

In the last edition of *Review* former Agenda executive producer, George Mazarakis, painted a grim picture of his days at the SABC. In an adjoining piece he also launched a scathing attack on the new SAfm. Here former colleague Charles Leonard, who is now executive producer on SAfm's Live Current Affairs, reacts.

Live broadcast

from hell

Monty
Python
on bad
acid doing
Kafka

Charles Leonard

IT'S JUST AFTER 7.30AM and Studio P9 is alive with the sounds of current affairs going out live. The telephone rings in the AM Live processing area. It's Cyril Ramaphosa.

Oh hell, the reader might think here. I have to brace myself for another tale of battle-weary SABC staffers like the gruesome one George Mazarakis told us in the last edition of *Review* about his tough time in the SABC. But, rest assured, this is not another eyes-a-rolling, palms-a-sweating they're coming to get me tale from inside hell.

"Sorry to bother, but what was the name of that band you've just played?" asks Cyril. "I unfortunately missed it."

In this piece I hope to correct some of George's wrongs, agree with him on some of the very valid points he made and give my insider's view on what it's really like being inside the belly of the beast at the moment.

Despite the fact that George is working in television at the moment I find his assessment of radio in his critique of SAfm more valid, less clouded and more helpful than his meanderings about TV. Maybe it is because he is now even further removed from real journalism at Carte Blanche where he is actually doing *Huisgenoot* TV and/or in terms of radio he has a more solid background.

I say without fear of contradiction that the journalism on AM Live and PM Live has improved immeasurably compared to the old Radio Today. There is no comparison. Many respected journalists who have switched from the tabloid 702 to our shows will bail me out here. Not only have we all the local top political players across the board on our programmes on a regular basis, but we also bring our listeners foreign news beyond the Anglo-American axis.

Talking of 702, I concede to George. Their news bulletins make ours sound decidedly, well, like the old Radio South Africa's. Not only SAfm, but the whole of the SABC have still for

some reason been unable to get simple soundbites regularly on their bulletins.

Let me explain structure here. We don't have our own reporters. We have to rely on our 200-plus colleagues in the nine different regions and on the political, economics and sports desks to provide us with items. I will understate by saying it is not a perfect system.

Another system that was also not made in heaven is our interaction with the news bulletins that appear on our shows. Listeners might rightly wonder whether we have any link with the people who write the bulletins and those who read them. Again, an understatement here, in that the writing and reading of these bulletins happen two floors away from our studio, and as they say in the classics, it seems that ne'er the twain shall meet. Hopefully this will be solved, but the wheels still turn v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y in the SABC.

When George claims that the shows are weak on contextualising and lacking in critical questioning, I'm not sure that he has actually listened to them. These two characteristics are the shows major strengths! I hope he is wrong where he suggests that Radio South Africa had a niche which should be retained. SAfm is the first attempt at non-racial radio in our country and it is a major risk being taken.

What I certainly don't agree with him about is that the original white listenership of Radio South Africa should have been smoothed into the new society. What makes them so special? You're actually doing them a huge disservice by not "introducing them to the broader South African picture", as George so euphemistically describes it.

I can't imagine that someone with such eurocentric tastes as our George would be a Radio Metro listener, but he goes on a panting rave about them: "...excellent talk radio, brilliant current affairs...". Huh? Metro has good talk radio with Tim Modise, but they do not have current affairs! But George is right where he says that the majority of Metro's staff

are black and I agree fully that because this is not the case on SAfm as a whole, that "there is still a lot of racial exclusion on the station". (To score a few gender brownies for our two shows though, both in terms of race and gender, we're tipping the scales in favour of black people and women. But this wasn't done out of PCness — it was because they were the best people for the jobs.)

So what's it really like inside the SABC at Radio? It is both exhilarating and depressing.

The teams on AM Live and PM Live are cohesive, young, ambitious, creative, talented, committed, progressive and always self-critical. There is the continual buzz you will find in a place where people have a common goal (excellence), work on something completely new (true journalism is something rare in the SABC) and have a common enemy (Big Bra).

At the same time the tide has turned for us on AM Live and PM Live after the initial outcry — we've been getting positive responses from our listeners for the past five months literally on a daily basis. It is not only "fan mail", but also communication about issues. What more can any serious journalist ask for than getting your listener/viewer/reader entering into debates with you and one another?

The SABC is one of the more frustrating and weird places — Monty Python on bad acid doing Kafka — to work in and we often marvel that we manage to get good programmes on the air in spite of the hostile environment. Despite what the boss types say, the SABC is still top heavy with bureaucrats with far too much say and power. Maybe that will change one day. We hope so, but as natural born cynics, the journalists inside the SABC have their doubts.

Radio is an exciting place to be at the moment because there is a lot of room for new ideas. Let us hope that the politicians inside and out of the SABC don't spoil it for us.