

SABC will always be a contested terrain

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The South African Broadcasting Corporation, better known as the SABC or the public broadcaster, sometimes confused as the state broadcaster, or a mouthpiece of the ruling party, is a critical propaganda tool or spin platform for any government of the day, be it the African National Congress or in the unlikely event, the Economic Freedom Fighters or the Democratic Alliance regime.

The SABC is also a powerful campaign broadcasting machinery, even in the age of social media with Twitter users like Mbalula and Malema, the ENCA, *City Press*, *Sunday Times*, Daily Maverick and the Gupta-owned ANN7.

It is therefore not surprising that most of the decisions continuously being made by the public broadcaster or its COO, Hlaudi Motsoeneng, will be under persistent scrutiny, praise and criticism. The SABC reaches more than 20 million radio listeners and 25 million television audiences daily from Langa to Musina, from Komatipoort to Pampeersstad. With 18 radio stations and four television channels, the public broadcaster reaches most areas that commercial radio, TV and print media don't have access to. This reality is further perpetuated by the lack of media ownership diversity and low broadband penetration in South Africa.

Recently the SABC announced that it will not broadcast footage of citizens burning public property like schools and libraries during protests. The decision was met with strong opposition from different quarters, others labelled the move "censorship". In the same vein, the SABC also announced that it has introduced a 90 percent local music quota across its radio stations. The music quota has been praised by different stakeholders save for some media buyers, planners and media commentators. The public broadcaster has also resolved to relocate the popular soapy, *Muvhango*, from its Auckland Park Studios to Thohoyandou in Limpopo. The SABC currently rarely utilise political analysts during different current affairs programmes. Analysts have political views and preferences like any journalists, viewers or audiences. Morning Live will no longer cover headlines of daily and weekly newspapers. The coverage newspapers received assisted the papers' sales and constituted free advertising worth millions monthly. This decision has also been frowned upon by editors, obviously so.



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During this period of campaigning for the municipal elections, the SABC radio and TV channels are continuously covering political parties' elections manifesto launches, rallies and door-to-door campaigns. The most fascinating coverage was the recent leadership squabbles of the Pan African Congress (PAC), particularly the litigation in the North Gauteng Court

between the two factions of Mphahlele and Mbinda. An uneasy coverage is the contestation of the ANC elections lists which has allegedly seen comrades eliminating each other. The public broadcaster's cameras and microphones have been to Imbali in Pietermaritzburg and Port Elizabeth wherein local comrades are not happy with election lists.

The SABC covered the recall of the KZN Premier Senzo Mchunu, and the subsequent provincial reshuffle and the appointment of the new premier. The public broadcaster continues to cover the leadership race of the ANC presidency and the controversies around the race. The recent protests in Vuwani were covered extensively by the different SABC radio, social media and TV platforms. The actual burning of the schools was not covered live as the arson happened under cover of darkness without cameras.

With all its controversies, the SABC board membership is one of the most sought after non-executive positions amongst the state-owned institutions. Even in urban areas with more content platforms choices, stations like Metro FM and SABC 1 have the highest listenership and viewership in areas like Durban and Johannesburg. The real question that continues to intrigue viewers, listeners, politicians and critics is what role the SABC should play in a democratic South Africa. This question's response is contained in the SABC license conditions imposed by ICASA, the Broadcasting Act and the Electronic Communications Act.

Looking at the SABC license conditions for each radio station and television channel, the mandate of the SABC is outlined. As with any legal document, the debate will always emanate on the interpretation and the implementation of the public broadcasting mandate. This is further complicated, confused, manipulated and frustrated by competing and conflicting interests of a diverse range of stakeholders with hidden and overt agendas. The SABC mandate comprises of different genres of programming beyond just news and current affairs. The SABC is expected to offer a full spectrum of broadcasting services ranging from children, drama and different sports codes programming. The mandate is complex.

With regards to the development of South African music content, the SABC has more obligations than commercial free to air, subscription TV broadcasters and commercial radio broadcasters. Contrary to the spin on 90 percent local music content, the SABC radio stations are already playing an average of 80 percent local music content, save for Metro and 5FM that play on average of 30 percent local music in line with the ICASA Music Regulations. However, Metro FM does largely contribute to the development and promotion of South African Music of different genres through the Metro Music Awards. The SABC as a whole does contribute through the broadcast of the South African Music Awards (SAMA).

As in any democratic country, public broadcasting is always a contested terrain. This is even more complicated in a country like South Africa which has competing political and economic ideologies. With liberals, communists, Pan-Africanists, capitalists and socialists competing for media space, the SABC will always be caught in the cross fire.

It is therefore critical to assess the impact that SABC has in the public discourse at any given moment in our history or events shaping the public agenda. In the aftermath of the Marikana massacre, the SABC has provided extensive coverage of the events leading to the massacre, massacre and the political explosion that erupted afterwards, and the live coverage of the Marikana Farlam Commission. Should the SABC be combative like the ENCA or patronising like the ANN7? What is the role of the SABC journalists? Should they go to Luthuli House and confront the president about the social and economic

problems ravaging the country like ENCA did when it went to Union Building to confront the former president, Thabo Mbeki? Should the SABC broadcast debates on state capture or tail the president on his visits to Dubai and Saudi Arabia and find out if he is only meeting the King and the Sheik? Should the SABC broadcast the achievements of the ruling party government? The contestation continues. Mr Action, Hlaudi, does not have an easy job with a generous salary on hand.

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