

INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA: FACTS OR FACADE?

An analysis of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)

Adela King

Adela King is completing her BA studies in Political Science at Central European University (CEU). As part of research at KAS Media Africa, Adela investigated the African National Congress's (ANC) interference at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

September 22, 2022
Johannesburg, South Africa

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PRESS FREEDOM – A LOCAL OR GLOBAL TREND?

The role of media in a democracy is crucial. There is a positive correlation between media and democracy. The higher the press freedom index, the more resilient the democracy. In 2019, the Freedom House reported a global breakdown on press freedom and an increase in attacks on media freedom.ⁱ Leaders of democratic countries have attempted, and succeeded, to interfere with the media, by silencing certain journalists, and establishing a quid pro quo relationship with media outlets.ⁱⁱ The regression of media and press freedom carries devastating implications for democracies. From denying the public the right to information, to deliberately misconstruing facts and media outlets reporting in favor of the ruling party – the media landscape is a powerful tool, and certain leaders have abused this power. This investigative report examines the evolution of media in South Africa’s new democracy, its role, and the extent to which the ruling party has interfered with the SABC.

After South Africa’s transition to democracy in 1994, the SABC was on the path to becoming an independent broadcaster that served the public, and not the State. In the early 2000s, the SABC’s efforts to function independently of the African National Congress (ANC) started to become compromised. “There was never an e-mail that was sent, there was never a document. It was always word of mouth; you received a phone call. It came down through the editors, but we all knew that this decision came from the 27th floor, and that is where Hlaudi Motsoeneng’s office was”, explained Lukhanyo Calata, a South African journalist, when asked to reflect on working at the SABC.ⁱⁱⁱ Since making the headlines of functioning as a government mouthpiece in 2005, the SABC’s independence has continued to deteriorate. The SABC has been under scrutiny for broadcasting content that is favorable to the ANC, while deliberately silencing and banning journalists from reporting on events that reflect poorly on the ruling party.

In 2018, the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of state, or else known as Zondo Commission, was launched to investigate the allegations of state capture, and, amongst others, the extent to which the SABC had been under the influence of the State. The first reports were published four years after the launch of the Zondo Commission, in 2022, and detailed how and to what degree government officials and businesses made unlawful and corrupt deals for personal financial gain.^{iv} Approximately 1.438 individuals were investigated.^v

THE SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION DURING APARTHEID

The role and position of the SABC in South African society has changed radically since 1994. The SABC is a public broadcaster, owned by the South African government. During Apartheid, the entity served one main purpose: to advance the interests of the National Party (NP) and the Afrikaners, at the expense of the black majority in South Africa.^{vi} “The suppression of opposition voices, the cementing of the Apartheid ideology in broadcast, the fiction that we are

not a nation, but an agglomeration of civil and ethnic nations” was among the functions that the SABC was carrying out under the Apartheid government, says Franz Krüger, the National Editor of Radio News and Current Affairs at the SABC during 1994 to 1999.^{vii, viii} When South Africa was transitioning to democracy, it was evident that the SABC’s role had to change, given that media outlets are at the core of a functioning democracy.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in 1997 reported on the pivotal role that the SABC and the media played in advancing and sustaining Apartheid^{ix}. During the hearings, Media Monitoring Group Head Professor Johan van Zyl spoke about the close partnership between the SABC and the Apartheid government. The SABC was broadcasting in the NP’s interest by “only (showing) images which positively portrayed the security forces” and only broadcasting “stories which depicted the government’s foes as terrorists and communists”, as stated by Johan van Zyl.^x Johan Pretorius, former SABC television news editor, admitted that journalists working at the SABC were not trained, and were not equipped with the skill set to produce content.^{xi} Footage of conflicts in the townships was recorded by SABC journalists, however, this footage “never saw the light of day”, Bheki Khlatide, former producer at the SABC, points out.^{xiii} The SABC was severely censored and relayed only one narrative – the narrative that the Apartheid government pursued.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTER POST-APARTHEID

In 1999, the Broadcasting Act was introduced. This Act redefined the responsibilities of the SABC. From a propagandist tool, the broadcaster took on the responsibility to “operate in the public interest”.^{xiii} Unlike other local media, the SABC has offices in all nine provinces, nineteen radio station, and four television channels, reaching 85% of South Africa’s population through the TV stations, and 30.5 million radio listeners.^{xiv, xv, xvi} Additionally, the SABC broadcasts in the eleven official languages of South Africa.^{xvii} Considering the vast outreach capacity that the SABC has, it is imperative that the news reportage is factual and not compromised by political bias.

By broadcasting in all eleven official languages, the SABC is successful in “transcending the barriers of illiteracy”, which has a meaningful impact, given that 3.7 million adults are illiterate in South Africa, according to the 2022 Report published by the Department of Higher Education and Training.^{xviii, xix} Yet, to what degree the SABC has realized its role in this democracy, and upheld its mandate, remains to be determined.

THE SABC: RELAPSE TO ITS ROLE AS A PROPAGANDA TOOL FOR THE GOVERNING PARTY?

The period between 1994 and 1996, when Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri was Chairman of the SABC Board and Zwelakhe Sisulu was the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), is known as the “golden period of SABC independence”.^{xx} During that time, the SABC Board and CEO were appointed

based on merit.^{xxi} Media freedom and independence was encouraged and well-maintained under former President Nelson Mandela. The media landscape started changing under Former President Thabo Mbeki, however drastic shifts surfaced under Jacob Zuma.

Cadre deployment at the SABC, the appointment of individuals that are loyal to the ruling party in public institutions, started gaining ground in the early 2000s.^{xxii} In 2006, Snuki Zikalala banned journalists that spoke critically of the ANC from reporting.^{xxiii} The South Gauteng High Court found that Zikalala was appointed to the SABC to promote the ruling party's interests.^{xxiv} By 2011, most of the SABC Board was compromised and largely consisted of individuals that were loyal to the ANC, and Hlaudi Motsoeneng was elected as Chief Operating Officer (COO).^{xxv} It was well known that Motsoeneng had close ties to former President Jacob Zuma. Motsoeneng had not graduated from high school, yet was appointed the COO of South Africa's public broadcaster.^{xxvi}

The SABC has been South Africa's public broadcaster for 86 years, and therefore has established a long-standing relationship with the public.^{xxvii} It is important to note, that the SABC is a go-to broadcaster for many South African's, and therefore, if the ANC is successful in streaming its narrative on the SABC, it has direct access to manipulate the public's views, opinions, and potentially even voting patterns. Since government loyalists were appointed to leadership positions at the public broadcaster, the network became severely compromised, and the reportage changed, with a clear shift towards ANC favourable content.

The public broadcaster supported President Thabo Mbeki by silencing and blacklisting reporters that criticized the president, airing adverts that defended him, and by not broadcasting footage that provided the ANC with negative publicity.^{xxviii} For instance, the SABC was ordered not to broadcast footage of "the booing of the Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka".^{xxix} In 2005, an SABC cameraman did not film the booing of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka on Women's day, but the SABC did broadcast positive footage of a crowd cheering on Jacob Zuma.^{xxx} The ANC's interference with the broadcasting content might have been subtle at first, but to the broader public that trusts that the SABC will relay unbiased and factual information, televising predominantly positive footage of the ANC can influence their perception of the governing party, and essentially support the ANC's "fair" re-election.

An example of how the SABC downplayed negative publicity for the ANC was the 2016 of broadcasting violent protests. "The SABC issued a directive that the newsroom should downplay or deliberately ignore the community protests around issues of service delivery", says Anton Harber. The 2016 ban of broadcasting violent protests was introduced under the Zuma administration and during Hlaudi Motsoeneng's leadership at the SABC. Coincidentally, this ban was implemented while the 2016 local elections were taking place.

The public was aware that the ANC is particularly vulnerable during election, and therefore protests increased during this period. Communities looted shops, burned schools, and increased the scale of their protests.^{xxxi} The broadcasting of communities that are dissatisfied and the

televising of burning schools would show the rest of the public how the ANC was failing the nation. The broadcasting of violent protests would jeopardize the ANC's chances of winning the local elections. To protect the ANC, the ban of violent broadcasts was introduced. Banning the broadcasting of disgruntled communities during election periods poses a significant threat to South Africa's democracy. News outlets need to be able to hold governments accountable, and in this case, people were silenced and not permitted to voice their dissatisfaction with the government. It is the role of a public broadcaster to inform the public of ongoing situations. Particularly, during election periods, it is critical that the media report factually on protests, since it is the responsibility of a public broadcaster to represent the opinions of all South Africans, and the protestors necessitate representation as well.

Thereafter, Motsoeneng implemented censorship directives at the SABC, so that the journalists working for the SABC did not cover certain stories and overlooked a part of society that portrayed the government in a bad light. The SABC broadcasted clean, good coverage for the ANC in the run up to the 2016 local elections.^{xxxii} In one National Assembly sitting, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) would not allow Zuma to speak and chanted "Pay back the money, Pay back the money!". This was a reaction to the Public Protector's recommendation, that Jacob Zuma pays back a portion of the taxpayers' money he used to build his private home. When Mr. Calata was compiling the end-of year wrap of key highlights in Parliament, he was told he "could not use the audio, nor the visuals, and must not refer to that day".^{xxxiii}

The SABC was not the only network to suffer interference and politization from the ANC. Lukhanyo Calata was suspended from eTV News for four months after releasing a picture of Jacob Zuma on the day the President went to prison. The picture was obtained legally. However, the suspension was justified under the reasoning that Mr. Calata had failed to verify that the government had given him permission to broadcast the picture.^{xxxiv} The pressure to broadcast footage that is in favour of the ANC is felt throughout multiple broadcasting networks and newsrooms in South Africa.

CONSEQUENCES OF A CAPTURED PUBLIC BROADCASTER

If a governing party gains control over the coverage that news outlets broadcast, that party will have a direct say in the information that is provided to its citizens. The ANC, depending on the amount of control it has over the SABC and other news outlets, can influence the views of citizens, and manipulate the narrative. For instance, the SABC is required to provide all competing parties with the same airtime during election periods, so that the political party representatives have equal chances of making their case.

Phathiswa Magopeni, former Group Executive for News and Current Affairs at the SABC, was pressured by SABC CEO Madoda Mxakwe and SABC Chairperson Bongumusa Makhathini, to provide the ANC with more airtime during elections, and hold additional interviews with Cyril Ramaphosa.^{xxxv} During the local government elections in 2021, the ANC lost 50% of party support.^{xxxvi} Fikile Mbalula, ANC Head of Elections, blamed the SABC for the ANC's

bad performance, arguing that “You were in all these majority municipalities showing our weakness. I did my job to the best of my ability against a ruthless SABC.”^{xxxvii} The SABC is placed in an uncomfortable position. On one side, it relies on the ANC for funding. On the other side, the SABC is trying to divide itself from ANC control and fulfil its role as a public broadcaster. It seems that some ANC members have become used to the SABC’s support and could not imagine losing voting percentage because of bad governance, but rather because of the SABC’s “ruthless” reporting.

The consequences of a politicised SABC board were felt throughout the SABC network and South Africa. It is important to note that, despite the SABC Board being largely compromised and predominantly consisting of ANC loyalists, journalists working at the SABC were still trying to report independently, accurately, and fulfil their role as journalists to provide the country with unbiased, factual information. Journalists working at the SABC suffered credibility loss, because they were associated with Motsoeneng’s corruptness and ties to former President, Jacob Zuma. Some journalists faced threats from the public. Suna Venter, a member of the eight SABC journalists that objected to Motsoeneng’s directive to not broadcast violent protests, was kidnapped, and received death threats.^{xxxviii} Suna Venter died in 2017 of Broken Heart Syndrome, a cardiac condition that is caused by stressful emotions.^{xxxix, xl}

AFTER TRUST HAS BEEN LOST: THE SABC’S ROUTE TO RECOVERY

The SABC is en route to recovery. Public trust, SABC journalists, and editorial independence suffered, especially during Motsoeneng’s leadership, but the SABC is re-establishing itself by employing qualified journalists, restructuring the appointment of independent, politically unaffiliated Board Members, implementing guiding principles and the recommendations issued by Parliament.^{xli} It is important to raise awareness of the corruption that has taken place at the SABC.

The public needs to be informed about the critical role the media, and especially the SABC, given its vast outreach in this country, play in South Africa’s democracy. It is crucial that the public is educated on matters of misinformation and disinformation, and critically examine news. Transparency and trust between the SABC and the public must exist, and journalists working at the SABC must admit when inaccurately reporting a matter and rectify such inaccuracy. The SABC must employ qualified and independent journalists that will report in the public’s interest, especially in situations where the reportage is harmful towards the party in power. Non-governmental organizations and civil society groups need to be supported to fulfil their never-ending watchdog role.

The launch of the Zondo Commission in 2018 into state capture and the corruptness at the SABC was a good starting point to initiate transparency between the SABC and the public. The recommendations issued by the Zondo commission include Motsoeneng paying back the R11 million he received as a success fee and that he must be prosecuted. This is an important measure because it demonstrates that government institutions will impose consequences on

illegal behavior, and possibly prevent similar corruptness.^{xlii} Overall, the Zondo Commission suggests that law enforcement agencies take action and further investigate the findings, but this has only happened in a few cases.

The upcoming elections in 2024 will determine whether the SABC has regained full political independence from the ANC. The ANC, fearing being voted-out from office, might try to regain control of SABC coverage by withholding funds as to exert pressure on the SABC to broadcast ANC favorable content.^{xliii} It is therefore important that the public remain vigilant in the time before the elections, and critically analyze the news content being broadcasted, by the SABC, as well as other news outlets.^{xliiv}

THANK YOU NOTES

I would like to kindly thank Lukhanyo Calata, Anton Harber, Franz Krüger, Justine Limpitlaw, and James Myburgh, and for taking the time to talk to me about my research topic. Their insight was very valuable and helpful. I would also like to extend my gratitude towards my colleague and supervisor, Rebecca Sibanda, for guiding me and supporting me during my research process, and the finalization of this report. Thank you!

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