
Media Policy & Democracy Project

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Submission on the SABC Editorial Policy Review

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Introduction

Most media organizations have created and posted guidelines speaking to the principles, policies and practices, which guide them in their daily activities. These guidelines are used internally to explain how the organization maintains the trust of those they serve. In other words, the purpose of a code of ethics and practices is to protect the credibility of a media organization by ensuring high standards of honesty, integrity, impartiality and staff conduct. Thus, any editorial policy framework, should operate alongside i) an articulation of the ethical standards that the organization observe in pursuing and presenting material through its various distribution channels, ii) rules and policies that prevent conflict of interest, iii) establishing guidelines for outside work and activities that may reflect on the credibility of the organization and iv) establishing policies and procedures to ensure that the activities of the organization that fall outside the journalism and daily production - corporate underwriting, foundation funding, marketing and promotional activities - do not jeopardize the organisation's journalistic independence or involve SABC journalists in activities inappropriate to their roles. The code should also guide the organisation's use of social media¹.

Looking at the SABCs editorial policies, it is clear that the existing standards were well conceived and are relatively contemporary. Any cursory examination of the broadcaster's statements quickly reveals commitments to universal access, impartiality, culture, information, creativity, education and citizenship. With regard to meeting market failure, their responses typically suggest the importance of taking risks and of appealing to a range of different audiences without always having to worry about ratings or advertising revenue. It is recommended that the SABC endeavour to operate according to the overall principles articulated in those standards. This submission will therefore focus on strengthening of existing policies, with regard to editorial independence and accountability and exploring mechanisms for ensuring compliance with policies. It is necessary to focus on the ways in which new delivery systems, including social media, impacts

¹ Paragraph adapted from http://media.azpm.org/master/document/2011/8/19/pdf/11_code_of_ethics.pdf (accessed January 10, 2014).

upon the production, distribution and consumption of content, and the editorial implications of these changes. In this regard, transparency and integrity should be the hallmarks for the SABC in its approach and content going forward.

Credibility is currency?: Editorial Independence

Four fundamental principles guide a public service broadcaster's commitment to editorial independence and public accountability:

- **Editorial Integrity:** The SABC should embrace the highest commitment to excellence, professionalism, intellectual honesty and transparency. In its news and information content, accuracy should be the cornerstone.
- **Quality:** The SABC's content should be distinguished by professionalism, thoroughness, and a commitment to experimentation and innovation.
- **Diversity:** The SABC must be responsive to a diverse public and has a responsibility to explore subjects of significance and the marketplace of ideas
- **Autonomy:** Local decision making ensures topical and relevant content and allows public service radio to reflect the communities they serve. Similarly, allowing journalists to do their job free from interference, supports the goal towards diversity of content³.

We suggest that the concept "programming" be replaced with the concept "content". Like other media institutions in South Africa, the SABC has long since moved from producing only traditional television and radio programming. The SABC is also in the business of producing Internet material that should be equally governed by an editorial integrity policy. There needs to be more attention to issues of how SABC relates to the different media platforms (Berger, 2005)⁴. The policies do not adequately cover, for instance, internet and

² IANS. 2013. Credibility is currency, PM tells media. *The Times of India*. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-08-24/india/41443083_1_media-sector-social-media-national-media-centre (accessed January 10, 2014).

³ See Guidelines adapted from <http://www.pbs.org/about/editorial-standards/>

⁴ Berger, G. 2005. *Reconciling Editorial Independence and Public Accountability Issues in Public Broadcasting Service: Editorial Policies at South African Broadcasting Corporation*. Presentation to Asia Media Summit, Kuala

cell phone delivered content. There is a need for an all-inclusive policy that applies with relevant nuances to all the platforms operated by the SABC (Berger 2005).

The policy should engender trust in the editorial integrity and credibility of the broadcasters' content and the process by which it is produced and distributed. It is the SABC's responsibility to create such an environment and ensure the shielding of the creative and editorial processes from political pressure or improper influence from funders or other sources. The SABC should focus on extending the protection from undue or improper influence to focus not only on the role of the board (and by extension Parliament/government), but it should also ensure that its members "resist the inappropriate use of otherwise legitimate oversight procedures to distort the programming process". In this respect, the controversial upward referral clause in the editorial policy – which gives the broadcaster's chief executive the final say on editorial matters, can lead to commercial or political influences (or at the very least the perceptions of such) being brought to bear and unduly influencing editorial decisions. A good rule of thumb here would be to **resist conflating duties of the SABC Board, with that of professional management**. Board members should adopt and embrace policies and procedures that enable professional management to operate in a way which will give the public full confidence in the editorial integrity of the broadcaster's content/programming. To quote IANS (2013), "credibility is the currency of [a] station's content". The SABC must make every effort to ensure that the content it distributes satisfies the editorial standards to ensure integrity. It should educate both citizens and public policy makers that the "programming is free from undue or improper influence". The system of "upward referral" as it stands now – i.e. allowing the GCEO to also be editor-in-chief – contradicts the SABC's commitment to editorial independence. The GCEO should concern him/herself with ensuring a proper business platform that will allow content providers and journalists to do their jobs. Professional management, i.e. the Editor-in-Chief is there to protect the reputation of the SABC and its journalism – hence, neither the GCEO nor any other board member, should be engaged in editorial decision-making. Where credibility is

Lumpur, 9 – 11 May, 2005. Session, "The State of Public Service Broadcasting, One Year after the BBC Crisis" <http://guyberger.ru.ac.za/fulltext/aidbberger.doc> (accessed January 10, 2014).

concerned, upward referral as it currently stands is a double-edged sword: not only does it negate the credibility of those in charge of news and content management, it also refutes the SABC editorial policy claims of “editorial independence” and “freedom from undue influence” be that influence from the market or politics. Given the politics of the board nomination and implementation process in South Africa, where board members (especially the GCEO) are often political appointees, clearly the blurring of the necessary distinction between management roles and editorial roles, open the SABC to undue external commercial, political, religious and other influences. In this situation, there is potential for the politically appointed GCEO to forget about the SABC’s accountability to the general public, as that person may find him/herself more aligned with the political party that afforded them the position. This issue was debated at length before the existing policies were adopted and at that stage, it was decided that it was consistent with international practice in this regard. However, issues such as the blacklisting scandal, unilateral decisions to “can” television programmes (such as “The Big Debate”) and radio shows (i.e. the “canning” of a scheduled live interview on media coverage of the ANC’s Mangaung elective conference” on Metro FM), are clear indications that when management roles and editorial roles collide, freedom of expression is inhibited and journalism suffers.

The existing policies emphasise from the outset that one of the core editorial values of the SABC is editorial independence. This includes journalistic, creative and programming independence of the SABC’s staff and is necessary to protect the freedom of expression of the SABC’s audiences. The editorial code states that the SABC is independent from the government, and is not the mouthpiece of the government of the day. It confirms a commitment to diversity. Content Diversity furthers the goals of a democratic society by enhancing public access to the full range of ideas, information, subject matter, and perspectives required to make informed judgments about issues of our time. It also furthers PBS’ special mandate to serve many different and discrete audiences. The goal of diversity also requires continuing efforts to ensure that the broadcaster’s content fully reflects the pluralism of our society, including for example, appropriate representation of linguistic and other minorities. Upward referral endangers all of these processes as it leads to content distribution on the SABC being dominated by a single point of view.

Recommendation

Editorial independence is a staple of public service broadcasting and a necessary pre-requisite if a public service broadcaster is to fulfil its mandate to account to the general public. Decisions about programming and journalistic content should involve the people who would be affected by the decisions, and top management should be accessible and share ideas and not dictate⁵. Upward referral should therefore not be extended to the office of the Group CEO. The Group CEO should be left to deal with broad business strategy of the corporation and should not interfere in key editorial decision. News editorial decisions should be made by key editorial staff, not business top management. This means that upwards referral should also not be extend to Heads of News, as this is a management and news policy position, not an editorial position. This problem was pointed out clearly by the internal commission of enquiry into the blacklisting of political commentators (the Sisulu Commission), and its recommendation to clarify the Head of News role as a policy role and not an editorial one, should be adopted in the editorial policy. There is no need for a separate editor in chief position: s/he will undermine existing editorial decision-making, inevitably leading to internal conflict and demoralisation as the staff who have been put in place to make decisions are undermined.

Enforcing the policy

The SABC must be committed to serving the public interest by providing content of the highest quality that enriches the marketplace of ideas, unencumbered by governmental, commercial and other interests. Public (Service) Broadcasting is an essential service to the people of South Africa, necessary for upholding their right to know and to give them voice in matters which affects them regardless of class, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Hence it is of crucial importance that the SABC protect its journalistic integrity and it must reinforce its commitment to being a free and independent institution. The SABC must comply with the

⁵Television News Productions Transformation Unit, 'TNP's transformation proposals for consideration by SABC top management, TNP, 4 October 1994, pg. 9.

provision that it accounts to Icasa (as protectors of the public interest) in terms of how it interprets its editorial independence, secures internal accountability and how it performs in terms of public service. It should abide by the decision that the SABC editorial policies on programming and news be reviewed every five years. The current process of review is 4-5 years overdue, which resulted in cracks in the system which appeared soon after implementation of the editorial policies in 2004 being left largely unattended. The political yo-yo of the period between 2005 and 2014 also contributed to an unstable SABC, with a revolving board that allowed for serious financial, organisational and management mishaps to dictate the direction of editorial content in a negative trajectory. It is advisable to have a mechanism in place that ensures that the SABCs editorial policies are not compromised, even if the people governing the day-to-day workings of the organisation ebb and flow in line with the countries ever-changing political climate. If indeed the broadcaster is as committed to freedom of expression and editorial independence as its policies indicate, these fluctuations in political temperament would/should have zero impact on the content that the broadcaster committed to. Any policy is only as good as its practice. While the SABCs editorial policies enjoins a commitment to editorial independence and to ensure that no undue political, commercial and other self-serving group pressure is brought to bear on programme scheduling and commissioning practices or editorial and news content, the proof of the pudding is in the pie. Thus far, it looks good on paper, but fails to convince in practice. This could be turned around if the policies define the substance and mechanisms of accountability, and if the broadcaster acquiesces to regular monitoring and review of its policies by the public, including by holding public meetings and seminars to look at ways it might better serve the public interest. Its Annual reports must be published and distributed widely along with externally audited accounts. Similarly, the GCEO, CFO and COO (as well as the chairperson of the board) must be subjected to annual review with a view to assessing their performance. This review too should be published and widely disseminated.

Finally, Icasa must monitor whether or not the SABC has complied with its obligations in relation to programming and news content, the public review of the SABC and dealing with complaints from the public and other entities⁶.

⁶ Clearly, this is not something the SABC can enforce, but it is, in our current broadcasting landscape, a necessary oversight mechanism that should be doing its part in ensuring that the public broadcasters credibility does not become a liability.