

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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## Transformation and the South African Broadcasting Corporation

For several years the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has been engaged in a process to redefine itself as the public service broadcaster. **Kubi Rama** presented a paper at a conference on radiocracy in Durban last month about the challenges that the corporation is facing.

All sectors of South African society are currently faced with two enormous challenges: That of burgeoning unemployment and the rapid spread of HIV/Aids. Both issues require a multi-faceted plan of action in order to make effective positive changes. Arguably two of the key interventions are public education and mass information dissemination campaigns. These tasks may be located with the public services broadcaster. However, the public service broadcaster, the SABC, is operating in a climate where it faces both financial and political crises. On one level it has become financially sustainable. This creates the political crises because it then violates a critical public service broadcasting code: that of remaining independent of commercial interests.

From the mid 1980s to February 1990, the SABC was instrumental in creating and maintaining the authority of the ruling National Party government. Emerging from a culture of struggle and violence towards a democracy it was crucial for the SABC to completely revamp its image both internally and in terms of the service it provided. This occurred through the appointment of the new SABC board in May 1993 and the establishment of the Independent Broadcasting Authority the following year. This transformation of the SABC reached its pinnacle during the 1994 elections.

### What is radiocracy?

Radiocracy embodies and is a practical demonstration of the elements of radio, democracy and development. The term was coined following a presentation by South African President Thabo Mbeki.

Internal changes have coincided with the growth of the global economy through the development of information technologies. They also mirror the broader political change that has occurred in South Africa, from the authoritarian role of the National Party to the now legitimate rule of a democratically elected African National Congress-led government.

The SABC has had to negotiate a path between the forces of nation building and globalisation. NewsBreak represents one initiative within the SABC that responds to both of these contexts. Commercialisation has occurred within the public service broadcaster with a view to cross subsidising its public service activities. Clearly commercialisation has implications for the public service broadcaster and contributes towards the re-defining of public service broadcasting.

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The main principles of public service broadcasting could be summarised as:

- universal geographical access;
- universal appeal across tastes and interests;
- particular attention to the needs of minority groups;
- contribution to a sense of national identity and community;
- distance from vested interests;
- direct funding and universality of payment;
- competition in good programming rather than for numbers;
- guidelines that liberate rather than restrict programme makers.

In 1994 Mark Newman wrote in a Film and Allied Workers Organisation publication about the role of the public service broadcaster in the future democratic South Africa as follows: "The public broadcaster has to be made to look and feel like the heart and mind of the greater South African community; it must speak with the voice of the people, it must laugh and cry with us all; it must inform us, teach us and entertain us."

With regard to the political role of the public service broadcaster, both the SABC radio and television stations have been promoting the government's safe sex campaign. The programme *Lebone* on SABC 2 focuses on women who have set up their own businesses and achieved success. Siza Malabatshe's *Two Way* is an important public space to discuss controversial issues such as racism, foreigners and corruption. Social change is very much the business of the public service broadcaster and not the private commercial broadcaster.

#### Radiocracy in South Africa

"In the South African context, radio could become an extraordinary and excellent tool in playing an effective role in our socio-political mission and vision of promoting reconciliation and reconstruction on the road towards building a new, non-racial and open society. As we enter a new age of the technological revolution, radio is bound to maintain its pervasive power through portability and incredible outreach to people, both rich and poor, urban and rural, despite the expanding competitive forces against this medium of sound, space and airwaves."

*Deputy mayor of the Ethekewini (Durban) municipality Logie Naidoo giving the opening address at the International Radiocracy Conference in Durban last month.*

The programme *NewsBreak*, a joint venture between the SABC and the cellular phone network Vodacom, is a commercial service offered by the SABC to generate surplus revenue to cross subsidise other public service broadcasts. *NewsBreak* is an attempt to increase the outlets for SABC news nationally and internationally. News is available to consumers who phone a cellular number and pay cellular phone rates. The SABC has identified a niche market within its broader audience and provides this service specifically for them.

Commercialisation is a typical response to the introduction of competition, but it raises significant concerns. Commercialisation by the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation resulted in services to the poor and people in rural areas being compromised. One concern in relation to *NewsBreak* is that it is part of a news department that provides news to both the public service and the commercial arm of the SABC. There could be a situation where the news available on *NewsBreak* contradicts that which is broadcast on the public service channels. Hypothetically, what if a story emerges that compromises Vodacom? It is the duty of the public

service channels to run that story, but will *NewsBreak*?

#### Regulation by independent bodies appears to be a way of dealing with the emerging

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commercialisation of public spaces. A strong Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA) is critical to ensure that commercialisation does not result in the demise of the public service ethos. ICASA must, therefore, address the current crises it faces in relation to funding, staffing and political will and assume this important mantle to safeguard the interests of the public.

About *NewsBreak* the SABC's Judy Sandison says: "The project marries the latest digital technology in the audio news world with the latest technological advances in telephony". The convergence of technologies contributes to vertical integration in the communication industries. An example of such a deal was the joining of communication giant Times Warner and the Internet service provider America on Line. This is one example of the growing number of communication conglomerates. The concentration of ownership of the media in the global arena in fewer hands has resulted in the narrowing of the spectrum of viewpoints that are available as well as reduced opportunities to express views. This has serious implications for information available to the public in relation to the diversity of views, access to multiple information sources as well as control of information dissemination - all prerequisites for effective democracy.

At the same time the available of new technologies and their ability to converge in the communication process presents exciting opportunities to increase the access to information. The introduction of digital and satellite technologies has resulted in people in rural areas and outlying areas being able to receive information. The issues are control, accountability and to prevent concentration in the hands of a few. The decision of the United States court with regard to Microsoft is an important milestone in this battle. Microsoft has been ordered to separate Microsoft in America into an operating systems company and 'other' software company. The decision is being appealed by Microsoft. The decision is meant to prevent Microsoft from automatically including Internet Explorer in the Windows operating system.

#### Facts and figures

"The SABC runs 19 radio stations that together reach a daily audience of about 20 million people. There are 15 commercial radio stations and 80 community radio stations. There were two commercial radio stations in South Africa before 1994."

*Address by Deputy President Jacob Zuma at the International Radiocracy Conference in Durban in September.*

Independence from state and business has been one of the most important principles of public service broadcasting. In practice however many public service broadcasters have had to compromise in order to survive financially. Synergies are strategic alliances that do not necessarily concentrate ownership in specific industries but facilitates the concentration of capital in the hands of major corporates. An example of such a deal was the partnership of Universal Pictures and McDonald's restaurants for the movie 'Jurassic Park'. However, synergies need not focus on the concentration of capital, but also technology and resources. The SABC must continue to forge partnerships with both business and the state. In the South African context partnerships with the government are always viewed with caution and vague suspicion. Having been oppressed during the apartheid years this reluctance is justifiable. However, the SABC does not operate in a vacuum and must not be insular in its vision.

Universality must also be discussed in the context of the redefinition of public service broadcasting. The notion of universality seems almost to contradict diversity. Instead of constantly striving to achieve 'oneness' the notions of difference create an opportunity for diversity specifically in relation to local programming. Public service broadcasting must harness the diverse nature of its mass audience and programme appropriately and thereby increase its efficacy.

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Three questions should guide the ethos, programming and purpose of public service broadcasting. Does the SABC create jobs? Does the corporation produce socially useful products and services? Finally, can their behaviour be regulated in the public interest?

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