought to know. Why doesn't the government rather advertise what info it has, and where the public can get this directly?

Why not, in fact, just leave it to professional broadcasters to use their ethics and their expertise, plus audience feedback and ratings, to give the public what it wants to know.

Government should keep its hands out of broadcasting. And even within broadcasting, we ought not to leave information programmes solely in the hands of people whose speciality is not journalism. For example, information about housing subsidies should not be left to educational programming alone, beyond the glare of critical scrutiny – and not least because of the potential for corruption involved.

In the face of governmental designs, will the SABC's journo's prove themselves worthy of the designation? Will they defend and develop their right to be society's trusted and primary communicators, professionals who are expected to be critical and independent?

We forget past patterns at our peril. Previous thinking was that radio and television were one and the same thing: a tool for the ruling party. From the mid-1980s onwards, there was a single controlling editor for both

a case of broadcasting following not merely print, but trailing behind a competing broadcasting venture.

Introducing direct speech into news bulletins à la 702 is the way to go, but SAFM does not do it sufficiently. Almost every story on 702 has a soundbite. That's what makes it come alive. And 702 also communicates more info in shorter and less wordy bulletins.

Despite its bid for a new look, SAFM retains officialese in the form of "the minister of xyz said ...". The newswriting side, it seems, has yet to understand what the new look-alive style is supposed to do. And what is the point of changing a station and keeping very much the same programme format?

The journalism outside the talk shows is weak on contextualising and lacking in critical questioning. Sometimes it is downright embarrassing on general awareness. Just recently, AM-Live's Sally Burdett came across as knowing neither the proper name nor background of broadcast lawyer David Dison. (This is the man who helped draft the Broadcasting Act – about which she was talking and within which she functions!) It

makes one wonder where she has been the past few years – and why the research department, at least, is not filling her in?

A further criticism is that Burdett's co-presenter John Maytham doesn't listen to his answers. In addition, the field reporters for all SAFM's current affairs programmes do not deliver structured reports (with a few notable exceptions).

The problems with SAFM lie not only in the journalism, but in a strategic mistake. The SABC's view is that the complainers are a small audience, and that it won't make a difference if they are lost. The question is why the corporation changed something that, though limited, still worked, instead of rather putting resources into building Radio Metro and serving its 3.08 million listeners? Metro already has a style which SAFM is not succeeding in producing, although it aspires to this.

The SABC should have shrunk Radio South Africa, giving its listeners a little less, but keeping it as a market niche for that particular group of white people while still introducing them to the broader South African picture. Resourcing could have been switched



media. It was not enough to have Broederbond and/or security-linked apparatchiks in charge of individual stations – a supreme central power was required.

My former colleagues at the SABC will remember how the organisation used to be run by a cabal headed by Kobus Hamman, deputy director general entrusted with news and current affairs. He was assisted by Johan Pretorius (known in the corporation as the "Tuinhuys-Muis" for the manner in which he acted as veritable spokesman for the presidency). The team included Sakkie Burger (brother of the CCB's Staal Burger) and Christo Kritzinger (brother of Krappies, colonel in the infamous Brixton Murder and Robbery squad). In time, the grouping appointed Louis Raubenheimer as head of radio news – a man exposed in the Sunday Times recently for his apartheid connections.

As part of this picture, there was a single news conference for radio and television. The rationale was not one of bi-media news production, even though radio occasionally ran extracts from television's news and current affairs. The logic was purely political.

The effect on journalism was disastrous. Down the ranks, every time a journo showed independence, they would move you away or edge you out. Ask Christopher Dingle and Steve Brittan. If you didn't toe a very narrow line, they just did not use your material.

"The atmosphere is electric. This day will be remembered as one when ululating women lined the streets of Hillbrow and 'Viva' became entrenched in South Africa's vocabulary." These were my words in describing a mass march on the day of

Nelson Mandela's release from prison.

They were not to be broadcast. The question came down the hierarchy from Christo Kritzinger: who was I to describe the atmosphere as electric? "I'm a journalist," I replied. To no avail. That was how the control worked.

The standard practice in television was that we had to phone political editor Andre le Roux for clearance of any controversial item. Although he is now a transformed character, I recall how he intervened in 1992 to censor a programme on June 16.

It is indicative of how things were. The script of our reconstruction of the '76 insurrection was slashed. So too were the visuals. There was a chilling shot taken from inside the back of a police van, and looking down the barrel of a moving rifle. It was cut off short so as to exclude the ensuing sequence of a demonstrator gunned down by the same weapon. No matter that the shooting actually happened, that it was important history on an important anniversary.

Most other visuals from 1976 were,

I believe, destroyed. The remainder were embargoed in the archives. In fact, it was only when Ameen Akhalwaya arrived at Agenda that the archivists finally stopped seeing it as their duty to enforce a ban on journalists even locating materials labelled "under no circumstances to be used".

Everyone thought that the SABC would change with the introduction of a new board in 1994. There was a brief Golden Age, when people like John Bishop began challenging the authorities on GMSA. On Agenda, we started

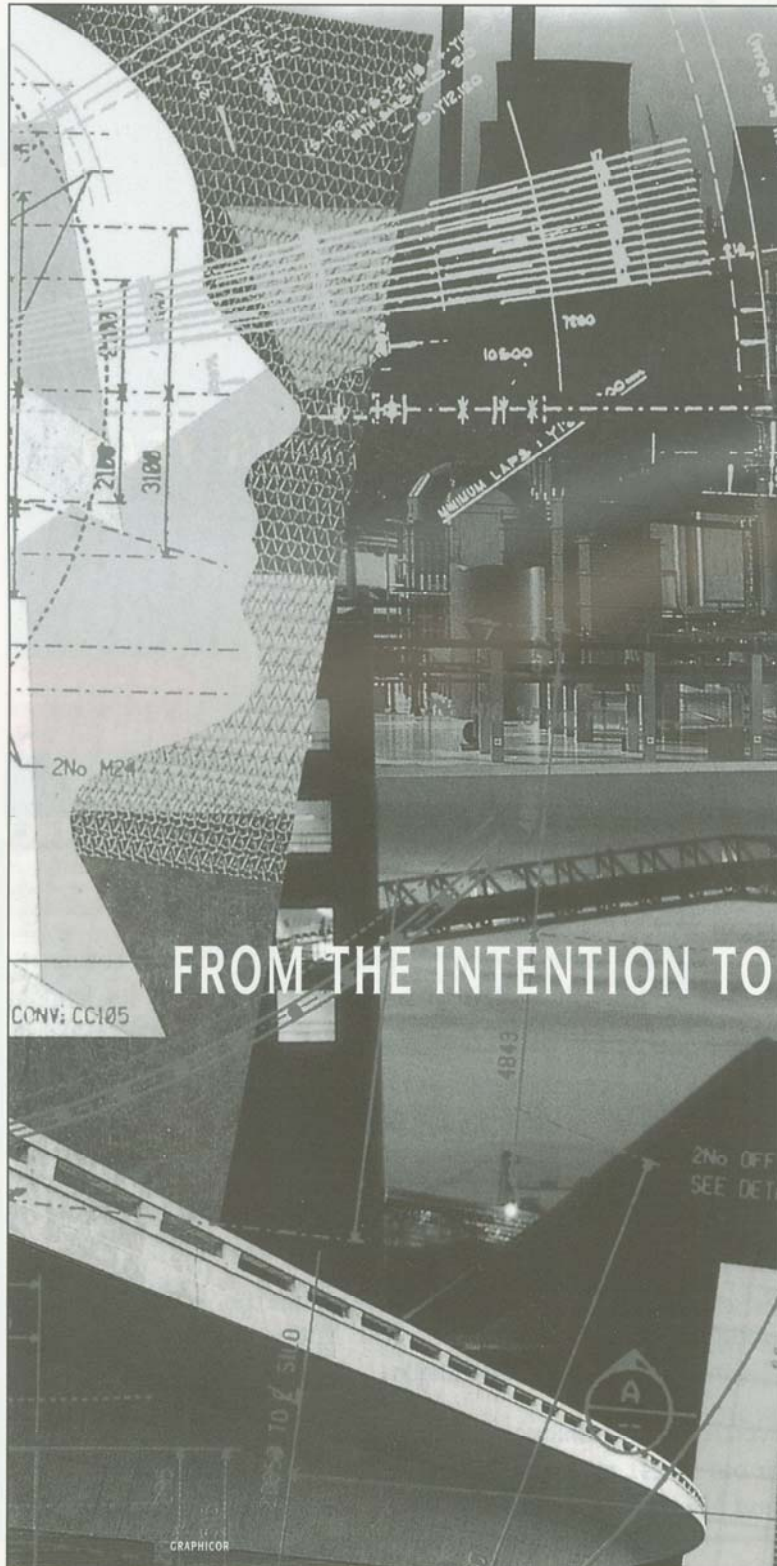
to making Metro even more successful. Metro has the English-speaking audience, it has excellent talk radio, brilliant current affairs and targeted music. It has a South African character.

**W**hy then impose an entirely different character on a station that though limited was working? They should have kept it - called it English Radio, or Classic Radio. Metro is something an audience can relate to: who can relate to SAFM as it is now?

Metro also has a majority of black staff, people who know the majority community in South Africa and who talk to it directly. This is not the case on SAFM, and there is still lots of racial exclusion on the station.

It's to be expected that whites will often offend blacks, that they don't understand the different cultural dynamics. I hear black listeners phoning SAFM to complain, and getting cut off. This is not saying that white journalists are bad journalists, but that SAFM's character is off the mark in terms of who it is trying to reach.

SABC radio journalists get good marks for trying, but a lot more will have to be done if radio is to be put right in South Africa.



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doing strike-force stories, producing on the day, up-to-the-minute current affairs – as opposed to dated, long-drawn out and easily censored productions. An example was when the story broke about the military signal ordering the “removal from society” of activist Matthew Goniwe. Our programme was shot in two days. Editing on the final 12-minute piece began with just two-and-a-half hours to go before transmission.

The press had not specified where the elimination decision had ultimate-

ly come from, and we began to narrow it down. We named the police who had been persecuting Goniwe, and we named the cabinet members of the state security council.

It was a risky business. Someone secretly searched my home, leaving conspicuous muddy footprints on the carpet. Then a bogus telegram announced that my call-up unit had been changed, and that I was required to do 752 days service.

But the show went on. For the first time, the country’s national television

network had tackled a politically contentious story. The then President FW de Klerk phoned director general Wynand Harmse, tracking him down late at night at a conference in West Africa. The cabinet, I was later told, had threatened to sue. “The best news I’ve heard,” I responded. “We’ll establish some credibility here.”

Radio had a less visible flourishing of journalism during this period, although Patricia Glynn was asking up-front questions, and Angus Begg did some quality journalism.

However, things began to change at the time of the election. The Independent Media Commission regulations, designed to ensure equitable treatment for all political parties, reversed the tendencies towards journalistic independence. The climate became reminiscent of what had happened before: people became aware again that they had to be politically careful.

The arrival of new journalists like Thandeka Gqubule, Charles Leonard and Jacques Paauw, made existing producers feel less confident because they lacked the same politically correct blood. For their part, the newcomers were not tuned into the needs of television.

Today, at the very time when government is signalling a desire to muscle in on broadcasting, a kind of journalistic inertia has resulted. The strength of television is to pre-empt the press, but there is very little of that happening. We have reverted to television that very rarely breaks stories; it just amplifies those already in the news. The same applies to radio.

The problem is that this kind of journalism doesn’t go further than what you would expect. There are no surprises. Television especially can surprise. It should.

Instead, we are seeing a lot more radio on television. It is easier to go for discussion programmes when you don’t have experienced producers. The result is that it is not exciting television to watch. So viewers turn to entertainment programmes.

Take the RDP. It is being done to death in a very predictable way. The stories start in the same way, and lead to the same conclusions. Where is the surprise, the debate, the controversy, the scandals?

Broadcast journalism has a role to play in making officials accountable. Instead, we see it too often acting as a PR mouthpiece. There is a lack of critical journalism, and that again is not much different to what has happened in the past.

There seems to be an over-riding fear of what a journalist can say or cover in a climate of political correctness. A commitment to nation-building and “rainbow-ism” may also be inhibiting investigative or critical journalism.

The new SABC board’s initial mission statement was to portray broadcasting as a way to heal South Africa. But journalists are not doctors. If we spend our time trying to heal, our watchdog role gets impaired.

Healing can be done in entertainment or educational programming. It is not appropriate in a journalistic context. Our job is to monitor the health of the patient. And to sound the alarm if necessary. I hope the SABC’s journalists will hear it.

George Mazarakis is executive producer of *Carte Blanche*. He is a former senior lecturer in Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, as well as a former executive producer of *Agenda*.

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