

CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE

By Ruth E Teer-Tomaselli

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE is full of phrases conveying a sense of crossing borders. Most changes happen slowly and imperceptibly, without us realising them. But at some stage, we know that it is different. Recently I crossed such a border.

When my name was forwarded to the judicial panel appointed to interview candidates for the new SABC Board I was flattered, but did not take it seriously. It was therefore with a great deal of surprise, and even greater trepidation that I found myself in front of the august panel of seven men. The nett result was that I, together with 24 others, took my place at the first meeting of the new Board in May last year. A border had indeed been crossed.

In those first few weeks of uncertainty, when we did not know whether we were legitimate or illegitimate, whether we had a leader or not, or whether we would even last the month, a strong sense of camaraderie built up between Board members. We were jointly under siege.

A fascinating aspect has been the collective attempt to thrash out a philosophical and principled stand from which the implementation of specific work can take place. In the beginning of September 1993, the Board took off a weekend to workshop through fundamental issues and directions. On two other occasions, day-long seminars have taken place to apprise Board members of the workings of the Corporation and, more importantly, to come to a point of agreement on the vexed issue of direction within the future of broadcasting: who were our primary audiences? What strategies would best serve and empower these audiences? And were we to focus primarily on public service, or were we to be driven by more commercial considerations?

This last question is at the crux of the transformation of the SABC, and a substantial source of tension within the Corporation. In common with public broadcasters throughout the world, the SABC is charged with the mandate 'to inform, educate and entertain', but unlike any other national public broadcaster, it relies on commercial revenue for 70 per cent of its budget. This anomalous situation makes for a double-headed Janus: looking over the one shoulder, in the opening words of the Board's Values and Visions statement, it

has "Accountability to the full spectrum of the South African services", while over its other shoulder it is always aware of 'the bottom line', the income revenue generated from being commercially competitive in an increasingly deregulated broadcasting environment. While the Board's Values and Visions spell out the viewer/listeners' rights and the broadcaster's obligations in this regard, considerable ambiguity still remains on how these values will impinge on the commercial thrust of the Corporation.

My personal commitment has been to the News, Information and Voter Education Committee. Our work has essentially been three-fold:

- to revise the old corporate code and transform it into an editorial code which would be the property of all the journalists who lived by it;
- to introduce a mechanism through which the public could voice queries, objections and dissatisfactions about the broadcast news product, and to have these satisfactorily adjudicated; and
- to introduce a broadcast initiative through which a wide spectrum of organisations from within the public sphere could contribute to, and direct, the process of democracy and voter education.

A crucial area for the legitimacy of the SABC as a whole lies in the level of acceptance and credibility of its news product. There is a strong feeling among those who work in the news departments of both radio and television that the invidious position in which they found themselves during the State of Emergency must never be repeated. A primary protection against this has been the re-development of an editorial code. To this end, a call was put out to all staffers, academic departments of journalism, and outside pressure groups to contribute to the process of examining and reformulating the rules under which news would be produced.

The approach to this process taken by the Television News Production (TNP) business unit seems to me to be one worth explaining in some detail. After distributing the present corporate code, together with editorial codes from broadcasting corporations and companies in America, Australia, Canada, and the BBC, as well as the South African Media Council and the SA Union of Journalists, a number of journalists within TNP submitted written >

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responses. The staff chose a number of representatives, who together with other individual staffers, attended a day-long workshop. Using the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's code as a basis, they devised the groundwork of their own editorial code, accommodating the specific needs of the South African situation.

A follow-up workshop consisting of the discussion group leaders and other co-opted staffers, met to formulate the ethical code. It was decided at the outset to dispense with the idea of a 'corporate' code, and divide the work instead between a succinct Editorial Ethical Code, and a longer set of procedural guidelines, to be devised at a later stage. A draft of the Ethical Code was circulated among the wider constituencies, before a final code was drawn up.

Apart from the TNP document five other organizational, and one personal, responses were received. From within the SABC these included Radio News; the SA Broadcasting Staff Association (SABRA); the SA Union of Journalists (SAUJ); and Mr ISW Burger. Participating outside groups were the Public Broadcasting Initiative and the Campaign for Open Media.

A public meeting was called during which each organization spoke to its proposals and comments, and discussed questions from the floor. Another border had been crossed: 'outsiders' and 'insiders' and those, who like the SAUJ, straddled the great divide, engaged each directly in debate, only to find that the positions they held were more similar than divergent. At the conclusion of the meeting, it was decided to use the TNP document as the basis for the new code.

Access to television by those who consume it has always been a problematic situation. Taken together with the urgent need to increase the perceived credibility of the Corporation's news product, the establishment of an Ombuds-office seemed to offer one important solution.

In the job description for the post, the Ombudsperson's goal has been defined as the facilitation of 'constructive dialogue' between the SABC and 'the people who depend upon the organisation for a fair and accurate hearing'. It is envisaged that she/he will be the representative at the SABC of the viewer and listener communities. Far from having a mandate to protect the SABC, it is expected that questions, criticisms and suspicions voiced about the news product will be pursued with vigour. A high degree of fairness and impartiality is called for in these dealings: just as the listeners/viewers are

to be taken seriously, so too should the rights and constraints of the staffers and organisation.

In part, this contribution to the *Rhodes University Journalism Review* is about watersheds. It would be difficult to find a watershed of greater importance to the future history of South Africa than the magic date of 27 April 1994. One way or the other, all the country is preparing for it. The SABC's role in the election is a fulfillment of its mandate to inform and educate the public. Early on in the process, it was realized that if the Corporation was to do this with legitimacy and credibility, it would be better to engage the co-operation of as wide a spectrum of outside organizations as were already involved in voter education.

The whole purpose of the exercise was to establish a partnership between the Board and Management of the SABC on the one hand, and a range of organizations from civil society on the other. The target audience was identified as all potential South African voters, with a special emphasis on women, youth, rural people and township and informal sector dwellers.

All material broadcast under the auspices of this partnership would be clearly branded. Because we were concerned that the initiative go beyond the mechanics of voter education, the branding Democracy Education Broadcasting Initiative, or DEBI, was agreed upon. DEBI became a character — a cross with a face, two legs and one arm — who will serve as the mascot and logo of the whole initiative.

In conclusion: The SABC in Auckland Park is a vast, sprawling organism: from the rabbit warrens of the underground radio studios to the executive suites at the top of the phallic Piet Meyer Building. There is an underground tunnel with umbilical links to the blue-glassed television centre, where departments are sprawled over vast areas. The SABC is a series of fiefdoms: each principality has its own momentum, challenges and potentials to add to the whole. In common with almost all institutions in South Africa, the SABC is in a period of transition. And like most institutions, from universities to corporate structures, the process is uneven, painful but frequently exciting.

The 'new Board' of the SABC is in many ways navigating uncharted — and turbulent — waters. This Board does not function as other Boards have done in the past. For a start, we as Board members are more deeply involved in the day-to-day Management

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than our predecessors. This brings its own kind of strains: the line between the legislative function of those who make policy, and the executive function of those who make that policy a reality, is fuzzed — sometimes fruitfully, and sometimes with unhappy results. The rules are no longer clear, and it appears that to some extent we are making them up as we go.

The procedures which are being negotiated will be imitated by other structures of the future, both those that are new, and those in the process of transition. The SABC under its present Board can be seen as the first organization under the 'joint control' of professionals and the lay public, a model which may well be copied by other bodies. The selection of officers for the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) for instance, will be carried out on the model first used for the selection of SABC Board members.

The style of 'joint management' extends beyond the immediate contribution of the Board to, for instance, the partnership between the Board, Management and Community organizations represented on the DEBI steering and working groups. In an ideal situation this model could lead to the recuperation of effective political and cultural power within the sphere of civil society, at worst, it could result in a sectoral 'take-over' by already powerful and dominant groups.

As importantly, the policies we formulate in the areas of affirmative action, language policy and regional devolution, will set the parameters for larger debates on the implementation of these issues through the parastatal sector.

A while back I was speaking in a women's forum on the topic of the changing broadcast environment. Mid-way into the address, I referred to the SABC, using the word 'we'. And suddenly I realized I was no longer outside the SABC, safe as a neutral academic commentator and critic, but I was right in the melee of change: the final border had been crossed. It is a border of some significance, since in formulating these procedures and policies, the present Board is busy with more than transforming the SABC, it is finding a *modus operandi* for transforming whole areas of the present bureaucracy. If we do it correctly, we will contribute to the reclamation of the public sphere within the South African polity, if we allow structural problems and petty personality clashes to destroy us, we will have destroyed a process much larger than ourselves. ●

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