

# REPORTING THE IVY LEAGUE

*The standard of the print media's efforts at reporting on the SABC Board and its chairperson, Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, augers a bleak future for any organisation or individual on the wrong side of the press, says **ARRIE DE BEER**.*

**A** BOOK can (and perhaps should) be written on the generally one-sided, negative, and incomplete reporting in South Africa's newspapers of the first three months of the new SABC Board (which is not saying that there were not also reasoned and fair reports).

Fired on by a "holier than thou" crusade by the country's new self-styled (and even self-appointed?) guardians of broadcasting freedom, the print media did not go out of their way to comprehend the complexities of the situation, neither did they, generally speaking, give a full and fair account of the Board's first wary steps.

The print media was so agog in their urge to further, through the process of bad news, the cause of the crusaders whose main line was that the Board was "illegitimate", that they often totally missed out on some of the best good news stories in the history of the SABC.

As *Negotiation News* pointed out, the positive impact of the public hearings which preceded the appointment of the Board, became all but forgotten in the acrimonious political battle over the membership of the Board. From the outset the efforts made for a more representative and accountable public broadcast system have been plagued by political squabble.

The Government/National Party, the ANC, the Campaign for Independent Media — a loose formation of some 40 plus organisations regarded as a front organisation for the ANC alliance — and the Conservative Party were the most verbal in the political fracas that followed the appointment of the Board. Impaired by political manoeuvring before it even began to assume its duties, the Board had not been given a chance to prove itself, said *Negotiation News*.

The only real victims were the Board members and the seven people who were nominated by the panel of jurists for the Board, but who were not appointed in the long run. They became political footballs kicked about by the main players — the National Party government, the ANC and the organised guardians of broadcast freedom.

While most the SA Press was still harping on the issue of "illegitimacy", a few (quality?) newspapers here and abroad ran stories on the almost incredible

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blending of forces and goodwill on the Board under its chairperson, Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri. Even after organisations such as equity became aware that the Board was the most transparent and democratic one ever appointed, the local press was still telling its readers about the "illegitimacy crisis". This was accentuated by Campaign for Independent Media spokespersons' pontifications that only by reinstating the seven people originally nominated by the selection panel, could the Board's legitimacy be restored.

And when, after a few months, it became clear that the Board could indeed find its own way through the barrage of negative and often very slanted reporting, the print media turned their often scathing attention to the Board's new chairperson.

Even by South Africa's media standards, the inordinate range of quasi-humorous attacks on Casaburri, often based on sloppy news research, or rather the lack thereof, will be a hard act to follow. (An article in *Femina* was a noticeable exception, among some other attempts).

The trouble started when Casaburri, an intensely private person, was thrown into the limelight. Not being a "public figure" before, she mistakenly thought that she could keep her personal life out of the media glare. She seemingly did not realise, neither was she apparently accordingly advised, that there would be a particular (and peculiar?) media interest in her person.

If she erred on this point, the press' reaction was by no means a shining example of professional expertise and valour. Instead of concentrating on the crucial impact the new chairperson could have on the Board in particular and the SABC in general, sections of the press concentrated, sometimes in a petty way, on the frivolous and the trivial.

Obviously there were exceptions. *The Star*, for instance, ran stories under headings such as SABC prepares for big day, telling its readers about an internal monitoring system for news; the appointment of an ombudsperson; the establishment of a steering committee for voter education and a new policy on employment equity.

It wasn't as if other newspapers did not know about the crucial changes taking place on the Board and >

consequently the SABC. *The Citizen*, that South African newspaper of record, gave a number of Sapa versions of developments on the Board and at the SABC. Leaders in the *Pretoria News* and other newspapers gave guarded, but fair versions of what could be expected of the new chairperson.

But there was, by and large, a definite lack of in-depth or investigative reporting on how Casaburri intended putting her words into action, and more importantly, on what she had, or had not, achieved over the first few months of chairing the Board.

Instead, the press took Casaburri to task because she was secretive about her personal life. *The Financial Mail* was especially hard-hitting. Commenting on the way that Casaburri was not transparent, it said that perhaps this was a sign that the ANC intended treating the SABC and the citizens of the country like the National Party did — with arrogance and disdain. Or, suggested the *FM*, was it perhaps (to quote WB Yeats) a case of: the beggars change places, but the lash goes on.

At first there were indeed problems with making known some basic facts regarding Casaburri's personal, academic and professional life.

According to a *Financial Mail* report, the SABC chairperson said that she would not discuss her personal life, where she was born, her age, whether she was married or had children (*Finansies & Tegniek* told their readers the same).

But, by the time the *FM* ran these hard facts about Casaburri, and the magazine itself was still insisting on other pages that the Board was chaired by a mystery woman, a number of other publications had already told their readers about the personal side of Casaburri — that she was born in Kroonstad, and, inter alia, that she indeed could speak Afrikaans, which a number of papers said she could not.

Quite an issue was made of the so-called fact that Casaburri could not speak Afrikaans, because this was perceived to have been one of the main reasons why State President FW de Klerk did not agree to appoint Professor Njabulo Ndebele to chair the new Board. But *Beeld* had already reported in mid-August that Casaburri could indeed speak Afrikaans (as well as a number of other languages), as any interview with her would have shown. Even so, newspapers still claimed as fact that she was not able to speak the language.

*Beeld* not only reported that the chairperson spoke Afrikaans, but also that she prepared her own afval, pap and marog while in exile. Almost two weeks later *Rapport* told its readers that Casaburri's talents in the kitchen remained her secret. In the meantime Casaburri had also told *City Press* that she was a workaholic and that she was prepared to face the challenges of the hot seat. This was not really the reclusive and mystery woman *FM* and *Rapport* tried to make out.

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Even when the newspapers were trying to get it right, they often didn't seem to get it quite right. *Rapport* said Casaburri was considered to be one of the foremost sociologists in Africa. No source was offered for this accolade in *Rapport* or any of the other papers that made the same assertion. (At least not in those reviewed for this article.) One could expect Casaburri to have shied away from this commendation. She is more known for her work in education and development in the exile community which includes work for organisations such as Unesco in Namibia and Zambia. She is also known for her work dealing with gender issues in Africa. She is active in the ANC Women's League, But it is an open question whether she is one of Africa's foremost or eminent (academic or research) sociologists, as some newspapers would like their readers to believe.

Much was made of Casaburri's academic qualifications. *The Pretoria News* said she had a PhD in English and History (sic), *Rapport* said it was social development (partly correct), the *Sunday Times* got it right: a Masters and PhD in sociology from Rutgers.

One of the decisions that Casaburri's Board made and for which she came under fire, was the re-appointment of Mr Wynand Harmse for another year as Group Chief Executive. It was suggested in *The Natal Witness* that this decision was pressed by management before familiarity (with the issue) could produce the confidence to reject it. What the *Witness's* columnist preferred not to tell his readers was that Harmse's contract with the SABC was on the verge of expiring, and therefore, had to be reviewed. Also, he did not tell his readers, which at least one other paper did, that the specific proposal to extend Harmse's contract by one year was not made by the old guard on the Board.

Taking cheap shots at the SABC Board chairperson became a national sport almost overnight. Her SAA flight to Sydney via Perth is a case in point. Duwweltjie in *Finansies en Tegniek* told its readers under the headline: Don't Laugh, that one could not really blame her for getting off at Perth instead of Sydney: "Both cities are at the coast. They are straight across from each other. Both are in Australia. Though they are 3 200km from each other, it could have been much worse, she could have stepped off at the Mauritius airport."

Anybody who comes in contact with Casaburri quickly learns that she can cross her t's and dot her i's in an assertive fashion. In the same vein she very well knows the difference between P and S, be it the geographical difference between Perth and Sydney, of the socio-political difference between Pretoria and Soweto. Nowhere (at least not in the newspapers surveyed for this article), was her personal response to be seen.

While the press was bathing in rancorous glee over Casaburri's perceived shortcomings on a personal level, it often glaringly omitted to give her her due

when she was making constructive policy statements and moves in a difficult leadership role, especially as this was perhaps the most senior public post ever occupied by a black woman in the country's history.

The press is hasty to get hold of *Interkom*, the SABC's in-house journal, whenever there is the possibility of a *stink storie* rearing its head, quoting liberally from the journal. Casaburri made an important statement in the September edition regarding the "fear for the future" that many SABC personnel felt. To those who felt threatened by so-called reversed discrimination, she said: "Changes make people uneasy. It is how you handle the fear that makes the difference. Those who refuse change make it difficult for themselves to participate...People should have hopes for the future, not fear." There was no rush on the part of the press to publish and investigate these statements that affected the lives of thousands of present and future SABC employees.

Also, when *Sunday Nation* thought it to be in decent ethical journalistic form to run a four centimeter WOB across the front page with an offensive racial slur on Casaburri attributed to an SABC official, the rest of the press apparently decided to turn a blind eye.

As was said earlier in this article, the press is not only to be blamed for naive or snide reporting on Casaburri and the Board. There were also some very well balanced efforts, especially leaders in both mainstream and non-mainstream newspapers. Leaders in the *Cape Times* and *The Star* are cases in point. The latter said, inter alia:

**"At a time when there is a need to redress imbalances of race and gender, the appointment of a black woman to head the SABC is in itself welcome."**

—*The Star*

*THE ELECTION of Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri as chairman of the SABC Board, by the unanimous vote of its members, marks the end of an acrimonious dispute. For that reason alone it is a positive development.*

*Casaburri, an educationist and former ANC exile, has emerged as a compromise choice between Njabulo Ndebele, the man originally chosen by the legal panel and favoured by the ANC to head the Board, and Van Zyl Slabbert, who was preferred by President De Klerk.*

*But Casaburri seems to have commendable qualities in her own right. At a time when there is a need to redress imbalances of race and gender, the appointment of a black woman to head the SABC is in itself welcome.*

*One cannot quarrel with her first pronouncements: revision of the editorial code; open access to the SABC by political parties during the run-up of the election; and a balanced programme of affirmative action, taking cognisance of skills and qualifications.*

*Casaburri has strong political convictions. The acid test will be her ability to withstand pressure to put her political loyalties before her responsibilities as Board chairman.*

Somehow, this leader seems to qualify for journalistic edicts such as fair comment, balanced views etc. Is there a doctor in the house? ●

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