

Will IBA changes leave SABC Radio with enough tools to survive in the new South African broadcast environment?

Keeping the strong state broadcaster thriving

Keith Watt

THE CHANGES are dramatic even since my last visit to South Africa (January 1994). South African Broadcasting Corporation programmes try to reach a wider audience. Newly licensed community radio stations pop up like toadstools on a wet lawn.

Private broadcasters vie for lucrative commercial radio licences just ahead.

The radio landscape in South Africa has begun to change, and after almost 60 years of monopoly by the SABC, the "Voice of Apartheid" is trying to find a new home on that landscape. The next five years will see more transformation in the sounds South Africans hear on their radio than they've experienced in the past 60 years of broadcasting history.

What will radio sound like in five years in this country? How will these changes affect the SABC, the major source of radio journalism in the country? And how will the newly unveiled Independent Broadcast Authority's plan to reshape the radio environment influence the SABC?

The SABC was born amongst a legion of colonial state broadcasting agencies cast in the image of the British Broadcasting Corporation in the 1930s. At that time governments were aware of the growing power of broadcasting in democracy, something we take for granted today. At that time, politicians all over the globe realised broadcasting would have as powerful an effect on society as Gutenberg's printing press in the 15th century. They scrambled to get a piece of the action, or to control all the action themselves.

Canada formed the CBC in 1932. Australia followed soon thereafter. The South African Broadcasting Corporation joined the chorus in 1937. The only major nation to resist the tide of state broadcasting was the United States. Even there the government has always kept close control over the broadcasting environment through the Federal Communications Commission.

All state broadcasters had some assumptions in common. They were founded on the recognition that broadcasting had a vital role to play in the evolving state. In Britain, the BBC was given a mandate to be the source of all broadcasting, and that mandate found a significance in its public educational role. In Canada, the CBC was founded to forge links in

an enormous country with a very small population, and to counterbalance a strong US cultural bias in broadcasting. The South African experience followed the British model: that the SABC was to be the source of all broadcasting, and thus the regulator of broadcasting. It was to make, and to carry out, all broadcasting policy in South Africa.

Other European nations followed the same path: they formed a large monopoly state broadcaster that regulated all broadcasting in the state. It served as both a source of entertainment and a vehicle for some form of government policy mandate — to educate, to inform about government activity, and, very quickly, to propagandise. The rise of the Third Reich in Germany coincided with a centralisation of all radio under the Ministry of Propaganda. Radio became the engine of German fascism.

One by one, under the pressure of private capital and the increasing ability of broadcast signals to cross international borders, these state monopolies fell. Germany, Italy, France, and finally the BBC lost control of the airwaves. The arrival of television following World War Two accelerated the erosion of the monopolies. Gradually these broadcasting jurisdictions moved towards the Canadian experience — a strong state broadcaster at the centre of, and influencing, a diverse private broadcast sector. As the 20th century draws to a close, and as all governments in the developed world experience their first contraction in the post-World War Two era, keeping that strong state broadcaster thriving and at the centre of the broadcast environment is increasingly the task at hand.

Which is exactly where South Africa finds itself in the mid-1990s. The SABC was the last of the great state monopoly broadcasters when, in the early 1990s, the National Party began to liberalise the broadcast environment. This year the South African radio environment finds itself undergoing in 18 months a transformation that has taken most state-dominated broadcast environments a quarter-century to achieve. The task faced by the IBA, envisaged in the IBA report released in August of this year, is how to allow private broadcasters onto the airwaves without gutting the public broadcaster.

Unfortunately, there's not much comfort in the IBA report that they won't do exactly that — gut the public broadcaster. More specifically, there's little comfort they won't burden the

SABC with so many contradictory roles, and change the conditions under which it operates so dramatically, that the SABC will find it harder and harder to figure out what it is supposed to do, and to carry out that duty in a fragmented and turbulent radio spectrum. Indeed, the IBA recommendations on the radio environment create a very confusing and complicated picture, and I fear they may ultimately become a self-defeating attempt at regulating what should be considered a vital tool of social policy, the state radio broadcaster.

The IBA envisions a radio environment with three main players — a state broadcaster operating on the national level, serving the 11 major language groups from a centralised broadcasting network; a layer of independent commercial broadcasters operating what are very profitable stations bought from the SABC and already operating in major markets around the country; and hundreds of tiny community radio stations staffed by volunteers, operating on a not-for-profit basis and serving a community development role for the local area they reach.

Several problems arise here. First, that the SABC has operated, at least from a news and current affairs point of view, as a centralised national network, is an aberration in international broadcasting. As state monopolies fell, and as radio broadcasting environments the world over have developed, radio has increasingly become a local medium. In Britain, the major influence of the end of the BBC radio monopoly, both within the state broadcaster and in the private broadcast environment, has been the rise of local radio. In Canada, the major transformation within CBC Radio in the half-century since the end of the World War II has been the growth of regional radio. Even in the United States, post-television radio growth has been explosive, and it has all been in local radio. The US joined the state radio movement in 1967 with the formation of National Public Radio, perhaps the most decentralised public radio network in the world.

All over the developed world, people turn on the television to find out what the politicians in the nation's capital are saying, and what the war- and weather-devastated villages that make the world headlines really look like. They turn on the radio to find out whether they need to take an umbrella to work, and if the weather will be fine for the weekend braai. So to confine the

SABC's activities to the national broadcast sphere, to sell off the seven successful regional SABC stations, as the IBA report suggests, could spell disaster for the SABC.

Increasingly, listeners who want a blend of entertainment and local information will flock to the private stations, especially if the private stations get smart and produce decent local newscasts, leaving the SABC national stations to cover the sterile political debates and economic

forecasts that make up the majority of their current coverage and leave very little room for listener interest except among a narrow band of business leaders and political junkies.

On top of the narrowing of the SABC audience base, the IBA is overlaying hundreds of community stations in every region where there is enough community support to staff a station. The stations that are on the air now are largely doing educational radio, and, as they

evolve, that mandate to produce public affairs programming in their home community will likely become more urgent. Thus, the IBA is isolating the SABC from another potential audience — people genuinely interested in local and regional public affairs.

These moves could dangerously segregate the SABC from radio listeners across the country. Indeed, that isolation was already evident to me when I visited South Africa in August and September this year. There is a painful lack of communication between the regional and national radio services. The new flagship radio programme, AM Live, was a dry blend of analysis and overview information, with little of the passion and visceral coverage that can be so compelling on radio, largely because it confined itself to "national" coverage. In the drive to find stories that will be of interest to a national audience, they avoided the dramatic local stories that were happening all over the country.

One weekend I was visiting a friend who works in the SABC newsroom in Cape Town. As we were chatting in the newsroom, a very powerful local story was breaking in the Cape Flats area. Students who were part of the Azanian student's movement had driven white teachers from one of the local public schools because they alleged the teachers were taking jobs from blacks. The newsroom had dramatic tape from one of the teachers who described how she felt at being stoned by her students. They also had tape with the Azanian student group, and with some ANC-affiliated students who vowed to escort the teachers back into the school on Monday morning.

It was very potent radio. My friend was busy preparing the material for broadcasts on all the local SABC stations. I suggested that AM Live would be interested in some of the tape. He said he was too busy to send them anything, and, besides, every time he'd approached them with a good local story, they had said that it was too local for them. The following Monday, AM Live carried nothing on the confrontation at the Cape Flats high school. Instead they had an interview with a British academic who had done a study on the psychology of "streakers" — people who take off their clothes and run through crowded public places.

In fact, during my eight weeks in South Africa, waking up to AM Live every morning, I was struck by how many British academics were interviewed. I was also struck by how arid the programming is. There is a distinct weakness in the elements that can make public affairs radio a powerful and compelling medium — good field tape, passionate speakers, and eyewitness reports. There is rarely any actuality used in newscasts. The programme has very few reporters in the field. They interviewed few real participants in the stories. Instead I got a steady diet of politicians facing accountability drillings from poorly briefed hosts, and analysts giving a bit of intelligence on the latest national or international political dispute. Morning after morning it made for very barren listening.

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How many **squares** in your ceiling?

A guide to power and status inside the SABC.

WITH ALL THE turbulence in the South African Broadcasting Corporation ranks, it is sometimes hard to tell who's on the upswing, and who should start negotiating for a package. So in the interests of reducing the level of anxiety at Auckland Park, we have compiled a primer on how to measure status in the SABC.

The first and most customary measurement of a person's status is if they have a secretary. People in the organization say having a secretary had nothing to do with how much work you do, but everything to do with keeping up appearances. A cursory tour of SABC offices offered glimpses of many women who seem to spend a great deal of time doing their nails. Of course that's a superficial and obvious examination.

A deeper penetration of the facade of efficiency shows an inordinate preoccupation with the size of office, as in "how many squares in your ceiling?" One senior SABC executive, when kidded about the size of his office — clearly enough room for half a dozen people to work — responded that he didn't need that much space, but if he didn't take the office, then his voice wouldn't carry as much political weight in inter-departmental meetings.

That is, his peers wouldn't respect him because his wasn't as big as theirs was.

Another SABC official says a sure measurement of your status is how many times your car is washed in the parking lot. He joined at a senior position in the past year and was astounded to find his car being washed up to three times a day.

Perhaps the strangest story of status came from a black man who joined about two years ago. At first he wasn't even given an office, and had to operate out of a diary he carried around the halls. Eventually his boss gave him a very small office and he set himself up for business. He worked hard and was clearly making some headway. One day his boss called him into his office and told him what a good job he was doing. He was told: "It's time for you to get a painting."

Now, this was a huge jump in status, and he and his boss set off for the SABC art vault deep in the



bowels of the Piet Meyer Building. They were ushered into a huge warehouse filled with paintings, and the boss encouraged our man to "pick anything you like". He examined several paintings and eventually settled on a rather attractive still-life with an ornate 18th century frame.

A cloud settled over the face of his boss. "I don't think that's quite

right for you," he offered, the clear implication being that the painting was of a higher status than he was. Not to be put off, our man demanded that this was the painting for him. The boss relented, and the painting made its way over to adorn one of the bare walls in his tiny office, clearly a tribute to breakdown of barriers in the New South Africa.

achieves audiences even in a diverse and competitive private radio environment, is radio that captures the emotion of stories and stimulates the listener's imagination in the way those stories are told. That is radio that can only be produced at a local level, where reporters can go out and capture the tape that tells the story, and the passion that is as much a part of the factual framework of the story as the numbers and analysis are. That radio will not be produced by a national broadcaster whose regional stations are sold off, which is competing for listeners with a bevy of community stations doing decent local coverage of issues, and which is increasingly isolated in its national mandate.

What SABC Radio needs to develop, and what the IBA should be giving them the tools to develop, is a fully-integrated network that can move material from the extremities to the centre as efficiently as it moves material from the centre to the extremities. What SABC Radio should be doing is beefing up its local stations, not selling them off. The SABC needs strong regional radio stations to provide strong regional coverage, so it can effectively compete for listeners with profitable and powerful local commercial radio stations, and committed community radio stations.

The example of CBC Radio is instructive. When I turn on my radio in the morning here in Canada, I get a three-hour morning programme that originates from the city in

which I live. It includes actuality and interviews on breaking local stories. It also includes inserts from the national newsroom. I get a complete news package that competes with anything on the private radio spectrum, as well as the growing bevy of breakfast television shows, in providing me with what I need to know to make my way in my city and my country that day. This programme is replicated in 26 major centres in Canada. This product is very competitive in this market, consistently drawing the second largest audiences in our area out of the 20 or so radio stations that clutter the radio bands. It is also a consistently better product, both journalistically and radiophonically, than AM Live, partly because a mixed radio environment has forced CBC Radio to create very lively public affairs programmes, and partly because access to local stories, and having more reporters on the street, give CBC Radio programmes more actuality and emotional texture to build the sort of story treatments that engage listeners.

AM Live doesn't have to be arid. In my visits to SABC stations in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and even Radio Ciskei in Bisho, I saw the same level of resources that I see in CBC Radio stations across Canada. It's not staff that is in short supply. It's co-ordination between the regions and the national programmes, and the determination to make really engaging public affairs radio.

That's what the SABC needs to do to survive in the new broadcast environment: focus on

providing the best public affairs radio in the country. It needs to build a network that puts the resources where they're needed to fulfil that mandate. And it needs to integrate its national and regional broadcasting to bring the best possible local coverage to each region, along with high quality national and international news. Unfortunately, there's little evidence either the SABC or the IBA realise these necessities.

All over the world, with governments in retreat following a half-century of expansion, people view government agencies with a great deal of scepticism. But state broadcasters of the stature of the BBC, the CBC, and the SABC, are major triumphs of social engineering. Whether the electorate or the politicians realise it, these are institutions worth preserving, and worth retooling for news tasks in a changing social environment. To deal harshly or hastily with the future of these institutions is to deny our children and grandchildren the benefits that we have enjoyed from them. And if we lose them, because we don't spend enough money on them, or because we don't handle their transformation very carefully, we will all be poorer.

Keith Watt is a Canadian radio documentarist and educator. He taught radio journalism at Rhodes University in the winter of 1995.