

SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION'S EDITORIAL COVERAGE OF COMMUNITY PROTESTS TOWARDS THE 2016 MUNICIPAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDITORIAL POLICY

T. Muswede
University of Limpopo

ABSTRACT

This paper evolves from the South African Broadcasting Corporation's decision to selectively broadcast images of protesters expressing discontent over poor service delivery, particularly the destruction of public property towards the 2016 Local Government Municipal elections. It examines the editorial policy implications for such action against the public broadcaster's role to report news truthfully, accurately and objectively. As the sole provider of public broadcasting services in the country, the SABC is charged with the mandate to serve as a vehicle that carries the country's transformation agenda through contextualising national challenges, achievements and possibilities. This places high demands on the professional judgement of the editorial team to avoid being influenced by external pressure including that from political, commercial or other sectional interests in order to promote independent, transparent and non-partisan news coverage. However, following the new policy shift, the SABC was inundated with complaints as part of the national outcry that this action was tantamount to self-censorship and has the potential to trample on people's rights to freedom of expression, access to information and above all, their right to express unfettered dissent. Premised within the normative media theoretical framework, the paper argues that the editorial shift in news coverage has the potential to impede on the citizens' rights to exercise their "freedoms" in a democratic country. Furthermore, since the SABC is funded from the national fiscus, its editorial policy review initiatives must adhere to the standard code of practice, including holding consultative meetings with stakeholders. This will, among others, help the organisation to efficiently serve the populace to whom it is accountable as regulated in the broadcasting charter.

Keywords: Public Broadcaster, Transparency, Editorial Policy, Freedom of Expression, Protests.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, South Africa has been counted among countries with the highest rate of protest action globally owing to the modes of political engagement that arguably assist ordinary people to register their vested interests to satisfy their public demands (Ngwane, 2011). These community protests, also commonly known as "service delivery protests" are usually associated with poor provision or lack of clean water and sanitation, electricity, housing, and road infrastructure. This is further compounded by issues relating to high rates of unemployment, crime and non-availability of business opportunities among citizens, particularly those living in the townships (Mottiar & Bond, 2011). The Constitution of the Republic South Africa of 1996 provides that "everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions", some scholars have noted with great concern the degree of violence and level of security risk that accompany such actions (Tshandu, 2010; Letsoalo & Molele, 2011). Nonetheless, these protests serve to highlight core issues relating to poor governance, ineffective management, poor housing administration (Mottiar & Bond, 2011) and possible poor implementation of existing policies. Hence, the country finds itself in a unique position where some critical aspects in governance operate in the defence mode against public demands for transparent governance and accountability.

After 1994, the need to reconstruct the national development goals through an all-encompassing South African identity has been the driving political imperative in South Africa. To communicate

this vision, the media, in particular public service broadcasting (PSB), has served as an important medium in the public sphere as it occupies a crucial role in strengthening democracy and the on-going process of democratisation (Horwitz, 2001). Although the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has been the only provider of public broadcasting services in the country, it was transformed from a state controlled broadcaster into a public broadcaster after 1994 (Independent Broadcasting Authority Act 153 of 1993). The transformation of the SABC into a public broadcaster was intended to ensure the establishment of a public forum that is truly reflective of the political, social and economic outlook of the country and to serve as a pillar for the regeneration of the South African society (RSA: Government Gazette, 2009:18). However, in the period leading to the local government elections held on the 3 of August 2016, the SABC Chief Operations Officer (COO), Mr Hlaudi Motsoeneng announced the public broadcaster's decision to stop showing images of protesters expressing dissent in the form of violent community protests in its editorials. Special reference was made that the decision would apply particularly where the destruction of public property was involved. Arguably, the announcement was sparked by violent community protests following the ruling of the Municipal Demarcation Board (MDB) to include Vuwani community into the new Municipality of Malamulele in Limpopo Province (Tau, 2016). Protesters had blocked roads with debris, disrupted businesses and torched at least 23 schools in the Xitsonga speaking communities of Elim-kaBhungeni under Makhado Municipality. The new editorial policy shift sparked a national outcry from various stakeholders who view such action as being tantamount to self-censorship with potential to trample on citizens' rights to freedom of expression, access to information and above all, their right to express unfettered dissent. Therefore, the study examines the editorial policy implications for such action against the public broadcaster's obligation to report news truthfully, accurately and objectively in line with the standard editorial code.

2. PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING, CIVIL RIGHTS AND MEDIA COVERAGE

2.1 The Role of the South African Broadcasting Corporation

Globally, public broadcasting is an initiative characterised by non-profit objectives, often government ownership, and involves the provision

of some form of broadcast service in the public interest (Armstrong, 2010:112). The entity is usually a government owned broadcasting company that does not focus on generating money through advertising but operates on the public-good principle. In South Africa, the SABC's duty can be understood in terms of its mandated responsibility to provide consistent, relevant and high-quality information which all South Africans can rely on as the basis for public debate, opinion formulation and achieving common goals.

2.2 The Mandate of the SABC

The SABC's mandate as a public broadcaster originates from the public broadcasting service and charter of corporation, which defines its objectives. The Charter is laid down in chapter IV of the Broadcasting Act 4 of 1999 (as amended) and requires the SABC to promote the development of South African expression by providing, in the eleven official languages, a wide range of programming that reflects South African attitudes, opinions, ideas, values, and artistic creativity. The Charter further promotes the development of South African talent in educational and entertaining programmes offering a plurality of views and a variety of news, information and analysis from a South African point of view to advance the national and public interest (RSA: Government gazette, 2009). Fundamentally, the public service broadcasting was established to promote cultural and educational programming of human interest and importance that would normally be ignored by other media platforms such as commercial channels. It is a service that is rendered to the public for pursuance of national goals relating to democracy, culture and development with a goal to overcome the short-term and unpredictable demands of elite consumers by focusing on the national interest (RSA: Government gazette, 2009). Essentially, the SABC is communally goal orientated, and focuses largely on the goals and informational needs of the entire citizenry. This is evident in its operational model which advocates for provision of services in pursuance of public goals based on accountability and responsibility, diversity and choice, contribution to national identity, social cohesion and development (RSA: Government gazette, 2009:16). This is applicable to all its 18 radio stations, 3 free-to-air television channels (SABC 1, 2 and 3) and 2 subscription-based channels (SABC Encho) and SABC news (Channel 404).

2.3 Funding Model

For a public service broadcasting, the funding mode is a central public interest principle which

ensures editorial freedom and limits the influence of advertising on content development. In a democratic environment like South Africa, diversity of opinion is intimately related to the principle of independence. Public broadcasters are not expected to raise funds in the same way as private or commercial broadcasters do. The need for independence from the corporate sector and government flows directly from the guarantee of freedom of expression and accompanying human rights (Mendel, 1999). Thus, independence and freedom from commercial pressures and government within a public broadcaster rests with the funding model as an attendant risk of interference. While it may not be assumed that the independently funded public broadcaster is immune to political interference (Ciaglia, 2015), the credibility of a public broadcaster should not be linked to its funding model alone. Instead, the level of creativity to foster the ability to be wholly independent from both the state and commercial pressures is what should be considered. In some instances, the public service broadcaster can become captured by the market where advertisers could in fact be a greater threat than any politician or political party (Mendel, 1999).

2.4 SABC Editorial Code and Programming Imperatives

Despite the significance of PSB elements such as geographic availability, national identity outlook, cultural relevance and inclusivity of minority interests, this section focuses on the editorial code, diversity of content and current affairs programming as critical aspects in understanding the editorial obligations of the SABC to society.

2.4.1 Editorial Code

The SABC editorial code provides that the public broadcaster must be independent, which entails that it should neither be state nor commercially controlled. The relationship between the SABC and the government must be as transparent as possible where the former must be able to resist political pressure, but maintain control of the provision of news and current affairs. The editorial obligation of the public broadcaster (SABC) is to address citizens' informational needs, through content that is intended to create an understanding of the citizens' cultures, histories and ideas, and contextualising the country's problems, achievements and possibilities (Fourie, 2009). Fourie further states that the SABC should be accountable to the public it serves by adhering to criteria documents such as the editorial

and programming policies as well as codes of practice drawn up to guide the public broadcaster's operations. These documents are also used as the foundation for self-assessment, which should be made available to the public.

2.4.2 Diversity in the Range and Variety of Content

As a public service broadcasting, the SABC provides a variety of programmes, including shows of an educational and informative nature. The obligation of diversity in programming derives from the public's right to know and serves to ensure that the public has access to information about a wide variety of issues and concerns including news on service delivery matters. The World Radio and Television Council (2000:10) outlines several dimensions of diversity in public broadcasting such as opinion-oriented diversity (based on individual assertions); individual and group-oriented diversity which provides important societal forces and groups with opportunities to express themselves; issue-oriented diversity that covers a sufficiently broad spectrum of issues in programmes; territorial diversity which addresses coverage of views and news from the various regions, local and supra-national areas and lastly, format diversity, which entails a balanced provision of content across the various programme categories, particularly information, entertainment, education, and consumer advice. Public broadcasting is structured so as to encourage competition in good programming rather than competition for audiences (Government gazette, 2009). This entails programmes that reflect a commitment to diversity of sources and provision of opportunity for public participation from viewers of diverse origins and socio-economic statuses. However, the number of independent content producers for South African public media remains a challenge due to, but not limited to geographic location in the various parts of the country and lack of human skills to ensure a diversity of voice and opinions.

2.4.3 Current Affairs Programming

In addition to promoting diversity of content, one of the key goals of public broadcasting is to provide quality programming which meets the informational, cultural and educational needs of the recipient population. This involves wide-ranging and full spectrum programmes which usually include news and current affairs, investigative reporting, talk shows and debates, cultural programmes, musicals and sport. In addition, the language policy requires the broadcaster to offer broadcasting services in

all of the 11 official languages of the country and provide both local and foreign content (Independent Broadcasting Authority Act 153 of 1993). While responsible scheduling informs all programming activities, on current affairs, the SABC is specifically required to report news truthfully, accurately and objectively. It is the responsibility of SABC journalists and editorial staff to ensure that their reportage does not lead to any form or perception of inequity or prejudice. In this regard, the staff may not allow their professional judgement to be influenced by pressure from political, commercial or other sectional interests (Press Freedom Commission, 2012).

2.5 Contextualisation of Community Protests and Media Coverage

An understanding of the context within which community protests occur in South Africa emanates from the mutual co-existence between the government of the day, recipients of service delivery and the media as intermediaries. This is so, because the government needs the media to communicate its policies whereas the public/society needs the media to inform them about the quality of services to be delivered. As such, the need for the media to monitor the quality of service delivery is a constitutional imperative associated with the upholding of human rights and maintenance of optimal standards of living among citizens. This constitutional obligation is further augmented by the *Batho Pele* policy framework, which implores the public to rely on the government to provide direction in line with the implementation of the National Development Programme initiatives. The principles also require that the media keep the public informed about the way in which services are provided (Tshishonga & Mafema, 2010:561). This stance concurs with Rosen's (2012:34) assertion that classifies the media as public opinion shapers that bring issues to the public's attention, affect how the issues are framed, and also give voice to stakeholders such as opinion leaders, civic groups and the citizens.

In view of the above context, service delivery must effectively be provided to the public in order to meet the basic needs of all South African citizens (Tshandu, 2010:46). Decisions about what services should be delivered is a subject that needs to be debated through public participation. However, such public participation is also subject to the guidelines of public accountability which in essence brings in the SABC as a major role player in public service delivery.

The involvement of the SABC also ensures adherence to democratic values and determines the nature of interaction that the public has with government. Thus, the media's coverage has a bearing on how the principle of public participation is realised, and therefore remains an indispensable tool to obtaining public participation and ensuring accountability in service delivery. As a "force multiplier", the media usually enhances proper adherence to the principle of public participation which requires constant communication and public involvement. This is essentially as a critical strategy for monitoring service delivery and promoting good governance (Tshandu, 2010:46-70).

3. THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

3.1 Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory came as a result of the 20th century communication revolution in reaction to the libertarian emphasis on the free flow of information. It is associated with the new dimension of media ownership and control market structure that places an obligation on media operators to act in a socially responsible manner towards society. Firstly, this was to ensure that the views of both dominant and minority groups were represented in the media, and secondly, to ensure that the public were provided with sufficient information to enable them to form independent opinions (Roelofse, 1997). The theory maintains that the media have an important function to fulfil in society, especially with regard to supporting democratic political principles and to operate as an apparatus that should serve the public without government interference. It defines guidelines that the media should follow in order to fulfil its obligation of serving the public (McQuail, 1987) including the responsibility of journalists, reporters and producers of media content. This responsibility also implores media users to become media literate and maintain high, yet reasonable expectations of the media. As a moral obligation to society, responsible journalism empowers the public with the ability to determine what is right and what is wrong, and to take action to preserve the "public good" within the context of the law. In addition, the theory postulates that society is entitled to expect high professional standards from the media practitioners and justifies intervention if the media fail to meet particular standards of practice (Roelofse, 1997).

Furthermore, the theory advances the media's collective responsibility to represent all social groups and reflect the diversity of society by giving people access to a variety of perspectives as well as the right to respond to varying viewpoints. Notably, the media should also avoid publishing information that can lead to crime, violence or social disruption, as well as information that can offend ethnic or religious minorities (Roelosfe, 1997:54). In this case, the media's obligation is for proper custody, care and safekeeping of media users' informational needs. Moreover, social responsibility entails the necessity for the editorial staff to keep society's interest as a top priority in an effort to promote collective or public interest responsibility. This concurs with the view that the media could be self-regulating by adhering to specific precepts such as the obligation to preserve freedom; self-regulation; upholding high standards of professionalism and objectivity, and balanced reporting of news (Press Freedom Commission, 2012).

3.2 Development Media Theory

This theory applies to the developing nations' adoption of alternative media paradigms in reaction to the normative approaches which have been associated with western democracies. It acknowledges that, for several decades developing nations have built their systems on a colonial legacy that made little provision for the unique conditions of poor countries. These countries' systems still lack adequate infrastructure, technical and professional skills, and resources for cultural development due to weak financial standings. This predicament is compounded by the high level of illiteracy and the diversity of languages applicable to these nations' formal and informal communication contexts (Roelofse, 1997). The theory deplores the dependency syndrome associated with the erstwhile neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism of the former colonial powers such Britain and France. After attaining independence, a majority of developing countries have advocated for the positive use of the media to promote national development, autonomy and cultural identity in order to deconstruct this syndrome (McQuail, 1987). They have adopted this approach as a development strategy to provide a delivery mechanism that thrives on the organic values of the recipients of their services. Thus, the approach is based on developmental attributes such as participation, cultural identity, community empowerment, and dialogical communication (Banda, 2003). For this reason, a new regulatory framework for broadcasting was adopted in South Africa in the early

1990s, to encapsulate a progressive broadcasting system compatible with a developmental state (Broadcasting Act 4 of 1999). In the current context, globalisation of the media and the imminent threat to poor nations' national cultural sovereignty presents potential for an overriding of local public interest imperatives. Therefore, public broadcasters in the developing world have to prioritise national content by promoting the expression of ideas, opinions and values of the society where they operate (The World Radio and Television Council, 2000).

4. THE SABC'S EDITORIAL ROLE, CIVIL RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

As highlighted by Hallin and Mancini (2004), in their daily operations, media entities tend to reflect the political, social and cultural characteristics of the environment within which they function. The discussion below describes the SABC's editorial mandate against civil rights and further examines how this interface impacts on the democratisation process in South Africa.

4.1 The Challenge to Editorial Independence

Editorial independence in any PSB system involves "maintenance of high standards and ... preservation of a high moral tone" (Scannell, 1990:13), in order for it to fulfill its obligated mandate. This is critical in ensuring professional and objective reporting of news that helps to foster accountability in governance. To ensure this, the SABC is subject to several monitoring mechanisms such as parliament, the regulator (Independent Communications Authority South Africa), Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) and Chapter 9 institutions to guard against editorial compromises. However, recent developments at the SABC have revolved around the controversial appointment of Mr Hlaudi Motsoeneng as Chief Operations Officer (COO) and his unfettered powers to make unpopular programming changes including unilaterally declaring 90% local content broadcasts on all SABC radio stations. This circus started when he took over as *de facto* Chief Executive Officer of the SABC, a position which is primarily an editorial role (Ciaglia, 2015:10). Such action irked some of the editorial staff and wide sections of civic society, leading to lawsuits where the courts reversed the SABC board's decision to appoint him as COO.

Following these events, there has been "back and forth" litigation battles until the parliamentary

committee on communications intervened by requesting the board to be dissolved amid conflicting views from stakeholders such as the ruling party (African national Congress), opposition parties and civic group organisations. As such, it can be observed that, while the SABC has drifted from a strictly controlled to a free and independent broadcaster with the advent of democracy, editorial independence remains under threat. This demonstrates the degree to which non-editorial management's personal political affiliation or preferences, may effectively interfere with the public broadcaster's editorial responsibility (Wasserman, 2010).

4.2 Effects of Gatekeeping and Self-Censorship on Delivery of Public Service

Although every news channel has its own editorial policies and code of practice, it is the editors who finally decide the news items for inclusion in their news bulletins. While most of the news items often make it to the copy stage, others get rejected due to organisational or ideological suitability in the gatekeeping process (Day, 2008:10). This often entails different forms of information control that arise based on decisions about message encoding such as selection, shaping, displaying, timing, withholding or the repetition of entire messages or message components (Kline & Tichenor, 2006:44). While gatekeeping is a system of rules, editorial checks and other verification processes important to journalism ethics, if poorly managed, it often leads to sanctioning of news. This often results from a culture of self-censorship or the so-called *don't rock the boat culture* which is on the rise at the SABC (Ciaglia, 2015:9). This culture of "fear" exerts indirect influence on the performance of the editorial team and has the potential to influence the quality and objectivity of media content delivered to the citizens (Evans, 2014:108). The work ethic gradually develops into a soft stance to appease authorities by avoiding serious critique of and any effort that may be deemed upsetting to the ruling party. Thus, self-censorship is a self-serving mechanism that does not advance the broader goals of the public broadcaster, but erodes the professional culture meant to fulfil the delivery of public service to citizens.

4.3 External Pressure Including Political Interference

Although public broadcasting entities are often exposed to the risk of politicisation for numerous reasons, the nature of their funding model is

arguably the most problematic element. In South Africa, the state has historically been one of the most effective influential agents in the public broadcasting sector due to the "parastatal" model which broadcast services are owned by the state. In the recent years, this relationship represents an indirect consequence of an overlap between the governing party and the public broadcaster (Ciaglia, 2015). Despite the subtle 'non-linear' political interference at play at the SABC, the recent legal altercations involving managers and board members over appointment of senior staff and composition of the board, are a symbolic offshoot of both the internal and external efforts to align the broadcaster towards "the powers-that-be ... particularly when it comes to controversial decisions that may offend the Government or the ruling party" (Duncan & Glenn, 2010:49). Hence, the fact that the public broadcaster finds itself dithering in a defense mode to justify both its institutional and editorial jurisprudence over who should do what and how, is symptomatic of clandestine political insinuations linked to broader power dynamics. While it is undeniable that political interference at the SABC still exists as before, Ciaglia (2015:10) observes that, the actual shift has drifted from a linear to an entrenched PSB politicization, albeit in subtler ways than hitherto. Under such conditions, it is clear that the public may lose confidence and no longer view PSB as the erstwhile espoused champion and carrier through which the transformational agenda of the country could be achieved.

4.4 Public Mandate, Public Participation and Democratisation

As the fourth pillar of the state, the media share a responsibility to contribute to political, economic and social development of any nation in ways consistent with democratic principles, particularly objective reporting. Despite the current global multi-media environment, PSB remains critical in organising and packaging content that people use to make sense of the world around them (Golding & Murdock, 2009). It is the means through which society obtains knowledge and an understanding of their immediate environment as well as experiences. In South Africa, the SABC occupies a distinctive position of trust based on its public mandate towards the delivery of public service to the people. This mandate is driven by broadcasting services in pursuance of public goals on the basis of accountability and responsibility to contribute towards national identity, social cohesion and development (RSA: Government Gazette, 2009:16). This is important in

a democracy where public participation is premised on the public's right to know. However, public participation works when citizens have adequate information about the decisions and actions of those in authority to hold them accountable. This serves to galvanise the emancipatory role that PSB plays in a democracy, as a thrust that prompts citizens to make more demands in terms of expected quality of services and fair distribution of resources (Ciaglia, 2015). Furthermore, public media also serves as an essential platform that helps to inform the electorate's decision making process regarding electoral processes and to interpret ideological positions presented by various contenders. As a result, people can elect their government based on an understanding of the democratic values that it stands for rather than on patronisation. This concurs with the view that economic and social development is more likely to be achieved and sustained in societies that are democratic and well informed (RSA: National School of Government, 2015). Thus, in this context, responsible reporting of events has the potential to enhance democracy through promoting transparent and accountable governance in the country's leadership.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper acknowledges that the post 1994 national communication paradigm in South Africa was adopted in recognition of the media's role as both the watchdog and gatekeeper in society "to serve as an intermediary between government and its publics" (Kline & Tichenor, 2005:43). In the initial years, the public broadcaster was lauded for its ability to influence and shape South Africans' understanding of the negotiated political transition and the popularisation of benchmarks of the new democracy such as the first democratic election in 1994, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Constitution of 1996. Therefore, owing to its potential to intensify the uptake of the transformational agenda, the public broadcaster ought to be as comprehensive as possible in its coverage of critical issues of national interest including national and local government elections. Given that the media are accepted as transmitters of reality and have the capacity to influence public opinion (McCombs, 2004), it is essential that their coverage of issues with potential to stir controversy be holistic, and that they adhere to standards of professional practice. The paper argues that the said editorial shift in news coverage has the potential to impede on the citizens' rights to exercise their "freedoms" in a democratic country. As such, socially

responsible journalism should not be extended to undermine freedom of expression by side-lining views of persons with dissenting opinions and marginalising "trouble-makers who provide radical critiques of the political status quo" (Wasserman, 2010:14).

Furthermore, since the SABC is funded from the national fiscus, its editorial policy review initiatives or policy shift must adhere to the standard code of practice, including the willingness to hold consultative meetings with stakeholders. This will, among others, help the organisation to efficiently serve the populace to whom it is accountable as regulated in the broadcasting charter to avoid self-serving subjective stances. To guard against political interference at the SABC, there should be willingness from political office bearers, including those in the legislature and the executive, to abstain from interfering with the operational business of the public broadcaster. The broadcaster must resist political meddling by remaining in charge of the editorial policy and current affairs programming. This has the potential to restore public confidence and may result in the SABC developing requisite social capital among its stakeholders including civic groups and the general public. This is significant in order to convince them that the broadcaster is indeed independent of external pressure and therefore can be entrusted to spearhead transformation and strengthen democracy in the country.

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