

How the SABC is buying into bi-media

pooled resources



Snuki Zikalala describes the developing partnership between television and radio in the halls of the national broadcaster:

The largest news organisation in world – after the BBC and CCN – the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) would like to position itself as the world's most effective and credible news organisation. One way of doing that is the recent creation of a free-standing news division which integrates its radio and television news departments.

Until May this year the SABC had two separate news departments which were scooping each other. Radio didn't know what television was doing and vice versa. Radio and T.V. assignment editors were not talking to each other.

There was duplication in management structures. We had two managers dealing with finances and human resources. In the regions, we had two regional editors for radio and T.V. who never used to communicate.

With this new system – called 'Bi-Media' – in place, we hope to integrate all our news departments by the end of this year. Currently we have two newsrooms and six assignment editors housed in two different buildings.

We are planning to have a single newsgathering department, the engine of our news department. Both radio and T.V. assignment editors and journalists from both media will be co-located. We will have one planning session and one assignment desk for both radio and television.

Journalists will be required to file their stories with a central desk. This will ensure that all our 17 radio stations and 3 T.V. news channels have immediate access to hard copy and sound. We want to inform both radio and T.V. audiences about what is happening as it happens. At present radio and T.V. journalists often keep a breaking story around and broadcast it three days later. But with the competition out there, the name of the game is who gets it first on the air.

With the integration of our news department we will have a bigger newsgathering team, with a more efficient use of resources, better forward planning, a wider range of skills

and a wider range of information available to all journalists and producers.

We have made a lot of strides. Initially people feared that radio would be swallowed up by T.V. But the opposite has happened. Radio journalists are more enthusiastic and willing to go the extra mile.

During South Africa's June elections all our operations were Bi-Media. We were co-located in our temporary studios in Pretoria. We shared resources and manpower. What people heard on radio they saw immediately on T.V. Television journalists filed hard copy and radio journalists filed for T.V. In the process we strengthened the quality and credibility of our news. We improved our efficiency and productivity and our journalists were exposed to both media.

Concerns and tensions around Bi-Media, however, have been expressed. Some journalists feel that they will be forced to work harder and others fear that they will be overtaken by those who have just joined T.V. Unions are concerned about job losses. They fear that the integration will lead to downsizing. But they have been assured that people will be deployed.

We have started courses on Bi-Media. Journalists from radio are being taught how to write to picture and those from T.V. how to write to sound. Our journalists will be multi-skilled. With digital technology available to them, they will be able to edit their own stories for both radio and television.

It is a challenge for all our news journalists: to achieve faster reactions from television and radio news bulletins in order to beat the global and local competition; to maximise the use of SABC specialists to improve the quality of information; to further train to ensure better quality reporting; to generally give our viewers and listeners better service.

SNUKI ZIKALALA is Executive Editor of SABC News.

With the integration of our news department we will have a bigger newsgathering team, with a more efficient use of resources, better forward planning, a wider range of skills and a wider range of information available to all journalists and producers.