

RECONSTITUTING PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING: MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY DURING TRANSITION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, for funds to present this research at its Media and Democracy Conference, January 1994.

ABSTRACT

As South Africa moved from formal apartheid to multi-party elections between February 1990 and April 1994, a unique testing ground for theories of media and democracy became available for analysis. Political struggles and discourses at every level of state and civil society were dominated by the demands of pressure groups, some with military support. Little agreement existed on what constituted democracy, on how such a practice could be attained, and whether or not a single nation could be forged out of the linguistic, cultural, ethnic, racial, class and geographical patchwork into which South Africa has been fragmented by apartheid.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) as an institution was a 'test case' in negotiating disparate ideological conflicts.



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Established in 1936 as a Public Service Broadcaster (PSB) under a Charter authored by John Reith, during the apartheid years the Corporation was used by the

government for unbridled apartheid propaganda (Tomaselli *et al.*, 1989). In the early 1990s the SABC became the locus for national struggles - over questions of control, racial composition, news content, language policy, ideology and so on. 'As the SABC goes, so may go the nation,' to paraphrase the popular analogy that once indicated the relationship between General Motors and the USA. What happens in the 'transformation' of the SABC may well be indicative of the what may happen in the 'transformation' of the wider society.¹

Apartheid located South Africa within contradictory relations. The under-developed dimension in both the rural areas and the cities stands in stark contrast to those sectors (entertainment, banking, media, telecoms, information) which are inextricably integrated into the global information economy. Current academic debates about the country's economic future, however, are rooted in modernist terms, and emphasize the restructuring of obsolete modes of production (see, eg., Howe & Le Roux, 1992; Shrire, 1992). Little discussion other than by some media scholars focuses on examining ways of integrating the South African economy into post-modern relations of production, distribution and consumption (see Marchant, 1988; Collins, 1992; Tomaselli, 1989; Louw & Tomaselli, 1994; Louw, 1993; Mersham & Hooyberg, 1993; Hooyberg &

Mersham, 1993).

In broadcasting, the result has been policy decisions which attempt to reform this institution within modernist conditions, as is evident in many of the provisions of the new Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act. Almost no attention has been given to the late capitalist economy into which broadcasting is moving internationally within the dynamics of a post-modern information economy.²

The emphasis on the immediacy of production, reminiscent of a Fordist approach, is perhaps a politically necessary route in the light of a 40% illiteracy rate, 60% unemployment and massive international debt. However, this raises the spectre of South Africa's slide into dependency on the metropolitan states. A danger exists if in its attempts at 'Africanisation', South Africa ends up with only the pejorative aspects of that process: images of inefficiency, backwardness, isolation, and inappropriate imported solutions. In contrast, the country needs to lock into a global economic integration which will facilitate growth and efficiency: however, it must do so on its own terms, and not in a subservient client relationship with more powerful international interests.

Attention must also be paid to South Africa's location as the gateway between the global information economy and economies within the sub-continent of Africa. All these

countries exhibit a mixture of modern and pre-modern economic relations, and each is a jealously guarded national entity. Again, apart from some statements on the matter by communications scholars (eg. Collins, 1992; Louw & Tomaselli, 1994; Marchant, 1988; Mersham & Hooyberg, 1993; Hooyberg & Mersham, 1993).

THE REITHIAN INHERITANCE: ASYMMETRICAL ACCESS AND POWER

Reith assumed an audience which in ideological terms was relatively homogenous, capable (not to say likely) of making relatively uniform interpretations of programme content and flow. Ironically, the translocation of the BBC ethos to South Africa in the 1930s suited the National Party's (NP) policy of apartheid after the 1950s, as neither Reith nor the NP recognised black Africans as part of the listening/viewing audience except on white terms. Media, and especially broadcasting, thus contributed to social and economic disparities. They legitimised apartheid in empowering a small sector of the population working on behalf of the global functions of capital, at the expense of the black-driven motor of the apartheid economy. Herein lay the essential flaw of apartheid. In serving the narrow interests of the South African bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie under fordist relations of production, apartheid could not adapt in the end to the needs of late capitalism. This era requires an

urban, computer-literate, time-conscious and competitively educated workforce.

Capitalism, as it was distorted into a racial form in South Africa, thus reduced the country's ability to interact with the global economy except in a rather asymmetrical kind of way. The suppression of a sufficiently large indigenous market was one result; acquiring the uneven hallmarks of a modern capitalist society was another. South Africa's path to modernity cannot easily be derived from too closely linking this country's historical experience to those of the older capitalist societies. Theories of modernity have a "different purchase in this partly similar and partly different society" (Muller & Tomaselli, 1990:303). Resulting from South Africa's scrambled periodization of modern, pre-modern and post-modern economic and social forms, theories and ideologies dominant elsewhere became oppositional in South Africa at different historical conjunctures.

Liberalism in South Africa, for example, has always been oppositional - initially it opposed apartheid and the tyranny of the minority, and in the 1990s, took issue with an all-embracing African nationalism which threatened to result in the tyranny of the majority. Broadcasting in South Africa in the 1990s, then, became a site of significant contestation over the image of the 'nation-in-waiting'. This image and struggles over it resulted

from a complex accretion of often antagonistic forces: the globalisation of the market versus local content imperatives; plural access versus centralised control; market-driven forces versus a public service ethos; modernity versus post-modernity; centralisation versus regional autonomy; minority pluralism versus majoritarian imposition; and a reverse discrimination uneasily disguised under the discourse of 'affirmative action'.

Discursive ideological claims on policies and practices via conceptions of the 'national', 'Africanness' and the 'polis' drove popular radical black demands for total control of broadcasting in the interests of the emergent black-dominated hegemony. Arising from these kinds of discursive demands, South African versions of international trends and their resulting paradoxes found expression in some extraordinary articulations. One of these was a naive New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) type call for 'good news' in the face of the debilitating violence that racked the transition to general elections in April 1994.

The question that we now explore is how PSB might respond to the above mentioned processes. We take for granted that PSB remains an important genre in South Africa in the light of the need to redress the disparities caused by capital and apartheid in the first place, and legitimated during the apartheid

years via broadcasting in the second place. What we are arguing, then, is that future broadcasting strategies should take advantage of the very nature of South Africa's scrambled periodization, turn it to advantage and thereby provide access to the entire population no matter their location within the pre-modern to post-modern trajectory. Achieving this requires a mixed media economy accessible to all communities and constituencies located within this trajectory.

CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC BROADCASTING: CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

A number of important dynamics are identified in the recent literature on the position of the mass media, and especially the electronic media. Specifically in the realm of PSB, late capitalism has brought massive problems in its inability to adapt to advancing technology, the problems of soaring cost structures, globalisation and monopolies, and socially and ideologically, their susceptibility to government pressure, and the need to redefine the notion of nationalism (see Thompson, 1990; Keane, 1990; Collins, 1992).

Technological innovation:

Facing up to satellites and digital networks

In terms of technology, the

emergence of the multi-channel society changed audience profiles, viewing habits and encouraged the rise of market values. Multi-channel broadcasting eliminated the PSB ideal of **balance**. Increased programming resulted in more entertainment programmes; and concomitantly, less educational, public affairs, children's and regional fare. **Geographic coverage** too has suffered. Outlying and rural regions not sufficiently lucrative to warrant expansive capital outlay lag behind in the provision of communication services, an observation as true of telecommunication as it is of broadcasting.³

Satellite television has attracted attention for two reasons. First, it abolishes the traditional relationship between cost and distance of transmission, and potentially offers new market stratifications. South Africa will introduce a KU-band satellite in 1985, and this will radically alter the pattern of television transmission. Second, the harnessing of Super High Frequencies, previously useless for broadcasting, will make the traditional parameters of spectrum scarcity anachronistic: almost limitless spectrum availability will result (Collins, 1990).

The extension of the technical possibilities of satellite, digitalization, and other technological advances, produce contradictory effects: on the one hand they extend the potential of the broadcasting sector to fulfil its mandate as a truly NATIONAL

broadcaster, extending the broadcast footprint in a way which is able to reach the most outlying rural areas, regardless of the topographical obstacles. At the same time, South Africa possesses the necessary communications capabilities for global integration and market penetration. As the country is willy-nilly pulled into a global network the only choice is whether to enter that network as agents in its own right, or in a client relationship.

Economic constraints:

Failing licences and the spectre of dependency

Fiscal constraints are a body blow to PSB. Internationally, it is no longer possible to depend financially on license income. Revenue needs to be supplemented by advertising and state allocations, both of which potentially impinge on the independence of broadcasters. In South Africa the position is particularly acute: by 1994 SABC was predominantly dependent on commercial revenue: approximately 72% of the Corporation's income derived from advertising, while only 28% came from licences.⁴

SABC's financial crisis, similar to that experienced by national organizations world-wide, will be ongoing. Operating costs are higher in South Africa than in most Western economies, since it imports its equipment and technical backup. Satellite technology, while cost-effective in the long run, requires

enormous initial capital outlay, and needs to be paid for at crippling rates of foreign exchange.

In most countries, the characteristic response to fiscal squeeze has been the 'down-sizing' of national broadcasters, in response to their habit of bureaucratic bloating. The SABC too, has gone through a period of drastic 'rationalization'. However, while in some areas such pruning is well over-due, problems arise when it diminishes the inability of production teams to be truly creative.⁵

The strategy of breaking the SABC into autonomous business units (which attracted the ire of 'leftist' commentators who saw it purely as a precursor to privatisation) had a contradictory effect on the possibility of PSB. While greater autonomy provided the valuable opportunity for editorial and programming independence, leading to a greater variety of 'voices',⁶ the downside has been that in circumstances in which individual units are entirely responsible for their financial health, the temptation to ignore culturally valuable, but economically less rewarding programming, becomes almost insurmountable.⁷

Particularly on radio, programme formats became sacrosanct, and any suggested deviation led to fears of alienating the established audience. Furthermore, the 'trapping' of surpluses in the regions led to even less cross-subsidisation of non-profit national projects.

Programming accounts for the largest expenditure in broadcasting. It is cheaper to import than to produce, a factor which has important consequences for the dearth of national programming, and the spectre of cultural imperialism, with wall-to-wall soap operas and German serials dubbed into Afrikaans. In response to the lack of adequate and consistent funding, PSB genres are being increasingly homogenized. Culturally valuable forms, such as the single play and the innovative documentary, are allotted fewer and fewer resources, and the impulse to co-produce becomes relentless. South Africa has the economic power to appropriate Western technologies and imperatives and reconstitute them into an African context without necessarily sliding into backwardness and inability to compete in international markets. Concomitantly, there is the increasing potential for economic and programming dependency on the part of Third World countries which find themselves locked into a client relationship with the First World giants.

Social and cultural adjustment:

Resolving the question of nationalism

One of the most important developments in recent political times has been the re-emergence of nationalism, particularly among previously marginalised countries and ethnic groups. 'Nationalism' has

been defined in this context as:

A belief system or ideology that asserts that the interests of a community, a nation, are best served through resistance to transnationalisation, and that it is only in (relatively) autonomous, economically self-sufficient and culturally homogeneous political units that individuals can protect their interests and feel at home (Collins, 1990:11).

The development of nationalist impulses has happened simultaneously with the break-down of trans-national barriers among the world's major powers. Significantly, the transnational movement is read by the large contenders within an economic discourse, while those who have most to lose see it in cultural terms.

An independent national broadcaster on the African continent has the responsibility to develop programming and scheduling discourses, particularly in the areas of news and actuality, which address the needs and aspirations of both the Euro- and Afro-centric constituencies. At the same time, there is a strong sentiment which endorses the idea that in the special circumstances in South Africa's move from apartheid, the national broadcaster needs to contribute to the establishment of a national sentiment, to build a "collective identity" (see Schlesinger, 1991). Thus 'nationalism' takes on a more rounded character: defensive of

its cultural territoriality on the one hand, and offensive in its efforts to forge in Gramsci's terms, a 'national-popular collective will', on the other (Gramsci, 1971:131). The double dynamic can be seen both as keeping out 'the other', and strengthening links with those inside the national cordon.

In constructing this 'collective identity', South Africans have to work against the history of the old quasi-'nationalisms' of apartheid, which decreed into being a jigsaw of 'homelands', 'self-governing national states' and the pinnacle of constitutional development, the 'independent TBVC states' of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei. Each of these 'independent nations' had their own media networks, which in the case of Bophuthatswana and Ciskei were fairly sophisticated. At the time of writing, however, it was uncertain as to how these territories' media (Capital Radio, 702, Bop-TV), are to be re-incorporated into the central state and the national broadcaster.

Taken together with the gross disparities in wealth, education, living standards, and denial of access to social resources which have been caused by an active process of underdevelopment through apartheid, the possibilities of a single post-apartheid consciousness seem slim. Apartheid, more than any other factor, prevented the development of an even minimally homogeneous audience in terms of media

consumption. A diversity of culture and language, and the vigorous ethnic consciousness apparent from the far left of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and Azanian Peoples' Organization (AZAPO), through to the far right of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), have complicated the situation further.

Even in Europe, where more sophisticated patterns of media consumption have developed, it appears that the concept of nationalism(s) bedevils the project of an electronic unity. While the potential for an undifferentiated TV market undoubtedly exists, other factors mitigate against it. Localised differences in language and culture have impeded the establishment of a trans-national audience in Europe. Attempts to establish a trans-national audience-funding programming by delivering international advertising media, specifically Super Channel and Sky Channel, have either been abandoned or bankrupted (Collins, 1990:107). In the South African situation, local content programming still attracts greater attention from the majority of viewers and listeners than imported productions. These observations underscore the point that if PSB is to continue to play a part in *national* reconstruction, it must do so largely in the context of its contribution to the local, the regional and specific language requirements of the country.

If there is one aspect of

communication in the era which we face, it is that there are no barriers. Satellite communications have dismantled the walls of the nation-state in a way which is only parodied by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and mocked by the feeble posturing of political moves to reincorporate South Africa's body-parts, scattered in the mine-explosions called the 'homelands'.

At the same time as technical developments work towards globalisation, a parallel development in the ownership and control of broadcast institutions has become apparent. A few major organizations control the newsflow, and set international news agendas. Nor is South Africa immune from the process: the SABC's introduction of CNN and SKY-TV on previously down-time, and M-NET's transmission of the BCC World Service to hotels, changed South African horizons of what constitutes 'news' in an international context (see Bara & Wallis, 1990). Rejecting Western news-values entirely is thus naive; better would be a strategy which interprets such foreign news within a Southern African context, and in terms of the region's own interests.⁸

At the same time, international monopolization of news programming as well as entertainment programming, bring with them the very real threat of cultural domination, and the erosion of existing communities and cultures.

This is at the heart of the current deadlock in the GATT negotiations, which saw the issue of barriers to broadcast of American movies and television programming, and the corollary of subsidies paid to European filmmakers, being left out of the Agreement. Jack Lang, the French ex-Minister of Culture and Communications, described Luxembourg's Astra satellite as the "Coca-Cola satellite attacking our artistic and cultural integrity" (in Collins, 1990:3). George Vradenburg, Executive Vice-President of Fox Inc, articulates the 'market' sentiments: "This isn't about culture. Its about money" (*The Citizen*, 15.12.93:30).

Where do these factors leave South Africa?

With regard to media, political transition is most evident in the de-regulation, or rather re-regulation, of broadcasting. As this article goes to press, the IBA is conducting its own public inquiry into deregulation. This body will oversee the transition of the whole of the broadcast sector from one which has historically been dominated by the SABC, a single national broadcaster, to a competitive broadcasting environment in which private commercial broadcasters will exist alongside the national carrier.⁹

Interest during 1993 in starting commercial stations was great with numerous applications received by government for commercial and community stations to be established. No licences, however,

were granted until November 1994, well after the April 27, 1994, elections. These were temporary licences only.

Such a situation has much in common with the scenario described by John Thompson (1990) as "regulated pluralism". In similar vein, John Keane suggests that to protect democracy within the sphere of civil society, and to undermine both "the arcane state and market power, requires development of a dense network or 'heterarchy' of communications media which are controlled **neither by the state nor by commercial markets**" (Keane, 1990:158, emphasis in original).

Challenges to the New Order

In the immediate to medium-term future, the SABC will be faced with at least three challenges:

*most immediate was the SABC's response to the elections;

*to fulfil its PSB mandate against the background of social, economic and technical changes taking place in the 1990s, a period when the concept and ethos of PBS is under attack internationally;

*to maintain itself as a site of excellence across the programming spectrum (entertainment, education and information), and not allow itself to slide irretrievably into a dependency client relationship with the international media giants.

ELECTION APRIL 27 1994

Election preparation and coverage occurred in three guises:

- * democracy and voter education;
- * coverage of political campaigns;
- * coverage of the election day and announcement of results as an 'event', both for domestic and international consumption.

The SABC's treatment of the election was more than simply news reporting. It was seen by a number of commentators as a test of the Corporation's impartiality and ability to move from the past into the future. It also forced us as media analysts to re-visit the hoary old debates about the media's role in agenda-setting: is it possible to do more than simply reflect the sentiments of the wider society? Is it possible to create an enabling approach / situation which will contribute towards freer, fairer and less violent elections, thus aiding rather than hindering the democratic process?

Democracy education: Access through Information

Crucial to the process of democratisation is the question of access in a doubly articulated form: access to the media as audience, and access to the media as voices to be heard. Early on in the planning process for voter education, 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 already

involved in voter education.¹⁰

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 the SABC was 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 served as the mascot and logo of the whole initiative. In an animated form, DEBI hopped, skipped and jumped across the television screens of South African voters (Teer-Tomaselli, 1994, 1995).

PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN A CHANGING MILIEU

By 1994 at least three broad areas of transition challenged the SABC:

- * to change the face and structure of the SABC to reflect the 'New South Africa';
- * to cater for the developmental and educational needs of the country in a period of rapid change;

* to acknowledge in the programming and scheduling the fact SABC is part of the African continent.

Reassessing practices of reporting and programming / scheduling

The style and practice of news presentation and collation seems to be a 'test case' of the functions of a national broadcaster. As Arnold Amber of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation noted:

Nearly every Board of every major network has some difficulty with its journalistic departments ... whether in the United States or Canada or anywhere ... because the methodology, and the separateness, and the special activities of journalists have to be protected from the top of the corporation right down to the bottom (Amber, 1993:4).

Amber further notes that procedures and demands made by news/information departments are extraordinary when compared to those of other departments like entertainment.

There have been sustained criticisms that the news practices of the SABC foregrounded the concerns of dominant white elite well into 1994, at the expense of other groups in society (Broadcast Monitoring Group (BMP), 1993). Implicit here is reproach that the hegemony of middle class (white) interests takes precedence over all others. In particular, the SABC is seen to privilege American and Eurocentric values, to the neglect of more

The first of these imperatives includes a reappraisal of the staffing and appointment policies of the Corporation. By the end of 1993, the great majority of employees remained white, and among senior employees, Afrikaans-speaking men. A policy of 'employment equity', which translates roughly into 'affirmative action', had been in place for since mid-1993, and three men of colour were appointed to senior posts. (Two of the three are high-profile members of ANC, a situation which caused a considerable outcry from both the black newspapers, particularly the black consciousness *Sowetan*, as well as the Afrikaans- and English-language newspapers.¹¹

The appointment of three ANC members was seen as a capitulation on the part of the new SABC Board to the new political orthodoxy, and replacement of one set of political masters by another.

Piecemeal appointments in themselves are insufficient to change of composition of staffing radically: the rate of attrition in staff members, either through resignation, transfer or retirement, is low - far lower than comparable figures for the private sector. Left to a 'natural' course of events, employment equity will take many years to achieve - much longer than the political logistics will allow for.

African- and Third World-oriented considerations. There is some truth in these accusations, though questions remain as to the ideological motivations of the Project.¹²

A long literature on the construction of news has indicated that news organizations usually access those voices which are already in a position of power. Mari Ruge and John Galtung (1973) speak of "elite persons" and "elite nations". Herbert Gans' (1980) classic analysis of news in the early 1970s has forever alerted us to the role played by 'knowns':

Well-known people ... (who) could be political, social or cultural figures, they could also be holders of official positions or powers behind thrones who play no official positions.

Recent international debates have focused on the amount of violence portrayed, not only in fictional programming, but also in news and actuality. In a country like South Africa, where violence is a staple fare of political and social life, arguments have been made that the media, specifically the electronic media - are in part responsible for the high level of societal violence.

Four general arguments are marshalled against the depiction of real-life (as opposed to fictional) violence. These are that depictions of violence:

*encourage others to do the same: this position revisits the copy-cat

syndrome popularised by Richard Clutterbuck (1981) in the mid-70s and early 1980s;

* label South Africa as a 'violent' and economically unstable country, and which discourages business and investor confidence at home and abroad, with concomitant loss of business opportunities;

* are uncomfortable to watch - they offend 'sensitive viewers'; and

* have a detrimental effect on children.

In a country in which violence has become the norm, it is very difficult for news bulletins not to deal explicitly with violence. Ironically, BMP claimed that SABC bulletins in the run-up to the elections had displayed a "tendency to under-report on the country-wide violence" (BMP, 1993:6). As journalist Mari Holden of *Die Burger* points out, ignoring violence won't make it go away, any more than ignoring the ANC during the State of Emergency made it go away.

Meaning, fragmentation and development

Criticisms have been levelled at news practices which see the world as a fractured, largely unrelated series of disparate events, with very little explanatory power. Notes Amber (1993:8):

We have to get away from giving people on radio and television bits of information. A meeting is held,

we rush out there, and what we come back with a little clip which has no context, not a hell of lot of content, doesn't talk about the process, doesn't talk about the setting.

In its *Annual Report*, BMP cited a litany of journalistic neglect and under-reporting: specifically with regard to the Security Forces¹³ rural news¹⁴, developmental issues¹⁵, and the changing economic and business scenario¹⁶.

When these areas are reported on, they usually reflect an official or government point of view.

At a 'bosberaad' or conference held in a South African game reserve, on the subject of 'The Role of the Media in Health Reform'¹⁷, serious reservations were expressed on the abilities of radio stations in the rural areas to deal adequately with events and processes happening around them. In particular, journalists on Radio Lebowa were castigated for their inability to come to terms with the fraud and corruption in that 'homeland' and for being incapable of dealing with the issues of health and rural development / underdevelopment imaginatively or competently. The point was forcefully made that journalist training regarding the rural areas is not secondary to that of the urban areas - it is almost more important, since the issues faced by journalists in these areas are often more complex and require greater subtlety to communicate well.

In South Africa, as in most 'developed' countries, news practices are dictated largely by news values - specifically 'negativity', 'frequency' and 'magnitude' (Galtung & Ruge, 1973; Tuchman 1978). When combined with the power of visual material in telling a story, this usually means that fast-breaking, dramatic and disastrous events are more likely to be reported than slower developing processes. John Hartley (1982: 81-86) notes that news events are arranged in a specific order so as to make sense to their audiences in terms of a 'cultural map'. This 'cultural map' is based on the presumption of a society which is individualistic, fragmented, and divided into specific spheres.

It is thus of little surprise that news tends to event-oriented, and fragmented. An event is easier to report than an on-going sets of processes, both because it is immediate - the fact that it happens within a relatively confined time span which from a logistical 'in-put' point of view makes it easier to capture, and from an 'output' perspective makes it easier to schedule in tandem with the demands of regularity and segmentation which characterise the production and scheduling of news. Events also have an immediate impact: they exhibit the characteristics of new-ness, immediacy and contiguousness.

Processes, on the other hand, are drawn out happenings which take a long time to come to fruition. They

are gradual, distant and remote. Processes lack the dramatic impact of an event. By their very nature then, disastrous events are more likely to be reported than happy ones. 'Good news' usually has a longer gestation. Hartley furthermore assumes a society which is hierarchical in nature and naturally aims for consensus. It is this assumption of consensus which is used to identify 'negative news' and 'deviant behaviour'. The predominance of reporting on violence can be seen in this context.

This predicament is not unique to South Africa. These comments have much in common with the long-standing criticism of television news worldwide, in which the 'bias' of news broadcasts is the result of the unconscious professional practices and class backgrounds of television journalists, editors and producers (see eg. Glasgow Media Group 1980, 1982; Hall, 1980). While still a television director, John Birt, who later become Deputy Director-General of the BCC, argued that TV news harboured a "bias against understanding", and dealt with issues only in the most superficial way. Birt proposed that TV approach world events with more analysis and in-depth reporting, proposals which he later enacted in his own programme, *Weekend World*, a sixty-minute current affairs slot, often entirely devoted to the analysis of a single story (Goodwin, 1990:45). Canadians Arnold Amber and Tim Knight share

an approach in which 'story telling' becomes a way around the dilemma.¹⁸ It has become almost a stock response of broadcasters to argue that TV news is inevitably limited in its explanatory power, and that the full story is to be found in current events programmes (see Skirrow, 1980). It is therefore helpful to divide the wider concept of 'news' into three working categories:

- * first tier or 'hard' news - specifically news bulletins;
- * second tier or 'soft' news - the 'news behind the news';¹⁹
- * third tier or magazine and discussion programmes.²⁰

We are not suggesting that actuality programmes should act as an antidote to shortcomings in the news, but rather that the two forms should be seen in tandem. Taken as an overall newsworld, it should be possible to 'even-out' some of the more staccato effects of event-oriented reporting. Andrew Goodwin's objection that audiences for news programmes are often ten times larger than those for current affairs, and the resultant impossibility of actuality programmes outweighing any bias (Goodwin, 1990:49), does not seem to hold true for the South African situation, where a nightly average of 7.5 million viewers for the 'flagship' news bulletins can be compared with 7 million viewers for the second tier in-depth programmes.²¹

Some ways out of conundrum

between the privileging of traditional news values over those of developmental imperatives were explored at the 'bosberaad' referred earlier. Discussions focused on the interaction between the media and health policy in the foreseeable future. Guest speaker Alfredo Bengzana, Aquino's Minister of Health, used the metaphor of media as both a mirror and a searchlight. According to him, it was a mirror when it showed what we are and will become, and a searchlight when it shows us what we can be. These different faces of the media correspond to different genres within the media.

The function of the mirror is best carried out in the hard news of the bulletins. But clearly, news is never simply mirrored, it is always constructed. And it is in the construction of news that the highest degree of ethical standards must be adhered to, and where the greatest dangers for news writers / presenters lie.

The purpose of second tier news is to provide a context in which the happenings of the day can be understood. This tier is often referred to as 'commentary' and to a certain extent this is correct. The word however has unfortunate connotations of the imposition of a particular God's-eye point of view - an all-seeing pronouncement of one preferred perspective. More apposite perhaps is to regard second tier news as dialogue - interaction

between a number of different points of view providing different voices on the same issue.

This second tier news is the appropriate place for contextualised news - placing the events of the day into a holistic social, political, economic and cultural perspective. This is the site of 'process' journalism, of explaining the history and long term development of a situation rather than mirror an event out of context. Here, the field of health reporting provides examples - tuberculosis doesn't just happen in the way that motor accidents happen, and yet more people die of tuberculosis than die on the roads. The challenge thus becomes how do we reflect this truth? As Mathathua Tsedu of *The Sowetan* put it - how do we make the kwashiorko death as 'sexy' as the necklace murder? Or, how do rural areas compete for attention with the war in the Phola Park settlement?

Part of the answer lies in understanding the inherent drama within an event or process. The word 'sensational' has come up for much criticism. The media, it was claimed, tended to 'sensationalise' events in order to make them more newsworthy. However, it was suggested that it was possible to 'dramatise' events. Steve Tollman, medical superintendent at the Acomhoek Clinic, pointed out that deaths by under-nourishment are the equivalent to thirteen Jumbo Jets of children crashing into mountains

annually.

There are 'good news' stories for those who have the energy and the initiative to find them - there are stories of bravery, of initiative, of models that could be replicated throughout the country. There are clinics and hospitals in the deep rural areas which defy the laws of economics. Above all, there is hope which exists. All these processes provide a challenge to journalists. But these 'good news' stories can never presume to be the news whole - they must be seen in the context of other stories - overcrowding, despondency, and structural problems.

In order to 'dramatise' the news, it must be people oriented - it must have a human face. It must be seen to make a difference in the lives of people. News organization, including the SABC, must prioritise non-traditional news areas, for example by extending the briefs of health reporters to cover what happens in rural areas, or by adding a developmental economist to the already-in-place stock market analysts on the Economics Desk.

What this boils down to is determination to find stories where previous journalistic 'common sense' would not look, by adjusting the focus of both the mirror and the searchlight, and by instituting training and support structures to bolster and sustain those journalists who are prepared to branch out into this *terra incognita*.

FIRST WORLD / THIRD WORLD

DIVIDE:

REGIONAL LEADER OR DEPENDENT CLIENT?

While it is essential to locate South Africa within the African continent, we must be wary of subjugating our own best interests, both in the field of academia and broadcasting, to simplistic rearticulations of the New World Information theories. Relevance and excellence both need to be acknowledged if public broadcasting in South Africa is to maintain its pre-eminent position.

In rethinking the role of PSB, there is much that South Africans, and indeed all Africans, can learn from their European counterparts. This is why it is worth spending so much time considering these theories. Nevertheless, Eurocentric First-World theories also need to be read through the lens of the African experience, and more challengingly, through the lens of the developmental needs of this country and the sub-continent.

The capture by foreign discourses on developments in South African broadcasting, such as the framing of aspects of the Independent Broadcasting Authority legislation, introduced in 1993, has been remarked on by some US commentators. Claims by US Embassy and FCC officials as reported by Chris Patterson (1994:23) that they have 'broken the back of the national broadcaster' in South Africa - thus ensuring greater consumption of American

programmes - is a misrepresentation. Rather, what these commentators are saying is that the US Embassy, which impacted local debates through visits by FCC personnel and communication lawyers since 1991, have seriously undermined 'state monopoly broadcasting'. Their intention was to ensure "democracy of the dial" and to open broadcasting to "multiplicities of voices" over and above PSB (Larry Schwartz, USAID, Interview May 1994).

South Africa as the dominant regional broadcaster remains in a position to protect local content and encourage sub-Saharan production developments. The independent production sector led by the Film and Allied Workers Organisation and the Broadcast Steering Committee are just two of the organisations representing the South African film and television industries which have set their sights on maintaining a strong PSB. The battle against the commercialisation of the airwaves is not over yet.

The issue of language is instructive here. The Transitional Executive Council, the pre-cursor to the post-elections multi-party parliament, agreed on eleven official languages. In effect, this meant that English has become the language of political and economic intercourse. However, a substantial number of people in the country are not competent in English, and require communication in their own languages. In effect, the language policies adopted by the

SABC are setting national examples for language policies in other areas. See, eg., Louw (1992).

NOTES

1. The issue of language is instructive here. The Transitional Executive Council, the pre-cursor to the post-elections multi-party parliament, agreed on eleven official languages. In effect, this meant that English has become the language of political and economic intercourse. However, a substantial number of people in the country are not competent in English, and require communication in their own languages. In effect, the language policies adopted by the SABC are setting national examples for language policies in other areas.
2. A major project by the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, sponsored by the SABC in conjunction with the Film and Allied Workers Organisation, on the impact of new technologies on PSB, was undertaken by Russell Baker (1994). "This is the only specific study dealing with such issues on PSB in South Africa.
3. Witness, for instance, the uneven coverage of the M-Net pay station and SABC's CCV-TV - both channels which depend on advertising revenue for their viability.
4. 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" (1994), it has 'Accountability to the full spectrum of the South African public for providing accessible, high quality broadcasting 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 Vision" spell out 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.

5. See, for example, the news staff on both TV and radio in 1994 were seriously undermined by the sheer volume of work required from individual journalists, editors and technical producers.
6. In Natal, the severing of the financial umbilical cord in 1993 which tethered them to Johannesburg, gave the Natal services far more autonomy. Since both NPR Stereo and Radio Zulu are profitable stations, and Radio Lotus producing a small, but viable surplus, the Natal operation was able to establish a well run independent news room to service local news, and 'export'

news and current affairs back to the centre.

7. By way of comparison, research done by the Association of America's Public Service Television Stations (ASPTS, 1991a; 1991b) indicates that the US's 340 public service broadcasting (PBS) channels are valuable community resources which have found ways of adapting to some of the financial problems identified. PBS serves 89 million viewers during an average week. More people watch PBS than any of the cable networks, including CNN and HBO.
8. See Mersham and Hooyberg (1993) for a comparative study of how black students at the University of Zululand interpreted foreign news within a South African context. This is one of the few recent articles to deal comprehensively and empirically with such issues.
9. Apart from the encrypted entertainment TV channel, M-Net. Other radio and TV stations situated within the former 'homelands' and can only be received in these areas.
10. To this end, a call for participation in the project was put out, and of the more than 140 organizations which responded, the Board sub-committee established the Steering Group on Voter Education. In recognition of the

central place played in the field by the IFEE (Independent Forum for Electoral Education), an umbrella forum of over 30 organizations directly involved in voter education, a block of 20 places was allocated to them. Membership of the Steering Committee was closed at 50 organizations.

From this plenary committee, a smaller Working Group was established to carry out the week by week work of the initiative. The Working Group was responsible to the Steering Committee, and made up of 9 members from the Steering Committee, two members of SABC Management (representing radio and television), and two Board members, who alternated as the Chair. See Teer-Tomaselli (1995).

11. One was Zwelakhe Sisulu, former editor of *The New Nation*, and son of ANC Deputy President, Walter Sisulu. Another, Solly Moekette, was a recent broadcasting graduate from Carleton University. The third was Govin Reddy, a journalist and returned exile, whom the press incorrectly assumed had close ties with the ANC. An earlier appointment was Ameen Akalwaya, former editor of an alternative newspaper and activist in the Black Consciousness Movement.
12. BMP has come in for criticism over its lack of a repeatable

methodology, its inability to discern new trends, and its lack of argument and often ambiguous evidence. In common with other monitoring which is based entirely on discursive analysis without the back-up of quantitative data, most of the Project's 'evidence' is anecdotal, and taken out of context, and not related to long-term trends or cross-correlation (Tomaselli, 1994). Like IFEE, BMP would appear to have been more of a lobby group serving the interests of its own constituency than a fully credible academic exercise. Most serious, was BMP's lack of audience reception research of news values and interpretations. The project blithely assumed that its interpretation is the only one possible.

13. "The police in particular have received favourable coverage ... and criticism of them has either been underplayed or completely excluded. A number of techniques in this regard have been used ... One ... has been that instances of security force misconduct have often simply not made the news" (BMP, 1993:16).
14. "rural news ... has been defined on SABC as news about white farmers. Coverage of the drought in various parts of the country has always concentrated on the financial difficulties of white farmers, and the destruction of livestock or wildlife. News items have also seldom mentioned the

plight of black rural communities, regardless of the fact that many areas are famine-stricken because of the drought" (BMP, 1993:20).

15. "Alongside the neglect of rural communities, there is a general lack of coverage of development issues" (BMP, 1993:20). Also: "there has also been consistent disregard by most SABC stations of the social services crisis in the townships" (ibid:21).

16. "The changing economic and business scenario has also not been represented by the SABC. The processes and decisions of the National Economic Forum, and economic proposals which differ from those put forward by government and big business have either not been reported, or have been marginalised on SABC news" (BMP, 1993:24).

17. Held in Ngala Game Lodge, South Africa (11-13 November 1993), was jointly convened by the South African based Health Systems Trust, The Open Society Foundation (in Cape Town), and the California-based Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation.

18. Amber puts it this way: "Stress this idea of 'telling stories'. That is that people will watch, that is what your competition, that you've invited onto television in this country; through SKY and CNN are doing. So you've already getting the population used to

watching stories, being told about events ... You should get stories that are interesting to watch, which have context, that have content, to explain the process."

19. Examples are *Radio Today* and *Monitor* on radio, and *Newsline* and *Agenda* on TV.

20. For example, Felicity Mabuza-Suttle's *Top Level*, Frederick van Zyl Slabbert's *Slabbert on Sunday*, or M-Net's *Carte Blanche*.

21. Average viewership for News programmes:

CCV 19:00, Monday-Thursday:
4,556 million;

TV1 20:00, Monday-Thursday:
3,096 million;

Average viewership for actuality (second tier) programmes:

CCV *Newsline* 19:30 (Monday-Wednesday-Sunday) 4,433 million;

TV1 *Network* 20:30 (Monday-Wednesday-Sunday) 2,566 million.

Source: AMPS Diary February/March 1993

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