# The future of public service broadcasting in South Africa: the need to return to basic principles

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## Abstract

In this article it is argued that should the South African public service broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), be expected to play a development and nation-building role in the South African society, as it is mandated to do, then policy makers should return to the basic principles underlying the philosophy of public service broadcasting. This needs to be done in a changed media environment characterised by privatisation, internationalisation and digitisation, all leading to increased competition and commercialisation. The argument is developed against the background of a discussion on (1) the reasons for the decline of public service broadcasting, (2) the ways in which public service broadcasters are responding, (3) an overview of the state of public service broadcasting in South Africa at the time of writing (April 2003), (4) a motivation for why South Africa needs a strong public service broadcaster and (5) what can be done to secure the future of public service broadcasting in South Africa. A return to the basic principles of public service broadcasting as the only way out, is suggested. This would require a complete revision of South African broadcasting policy.

## 1 Introduction

If public service broadcasting (PSB) in the Reithian sense of the word (cf. Scannell 1990) and its values entail

- the provision of an impartial space for free expression and open debate
- the provision for all interests and tastes (plurality and diversity)
- the provision for minorities
- concern for national identity and community
- competition in good programming rather than for numbers
- the liberation rather than restriction of programme makers
- universal accessibility
- addressing audiences as citizens, not as consumers,

then public service broadcasting is on the decline.

Curran, Elstein and Gitlin (2002) opened the Internet debate, 'Open democracy: public service media – thinking for our time', with the following summary of the state of public service broadcasting:

> Public service broadcasting is in the dock. What justifies it now? Originally defended as a way of dealing with the limits of 1920s technology, it now operates in a world where there is no technical limit on the number of broadcasting channels, and where technology offers the prospects of ever greater choice and freedom of expression. Once

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defended on the ground that it alone provides programme diversity, it now confronts expanding choice through the market's niche channels. Once supported in the name of programme quality, it now struggles to define just what quality is. Once defended as a way to umpire pluralistic debate, it stands accused of cosiness with government and corporate centres of power. (See also Giddens 1998, McChesney 1997, Tracey 1998.)

From this the following questions arise: Is the ideal of public service broadcasting communication independent of both the government and the market misguided or obsolete? Does new technology offer new ways to renew and redefine the mission of public service broadcasting? Can and should a new deal be struck between public and market values? If there is a place for public service broadcasting today, what is it? If not, what should replace it?

These and related questions are the topic of serious academic discussions and concern about the future of public service broadcasting. The challenge is to redefine public service broadcasting in a changed world and media environment, and to justify its future existence.

The purpose of this article is to investigate guidelines for the securement of public service broadcasting in South Africa. The point of departure is that South Africa, being a young democracy with a multiplicity of cultures and languages and a history of racial conflict, now, more than ever in its history, needs a strong public service broadcaster. If public service broadcasting is to play a role in the development of the country, in the education of its people and in the building of the South African nation, as it is mandated to do in the South African Broadcasting Act (1999), then policy should be geared towards that end and not be dictated by market trends.

In section two of the article, the reasons for the almost universal decline of public service broadcasting and some of the ways in which public service broadcasters have reacted to it are briefly discussed. In section three an overview is given of the state of public service broadcasting in South Africa at the time of writing (April 2003). Section four addresses two questions: Why does South Africa need a strong public service broadcaster? What can be done to secure the future of public service broadcasting in South Africa? A return to the basic principles of public service broadcasting revisited against the background of the changed media environment is suggested. In the fifth and final section it is concluded that if the South African government, public broadcaster and citizens are serious about the role public service broadcasting can play in the development of society, and if they do not want the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to slip away further, then an urgent review of public service broadcasting policy is needed.

## 2  The decline of public service broadcasting: reasons and responses

It is generally accepted that public service broadcasting in the Reithian sense of the word (as outlined at the beginning of this article) started to decline when the United Kingdom (UK) and major European countries, followed by developing countries, began to adopt the United States of America's (US's) system in which commercial broadcasting and public service broadcasting are combined in a dual system, with public service broadcasting playing a

significant but no longer dominant role. The process of deregulating the European audio-visual sector continues until today with the inclusion of the audio visual dossier in the framework of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Despite renewed calls to safeguard public service broadcasting, this will probably lead to the further commercialisation of public service broadcasting.

The market-orientated approach, is based on the belief that the market is the only 'democratic' regulatory mechanism (cf. McChesney 1997:3). One of the results of the market-orientated approach (or paradigm) was that the emphasis on broadcasting to inform, educate and entertain, along with the notion of programme quality, moved to an emphasis on satisfying commercial interests by giving the public what they want in an attempt to maximise audience figures.

The adoption of this approach gave rise to concern that it could have a profound impact on the role of broadcasting to provide

- citizens with information that would allow them to participate fully in their societies
- programming that would foster the development, curiosity and education of citizens
- programming that would tap the best of a nation's cultural resources in literature, art, drama, science and history
- programming that would express national and regional cultural identity (cf Blumler 1993).

Predictions for the future (2005 and beyond) are, among other things, that profitability will continue to be the main driver. Content push and user pull will increasingly go hand in hand. Branding will increase as content pull will change from 'what do you have for me?' to 'I want you to provide me with this'. Technological innovation will continue to be a driver, including the expansion of the potential of broadband and mobile technologies and with that the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to lower costs for content production, delivery and billing in relation to paying for specific content (cf Punie *et al.* 2002:12–16).

The change in broadcasting philosophy was thus and is still accelerated by technological developments that brought about digitisation, convergence of media technologies, and the provision of new delivery platforms (cf. Chalaby & Segell 1999). This led, among other things, to deregulation with, as a result, increased consumer choice, increased competition in local and global markets, the rise of niche markets, an increased battle for advertising revenue, and an increased battle to find new ways of funding.[1] As far as content is concerned, it is argued that the market approach has led to increased popularisation, repetition, less depth and less diversity despite the rise of the so-called niche channels.

As far as regulation is concerned, the main argument in the new paradigm is that regulation should the contributions of technology over favour to the creation of a vibrant economy and to the convenience of consumers. Freedom of expression is interpreted to mean, first of all, diversity. Governments are increasingly seen not to intervene but to rely on the industry's self-imposed controls and perceptions of social responsibility.

Public service broadcasters responded to the new environment by changing their programming strategies (eg new and popular programme formats such as game shows and

talk shows of which the quality is more than often dubious), by moving towards thematic channels and narrowcasting, by extending popular programme formats, by co-operating with independent producers/joint ventures, by exploring supplementary sources of revenue (apart from advertising, sponsorships, subscriptions, etc), by rationalising working practices, by providing additional value-added services (eg time-shifting and extended coverage), and by providing of services that go beyond traditional broadcasting, for example on-line services.

To be able to do this, public broadcasters need to convince governments, competition regulators and the private sector of the need to exploit public funds (eg licence fees) for commercial ventures, the need to explore global multimedia enterprises as part of its public service obligation, and to collaborate with commercial partners to provide commercially funded channels and services.[2] The trend of *mixed funding*,[3] however, was/is not met without political hostility and opposition from the private sector.

Typical criticism is that public service broadcasters launch new commercial services in a fragile and crowded advertising-funded broadcasting market; that the tendency in public service organisations to separate commercial and public service activities are not necessarily in the interest of fair trading; that there is too often a lack of accountability within public service broadcasting organisations; and that there is a decline in the public service ethos against the background of their growing commercial interests.[4]

In short, public service broadcasters are trying to merge two opposing paradigms. In the first the emphasis is on public service broadcasting as a cultural entity crucially connected to democratic and cultural objectives involving plurality, diversity and impartiality. It is guided by legislation securing the social functions of public service broadcasting. In the second paradigm, public service broadcasting is primarily seen to function in a media market governed predominantly by free market principles, convergence of technology and globalisation. Here the policy emphasis is on addressing technical and industrial issues (cf. Steemers 2002).

The efforts of public service broadcasters to forge the merging of paradigms gave rise to questions such as:

- Is it still possible to distinguish between public and commercial broadcasting?
- Why not leave public service broadcasting obligations to the private sector?
- If broadcasting is left to the market, will it necessary lead to market failure[5] in terms of price control and access?

The opinion that only public service broadcasting can provide a balanced and impartial public sphere is increasingly questioned as a motivation for its future existence. In this regard it is argued that the broadcast environment is lately just as diverse as the print media, offering a variety of views and opinions. Its audiences have become increasingly interactive, changing the nature of broadcasting as a public sphere. Diversity and technological developments, including media convergence, necessitate new ways of thinking about the regulation of media ownership and cross-ownership. Ways in which it would no longer be necessary to place public service broadcasting on a pedestal with regulatory and financial

benefits that are increasingly seen to be unfair. (The argument that the private sector can provide public services, and the question of whether there is still a need for public service broadcasting, will be addressed in section 4.)

The dilemma facing public service broadcasters is thus clear. On the one hand, they have to adhere to public service obligations. On the other hand, if they fail to rise to technological and competitive challenges, they cannot afford their public service obligations and will lose their audiences in the process. As Steemers (2002:19) formulates it:

> if they seek to concentrate their efforts on popular programming, then they are bound to be accused of neglecting their public service remit, which also threatens their claim to licence fee funding. If they occupy the cultural high ground to provide those things which commercial media do not, they risk marginalisation and cutting themselves adrift from public support and ultimately adequate funds.

How has public service broadcasting in South Africa positioned itself within the new media environment and with regard to this dilemma? In the next section a brief overview of the state of public service broadcasting in South Africa is given.

## 3 Public service broadcasting in South Africa

South African public service broadcasting finds itself in the same position as public service broadcasting in the rest of the world and most countries in Africa.[6] It is caught up between two opposing forces: on the one hand, it is under the same global economic and technological pressures as experienced in the developed world. As such, policy and some of the developments in South African broadcasting follow those in highly developed countries, where public service broadcasting is under pressure from economic and technological trends contributing to increased competition. On the other hand, it is operating in a developing country with the same economic, political, cultural and social problems facing all developing countries. These are problems that necessitate a strong public service broadcaster committed to the developmental needs of society, as will be argued later on.

### 3.1 Public service obligations

In its main broadcasting policy documents, the crucial role of South African broadcasting in development and nation building is emphasised.[7] Since South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the main objectives of broadcasting policy has been to address

- inequality in infrastructure distribution
- inequality in resources allocation (frequencies, human resources and finance)
- inequality in language, cultural and educational programming (given that English and foreign programming dominate the system)
- lack of diversity and choice
- lack of universal coverage and access.

This focus in policy is motivated against the background of the South African Constitution which guarantees fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, the right to equality,

choice and diversity, the equality of all languages, and the right of all South Africans to promote their cultures.

Public service obligations are clearly formulated for all three tiers of the South African broadcasting system,[8] that is for the national public service broadcaster the SABC, and for private (commercial) and community broadcasters. In the case of the public service broadcaster it is emphasised that public service broadcasting should and could play a powerful role in 'the task of nation building and to construct a vibrant and democratic dispensation fostering national and cultural identity, equality and respect for the fundamental rights of all South Africans as enshrined in the new constitution' (cf. Department of Communications 1998). It is also acknowledged that at this stage in South Africa's history, the majority of South Africans relies on broadcasting, usually radio, to meet its needs related to information and entertainment.

Policy is thus clear about the need and support for a strong and committed broadcasting service that

● should cater for the needs and aspirations of all sections of society, particularly the underprivileged and historically disadvantaged
● should ensure universal availability and access
● should meet the education, information and entertainment needs of all the people.

This role is supported in the local content policy which is based on the premise that the more South African broadcasting is defined by programmes about *other cultures* and from the creative output of *others*, the less the 'South African way of life', values and contexts are reflected.[9]

However, despite 'state-of-the-art' policy, the SABC is criticised for not living up to its mandate. The argument raised in a Canadian policy document (cf. Canada 2001(a)) that 'the gap between policy and practice is such that the promise of public broadcasting in Canada has more often than not been a pious wish', also applies to South Africa.

## 3.2 Criticism against the SABC

At a conference in late 2000, organised by the South African Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and entitled 'Taking Stock of the SABC', a wide spectrum of civic organisations and trade unions were unanimous in their condemnation of the SABC as public broadcaster for its failure to carry out its democratic mandate. As van Zyl (2002:3) observes: 'The most powerful and technologically advanced public broadcaster in Africa was condemned by the very constituency that brought it into being.'

The SABC is criticised, among other things, for mismanagement, corruption and nepotism,[10] a drop in the quality of news and documentaries, and too few local productions. In short, there is rising discontent that very little has materialised of the vision for public service broadcasting as formulated during the years of the struggle against apartheid by the Jabulani Group, the Campaign for Open Media and the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting.[11]

These groups foresaw a public broadcaster that would form the core of the broadcasting system, set the standards for broadcasting in South Africa, be accountable to the people who constitute its audiences and not only to its sources of funding, be responsible not only for entertainment and unbiased information, but also for educational programming, and that would reduce advertising as a source of revenue.

Concern about the community radio sector is rising.[12] This sector was expected to play a crucial role in development and nation building. Criticism is that very little has materialised of communities' own involvement in community stations. Programmes increasingly tend to focus on popular music and talk shows, making it difficult to distinguish between community and commercial radio stations. Further concerns are that little to no training is provided, that funding is insufficient, and that there is an antagonistic attitude on the part of the SABC that tends to see community radio as threatening to its own radio base and its advertising income (cf. van Zyl 2002:18).

As far as news and current affairs are concerned, the SABC enjoys considerable credibility amongst its audiences. Almost 91 per cent of the adult population of South Africa rates SABC news as (most believable), 77 per cent rates the electronic media as the most objective news source. About 90 per cent is confident that the SABC news is unbiased and fair. As a source of information, 76 per cent of the adult population relies on radio, 65 per cent on television, 19 per cent on newspapers, 3,4 per cent on magazines and 0,7 per cent on the Internet. By far the majority of adults prefers local and regional news (cf SABC 2000/01).

However, when it comes to quality, the SABC is criticised for broadcasting too few current affairs programmes and that news is offered in sound-bite formats that lack depth and a diversity of opinions. The Media Monitoring Project, based on a content analysis, recommended in 2000 that the SABC should offer more diversity of views and report in a more balanced and fair manner (cf Media Monitoring Project 2000).

As far as local content goes, the SABC meets, and in some cases even exceeds, present quotas, but the criticism is that this needs to be done without broadcasting repeats. Furthermore, the quality of locally produced game shows and local music in terms of the cultural and educational value of these genres is questionable (cf Mufweba 2002).

Of the original policy ideals to establish a curriculum-based educational channel nothing has materialised as yet (except for joint private–public initiatives). Criticism against present educational programming is that there is a lack of a clear definition and distinction between adult, early childhood and non-formal public education (e.g. health, human rights and civic education).

There is a general feeling of discontent among the African and Afrikaans language groups that the SABC is doing and has done, far too little to promote their languages and cultures, as the SABC has been mandated to do. This applies especially to television (cf. note 14 for a breakdown of language services).

The splitting-up of the SABC into a dual system is seen to be a further step in the decline of public service. Keeping in mind that the two entities will (according to the Act) be administered separately (implying separate management teams and financial reporting

systems), the argument is that, although the intention may be the promotion and self-sustainability of public services, restructuring may lead to the situation in which the SABC is even more unable to meet its public service broadcasting challenges. The dual system may amplify existing organisational problems at the SABC which, despite its changed mandate since 1994, has 'regressed into an over-managed organisation with one manager for every three workers and thus less money for programming' (cf. Duncan 2000).

Such an internal market approach (one entity being financially dependent on the other and in which internal units trade with one another) does not necessarily lead to efficiency, but more often to increased bureaucracy. Above all, it leads to an expensive infrastructure. Within the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for example, it is argued that these changes contributed to huge financial and administrative expenses, and a bloated management structure which lead to a situation in which money is taken away from the core business, namely programming.

## 3.3 The SABC's struggle

In fairness to the SABC, it must be acknowledged that it has to operate in a far more complex media environment than ever before in its history. Apart from managerial and organisational problems, the main reason for not achieving the goals of its public service mandate is increased competition due to technological convergence, privatisation, liberalisation, commercialisation and internationalisation.[13] On top of this, the SABC's task is further complicated by its legal mandate to cater for 11 official languages and their respective cultures.[14] This is an unenviable task that has to be fulfilled with limited financial resources.

Less than 3 per cent of the SABC's funding comes from government (cf Playing the game ... 2002). In the 2001–02 financial year the bulk (about 83%) of the SABC's revenue was derived from advertising and commercial sponsorships which, given the world-wide economic decline, is under pressure. Television licence fees generated R355 million (compared to R345 million in the previous year).[15] This means that only 70 per cent (compared to 64% in the previous year) of the 6,3 million households with television sets paid licence fees. The SABC calculated that 1,8 million viewers have not paid their television licences. In the previous year, debt collecting agencies and external inspectors, (the utilisation of whom is going to be increased) uncovered 70 898 pirate viewers. By so doing, R158,5 million was generated and the piracy rate dropped from 36 per cent to 30 per cent. (Cf. Ensor 2002(a).) In the 2000–01 financial year,[16] this task had to be executed with a limited budget of R2 185 million, made up as follows: advertising R1 444 million,[17] sponsorships R243 167 000, licence fees R344 726 000 and other sources of income R152 830 000 (cf. SABC 2000–01).

After being the monopoly broadcaster for more than four decades, the SABC now has to compete with 14 private radio stations, 1 free-to-air private national terrestrial television channel, e-tv,[18] and MultiChoice,[19] provider of the subscription television channel M-Net and the DStv (Digital Service TV) satellite bouquet with more than 50 channels including BBC World, CNN, Sky News, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, MTV, various sport channels (SuperSport), various niche channels, and various community channels including a successful channel for the Afrikaans-speaking population, namely kykNET. Furthermore, the

SABC has to compete with over 100 community radio stations of which about 80 are operational.

### 3.3.1 Change in ownership regulation

It is predicted that the SABC has only begun to feel the impact of competition. Present restrictive ownership regulations are about to change.[20]

Late in 2002 Icasa launched a discussion paper on the review of ownership and control of broadcasting services and existing commercially sound broadcasting licences. Public hearings on this paper started on 10 February 2003. Based on the hearings and submissions received, the authority will publish a position paper and formulate written recommendations regarding possible amendments to the relevant Independent Broadcasting Association (IBA) Act and the Broadcasting Act.

At the launch of the paper, the chair of Icasa said that the aim of the paper was/is to find answers to the following issues: how to promote direct foreign investment; assist the industry in continuing on a steady growth path and consolidate, whilst, at the same time, promoting the policy goals of black empowerment and diversity of ownership; achieve goals with regulatory mechanisms that are different or more effective than those currently enshrined in the Act (cf. Icasa 2002). Nothing was raised about safeguarding the future of the public service broadcaster in South Africa.

From the public hearings it was clear that most commercial broadcasters want the regulations to be relaxed (cf. *Star*, 10 February 2003). The majority of broadcasters called for the SABC's commercial broadcasting services to be privatised so that the corporation becomes a 'pure' public broadcasting service (cf. Mabuza 2003(a)). They are also in agreement that they want to see an end to the SABC's dominance of radio and television in South Africa. Worded by Stan Katz, head of African Media Entertainment's broadcasting division, the corporation had an advantage over other operators in running 19 radio stations and 3 television stations, making it the dominant player in broadcasting in the country. He argued that 'if we want a thriving, globally competitive broadcasting industry, we cannot have the SABC raking in 62 per cent of the total advertising revenue in radio and television' (cf. Classen 2003).

On foreign ownership, which is currently restricted to 20 per cent, broadcasters want to see it being raised to 40 per cent. Although this could be relaxed South African media companies are in agreement that foreign media companies should not be allowed to gain control of South African broadcasting assets.

To defend itself, the SABC argued that it received limited public funding to support the fulfilment of its broadcasting mandate and was largely reliant on advertising and sponsorship as a source of income; the Broadcasting Act allowed the corporation to run public commercial services to subsidise the public services; and that many public broadcasters around the world were now reliant on multiple sources of funding, some of which are commercial. According to the SABC, there are checks and balances to ensure transparency in the activities of the SABC's public commercial services (cf. Mabuza 2003)(b).

At the time of writing, the outcome of the hearings was not yet known and no position paper with recommendations has yet been published. It is, however, expected that Icasa will ease ownership regulations to introduce a second wave of transformation of the broadcasting regulatory environment. The first (and present) one was introduced in the early nineties after the fall of apartheid to curtail those who already had broadcasting assets from enquiring more (mainly the Afrikaans and English newspaper groups), and to encourage black empowerment through media ownership. These regulations are now seen to be out of step with the demands of sustainable economic transformation. They are seen to inhibit the economic stability and growth of the very new media owners who benefited from the first wave of transformation. Although this proposed change of regulations is welcomed, some industry players are concerned that additional competition may put struggling stations and channels under more financial strain.

In April 2002 Icasa and the Competition Commission have also agreed to work closely together on deals taking place in the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors. While they will still make independent decisions, the aim is to create certainty for companies in the sector. This move is seen to be necessary against the background of the dynamic growth expected in the industry. (Cf. South Africa 2002, Competition Commission.)

### 3.3.2  Increased competition

While waiting for a new regulatory framework, industry players have to find new ways of growth outside the regulated sectors, leading to further increased competition for the SABC. However, some of the enterprises could also create new revenue opportunities for the SABC. A first example is Primedia's (owner of, amongst other assets, one FM and two AM radio stations) new ventures Rank TV and Rank Branding. Rank TV involves setting up giant television screens at taxi ranks across South Africa. The SABC will supply material for Rank TV. A second example is TV Africa, a free-to-air television network operating from South Africa (but not broadcasting in South Africa) to African countries. It plans to extend its programme provision from 7 to 26 African countries reaching over 30 million homes across the continent. In June 2002 TV Africa unveiled a US$1,3 million South African-based production studio (cf. TV Africa gears up for expansion ... 2002). Obviously, this means increased competition for the SABC's 'Africa' channels, namely SABC Africa and Africa-2-Africa which are provided on the independent MultiChoice DStv satellite platform and which can be seen as the SABC's first move towards expansion into the rest of Africa.[21] In this regard, the SABC is already experiencing fierce competition from MultiChoice.

Sport, together with soap operas and game shows, is the most popular genre on South African channels. As elsewhere in the world, the public service broadcaster is in strong competition with private broadcasters for gaining the broadcasting rights of main sporting events such as soccer, cricket, rugby and tennis.

In March 2003 the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) released its latest viewing figures, showing that two of the SABC's three television channels and M-Net (the subscription channel) had fewer viewers than e.tv. Although being the youngest of all the

television channels (4 years old) e.tv had an increase of 22 per cent over the previous 12 months. The figures were:

M-Net: 2    149 000
SABC 3:     5 517 000
SABC 2:     8 634 000
e.tv:       9 719 000
SABC1:      15 027 000

(cf. *Mail & Guardian* 14–20 March 2003).

In the media, e.tv's growth is branded as being 'spectacular'.

Small wonder that the SABC announced a number of 'strategic' changes to its scheduling, programme content and style of presentation, based on the recommendations of an Australian consultant. One of the changes the SABC announced was the scheduling of its main news bulletin on SABC3 to be moved from 20:00 to 19:00 – to coincide with the screening time of e.tv's main evening bulletin.

In radio, independent regional radio stations gained ground with advertisers and audiences. This, together with the increased competition from e.tv resulted in the SABC Television's market share decline from 65 per cent to 61 per cent and that of SABC Radio from 56 per cent to 51 per cent for the financial year 2001–02 (*SABC annual report* 2001/02). This induced a fall in operating revenue from R2,18 billion to R2,17 billion. With a decline in operating expenses and a rise in income interest, the SABC managed to produce a surplus of R7m (up from R5m) in the previous financial year (cf. Ensor 2003(a)).

### 3.3.3  Strategies to survive

As the shift towards privatisation increases, commercial and budgetary pressures force the SABC to adopt a posture increasingly resembling that of the private sector.

As a way out of its dilemma, and following foreign examples such as referred to in section 2, the SABC is now in the process of restructuring into a dual system. The Broadcasting Act (1999) provides for the SABC to be split up into a commercial and a public service entity. According to the Act, the SABC will cease to be a parastatal and become a publicly owned company with the government as the 100 per cent shareholder. There will be two operational entities (1) a public broadcasting service consisting of 11 (language-based) radio stations and 2 television channels (SABC 1 and SABC 2), and (2) a public *commercial* broadcasting service (the commercial radio services and the television channel SABC3 (with foreseen multimedia aspirations and virtual technology)). As already referred to in point 3.2, the splitting up of its SABC and the possible impact thereof on the further decline of public service has been met with criticism.

This and new criticism flamed up when the government introduced a controversial broadcasting amendment Bill in 2002. The Bill was regarded as a brazen attempt by government to take political control of the country's airwaves (cf. Ensor 2002 b, c, d, e and Smuts 2002.)

Some of the main objectives of the Bill were to (1) require the SABC's Board to develop policies on programme and editorial content that would have to be approved by the Minister of Communications, (2) create two new regional television channels (one in the north and one in the south of the country) to broadcast in the 10 official languages under-represented in SABC broadcasts and (3) to provide further support for the splitting-up of the SABC's public and commercial functions into separate operational divisions.

The first objective was seen as a direct attempt by the government to control editorial and programme content. It was criticised for being unconstitutional and for undermining the independence and credibility of the SABC.

The second objective, the creation of two new television services, was seen to be a usurpation of the powers of the regulator (Icasa), which is constitutionally empowered to issue broadcasting licences. The government could not direct how Icasa should issue licences, nor could it assume its functions. The roll-out of these services would be a costly exercise which could not be placed in jeopardy by the risk of a constitutional challenge. The original draft of the Bill stipulated that the channels would be independent of the SABC. It was later relented that they would be subsidiaries of the SABC and would fall under the direct control of the SABC Board.

In defending the controversial Bill, the Minister of Communications, Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, criticised the broadcasting system, including the SABC, for continuing to be dominated 'by content that most of the time is about far-away countries and events that have no bearing to [sic] our existence. At times foreign rulers are given carte blanche access to our living rooms to propagate their propaganda when our own leaders cannot enjoy the privilege to air their views on important matters about our country.' She saw the amendment Bill as laying the foundation for the expansion of the broadcasting system in order to provide more diversity of service to all segments of the population (cf. *Star*, 13 December 2002).

After intensive deliberations in and outside parliament[22] the Bill's original proposal about the SABC's editorial, language and journalistic policies subject to ministerial approval had been replaced with the referral of these policies to Icasa (the regulator) which is, as it is, responsible for ensuring that the SABC complies with its founding charter. With regard to the legislative creation of two regional television channels without regard for Icasa's licensing role, it was decided that provision would be made in the new licence to be issued to the SABC when it is incorporated as a public company. The clause would be worded in such a way that Icasa's role in deciding upon and issuing licences was not undermined. The process of splitting the SABC into two entities is continuing.

Although the differences were settled and a Broadcasting Amendment Act, 2002 (Act 64 of 2002) was passed in February 2003, it remains to be seen whether the division of the SABC into a dual system will empower the SABC to fulfil its public service mandate more efficiently and whether the proposed two additional regional television channels would contribute to parity in language provision.

In the meantime, and as a result of growing competition, there is little distinction between the programme content and scheduling of the SABC and that of the private sector. The focus is mainly on imported entertainment, the bulk of which is foreign series and films. On radio

the emphasis is mainly on talk shows and popular music. This is happening when *distinctiveness* is increasingly seen to be a *raison d'etre* for the future existence of public service broadcasting, as will be discussed later on. In terms of financing, there is also no reason why the private sector should not complain about unfairness. The SABC continues to dominate the advertising scene.

As far as technology is concerned, the SABC is gradually coming on board. In February 2003 it announced its plans for digitisation. The plan involves a capital investment programme of between R800 million and R900 million over the next five to eight years. The first step was the acquisition of a R52 million mobile broadcasting unit which would allow the SABC to improve its coverage of live events, and to grow revenue by renting the facility and crew to other broadcasters to cover events in Africa and abroad (cf. Lourens 2003).

From the above it is clear that the SABC is following the same direction as public service broadcasting in most of the developed countries. To stay adrift in a competitive market it is conceivable that the SABC will follow international market and technological trends. However, as has happened with public service broadcasting elsewhere, it is losing its power as a coherent symbolic form of expression and thus its possible social influence and significance. Its products are not differentiated from those offered by commercial broadcasters. The SABC's focus is no longer on audiences to be addressed and communicated with, but on consumers who are expected to consume broadcast products. In short, content is no longer perceived and conceptualised as a semiotic construct, in other words, as a communication act with potential meanings and as an act towards the stimulation of dialogue. Content is predominantly regarded as a product to be sold to the biggest audience possible. For this there are predictable and standardised recipes. Even more so, there are markets on which to purchase these products, mainly from the US. This discontent with the SABC has recently been echoed by the Federation of the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) when its secretary-general, Zwelinzima Vali, declared that the SABC has failed to fulfil its mandate to inform and educate South African citizens about their society (cf. Rossouw 2003).

It was argued at the beginning of this article that despite the fact that South African public service broadcasting finds itself in the same dilemma as that of public service broadcasters in almost all of the rest of the world, South Africa needs a strong public service broadcaster. Two questions emerge: Why does South Africa need a strong public service broadcaster? What can be done to secure the future of public service broadcasting in South Africa? In the following part these two questions are addressed. This is done, knowing that solutions towards the securement of public service broadcasting are experimental and riddled with more uncertainties than certainties, that no clear model has yet emerged, and that this situation of insecurity is even more acute in developing countries such as South Africa.

## 4  Why does South Africa need a strong public service broadcaster?

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the media's role and social responsibility, or political, sociological and philosophical theories about nation, nationhood and nation building (cf. James 1996; Turner 1993). Neither is it the purpose to give an overview of the

role of the media in development and the theories, approaches and projects of development communication.[23]

Suffice to say that there is sound empirical proof that the media can contribute significantly to sensitising the public's awareness of development needs and projects, to mobilise participation, and to play a significant role in nation-building, especially in times of political and social transformation when feelings of insecurity and discontinuity exist (cf, eg Anderson 1983.) This is especially true of public service broadcasting and one of the main reasons for its coming into existence.

The development needs of South Africa are well known. Despite progress in the fields of telecommunications, housing, education, the provision of basic health, and so on, 20 to 28 million of a population of 41 million still live in poverty.,39 per cent do not have a stable source of food and 25 per cent earn less than R100 a month. Although the latest reports predict a slowdown, one in nine South Africans is HIV infected (cf. South Africa 2002, Department of Social Development).

Against the background of such figures, it is obvious that there is a need for a strong public service broadcaster who could, through its various programmes and genres, contribute to an acute awareness of the problems and measures (or lack of measures) to overcome these problems, to contextualise and debate them, and to sensitise the public towards finding and contributing to solutions. In some of the SABC's programmes this is done, but despite the SABC's 'social responsibility announcements',[24] they are few and far between. The general impression is that more can be done, and that this will not be the case once the SABC is further commercialised.

The same applies to the public service broadcaster's contribution to nation-building. Since 1994, South Africa has been going through a rigorous process of political and social transformation that affects the life of each citizen and the organisation and culture of each South African institution. There are many uncertainties and even anxiety among those who have lost their power and positions as white citizens. At the same time, discontent among the black population is growing as their expectations are not met and the gap between a new black élite and those who have not gained much since South Africa became a democracy grows.

To tell these people's stories, to bring them together through programming that has as its objective to create understanding of one another's cultures, histories and ideals, and to contextualise the country's problems, achievements and possibilities are of the utmost importance. Public service broadcasting is ideally situated to this.

However, getting the SABC to play such a role, in short, to be a true public service broadcaster, will depend on a renewed commitment from the government, policy makers and the SABC about (1) the *need* for public service broadcasting and (2) a return to the values and *principles* of public service broadcasting. Although present South African policy fully provides for, and acknowledges, the importance of public service broadcasting, when it comes to implementation, this commitment crumbles under the economic and technological pressures of the market, and the commitment as currently formulated in policy documents simply becomes symbolic and little if anything but lip service and political rhetoric.

## 4.1 The need for public service broadcasting

Within the Europe Union (EU) the battle against American film and television imperialism and against the US's demand to liberalise audio-visual services (be it in the negotiating chambers of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), at UNESCO, and within the WTO is based on the belief that the *cultural nature* of the audio-visual industry justifies national protection.

Despite the changed media landscape, characterised by (1) the transformation of broadcasting from a simple predictable monopoly into a complex, more volatile ecology, (2) in which the public service broadcaster is just one of a number of players fighting for survival, each with their own aspirations, (3) more diversification and individualisation of information sources, (4) fragmented audiences and (5) in which national systems are merging into a single global system made up of a mix of public, private and other types of broadcasters, public service broadcasting is becoming more essential.

In the literature this argument is supported by views such as that only public service broadcasting can

- perform the function of a national point of reference and of national identification (cf. Rumphorst 2001)
- be one of the few links in the individualist mass society that could share something with and between, citizens in a strongly hierarchical and individualist society (cf. Wolton in Van den Boogaard 1998)
- emerge to be the only established medium that can still be said to place social and cultural concerns before the imperatives of the marketplace (cf. Raboy 2001)
- maintain a common national culture in the postmodern era of fragmented communities and fractured identities (cf. McNair 2002).[25]

It is in the context of this kind of thinking and argumentation that the idea is beginning to emerge in both the cultural and value-for-money perspectives that public service broadcasting can be re-legitimised and the obstacles in its way can begin to appear less daunting.

As far as legitimacy is concerned, the inclusion in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty of a European Protocol in favour of public service broadcasting is an important matter of principle. Not only did this declaration demonstrate the power of politicians to resist commercial pressures, it was also the only concrete example to date of a cultural exception to the new rules of deregulation that are being applied by transnational authorities and an step towards the need to safeguard well-funded public broadcasting institutions as essential to the health of the media in a democratic society.

In Canada (Canada 2001), which borders the world's largest producer of audio-visual entertainment and which is constantly under the threat of American media imperialism, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) response to their government's *White Paper on A new future for communications* also affirms the role of a strong public service broadcaster to produce programmes that will

- enable (Canadian) citizens to understand one another in a diverse cultural society
- develop a national and community consciousness
- help to shape their own solutions to social and political problems
- inspire the imagination of their children and express their hopes
- foster civic understanding, tolerance and acceptance
- foster national pride and confidence
- build their reputation in the world.

In short, the place of, and need for, public service broadcasting are motivated against the background of the belief that a stable democracy presupposes respect and understanding, a sharing of views and a common political language.

To the growing view that the private sector can provide the kind of public service broadcasting obligations as referred to above, Rumphorst (1998) provides a convincing argument to the contrary. He shows how broadcasting compared to 'traditional' public services such as telecommunications, public transport, water and electricity supply, postal services, and so on, is not just about providing a universal service in the sense of access, which is a concrete, precisely defined result. Broadcasting is first and foremost about the provision of a cultural product that speaks to the human mind, taste, emotion, intellect and spirit. As such, compared to, for example telecommunications and public transport, it is not easily measurable and it is almost impossible for different providers to arrive at the same clearly defined result. How can different (private) companies, for example, deliver the same point of reference for all members of the public, provide the same factor for social cohesion and integration of all individuals, groups and communities, be the same forum for public discussion, adhere to the same high ethical and quality standards, and so on?

These aims of public service broadcasting are non-quantifiable, non-definable. As a not-for-profit organisation, a public service broadcasting organisation will, by definition, strive to meet those goals as best it can with the various financial resources at its disposal.

Without suggesting that the Treaty of Amsterdam (supported by UNESCO's Action Plan for Cultural Policies for Development (1998)) has solved the problems of public service broadcasting in Europe, or has made the audio-visual sector an uncontested terrain no longer under market pressures, South Africa needs a similar kind of treaty in which the government accepts its responsibility to implement policy that would foster public broadcasting values and objectives outside the sphere of commerce. As in the case of the Treaty of Amsterdam, such policy would illustrate the power of politicians to resist commercial pressures and to make a cultural exception to the new rules of deregulation that are being negotiated and applied by transnational authorities. It would illustrate the government's commitment to the democratic, social and cultural needs of society and to the need to preserve media pluralism. It would, in the words of Raboy (2001), legitimate public service broadcasting at a time when its basis is under attack on both ideological and economic grounds. It would link public broadcasting to the question of democracy, emphasise its socio-cultural nature as a public service, and underscore the distinctive role of public broadcasting in an otherwise uniformly commercial system.

## 4.2  A return to the principles of public service broadcasting

After reaffirming the place and need for public service broadcasting, the government, policy makers, and the SABC, in the second phase, need to re-affirm the basic values and *principles* of public service broadcasting. Such reaffirmation presupposes a revaluation of the principles of public service broadcasting in the context of the changed media environment, and in terms of own needs and goals.

Good policy requires a socially agreed-on set of principles. Without larger principles or goals in mind, any policy becomes its own end, as is often argued in terms of South African policies, including broadcasting policy. Although legislation acknowledges the role of, and provides for, public service broadcasting in South Africa, it is not clear what should be achieved with public service broadcasting, especially in terms of development, nation-building and cultural needs and ideals. This is because South African broadcasting policy is not convincingly based on the acceptance of, and agreement about, a clear set of broadcasting principles entrenched in the nature of broadcasting as a communication medium. A close analysis of the Broadcasting Act (1999) and the Green and White Papers on Broadcasting reveals that South African policy, despite its lip service to public service, development and nation-building, is overwhelmingly technocracy, economy and management driven. It neglects the intrinsic communicative nature and value of the broadcast media. Put in another way, it is more concerned with technology and its possibilities, with economy and management than with communication which, in the end, is what broadcasting is and should be all about. It is a generic policy for broadcasting, and despite convergence, does not take the intrinsic differences between the different broadcast media into account. It is almost as if the technological developments that have led to convergence and a blurring of the boundaries between media, have also blurred a vision and objectives for and with what the different broadcast media can do and should achieve. It should be kept in mind that visions and objectives are human activities that empower people to use technology in ways that fit their needs and ideals.

To give an example: the principles of public service broadcasting were originally conceptualised in terms of radio. However, policy seldom takes the fundamental differences between radio and television into account. With a few exceptions, the same public service values are transposed on television which were originally applicable to radio news, entertainment and education. Despite the intrinsic differences between the broadcast media, policy visions and missions continue to be formulated in a generic way for broadcasting as a conglomeration of content that is transmitted terrestrially, via satellite and/or cable.

Much of the confusion surrounding definitions and implementation could be overcome if clearer distinctions, especially in terms of visions, missions and charters are made between radio and television. This is especially true for developing countries in many of which radio is still the dominant, and in terms of cost and use the most accessible, medium.[26]

Returning to the need to rediscover and reaffirm basic public broadcasting principles, the next section provides a brief overview of the principles as interpreted in numerous publications on the reinterpretation of public service broadcasting in a changed media environment. The purpose of this overview is to provide a yardstick against which progress

or lack of progress with public service broadcasting in South Africa can be measured. The actual measurement of progress or lack of progress is altogether a different task and topic. However, against the background of the criticism against the SABC earlier in this article, and which acts as proof of general discontentment with the public broadcaster, it can be a worthwhile instrument for the government, the public broadcaster and South African policy makers with which to take stock.

The point of departure is that principles are general rules or propositions and jargon-free policy goals on which subsequent actions can be based. They underscore the values that a nation wishes to privilege with regard to a phenomenon, in this case the nation's broadcasting system; help to protect access to communication systems and content; set minimum standards of conduct; allow governments to shape communication systems before special interests become entrenched and change becomes more difficult; provide a firm foundation on which to build coordinated and comprehensive legislation; provide a benchmark for assessing whether specific regulations achieve their desired goals; foster linkages necessary to coordinate between national and international policy, law and technological developments; and, they are a superior basis for legislation to their alternative – narrowly conceived laws formulated in response to narrowly framed problems (cf Stein & Sinha 2002:418).

Although South Africa may, on paper, have a highly developed broadcasting policy, it can be asked whether the policy is based on South African-defined broadcasting principles, especially principles – related to public service broadcasting – that are geared towards feasible actions and goals within the South African context. The problem may be that South African broadcasting policy was developed too hastily to 'come on board' and was too much under the influence of foreign consultants who often operate more in the interest of transnational corporations, leaning towards, if not dominated by, the market paradigm, and not necessarily in the interest of the country and its needs and circumstances. The result is a 'narrowly conceived legislative framework formulated in response to narrowly framed problems'.

This overview is based on an analysis, personal synthesis and reinterpretation of some of the aspects addressed in a comprehensive anthology, *Public service broadcasting in transition: A documentary reader*, by Monroe Price and Marc Raboy (2001). The anthology begins with the statement that public service broadcasting rests on certain basic principles, defined in an era of general interest media, long before the multiplication of channels and the era of specialisation. These principles remain essential today and public broadcasting authorities must give them meaning, reinterpret them in some way, in a world characterised by media fragmentation. The authors of documents and articles included in the anthology then continue to investigate from different perspectives the basic principles that should underlie public service broadcasting.[27] These are the principles related to the structure and autonomy of public service broadcasting, as well as principles related to the funding, programming and content of public service. The documents and articles have as their primary objective to motivate why public service broadcasting is still necessary in a globalised world and cannot be replaced with the private sector, as is often claimed. Only the essence as particularly

relevant to South African public service broadcasting and against the background of the common criticism against the public service broadcaster in South Africa is given here.

### 4.2.1  Revisiting the principles of public service broadcasting

From a number of White Papers, discussion documents and public service broadcasting policies, the following emerges as the basic principles that should underlie and guide public service broadcasting:

- **Principles related to the structure and autonomy of public service broadcasting**

*Universality*: Public service broadcasting must be accessible to *every citizen throughout a country*. Accessibility does not only mean technical accessibility, but also the need to ensure that everyone can *understand and follow* its programming. Therefore, the public service broadcaster should ensure that its programming is popular, not in the pejorative sense that some give this term, but in the sense that the public forum it provides should not be restricted to an élitist minority. Thus, public broadcasting should, while it must promote culture, not become a ghetto constantly frequented by the same group of initiates.

*Independence*: If public service broadcasting is to play a role in democracy, it should provide a public sphere where the public can express ideas freely and in which information, opinions and criticisms can be circulated independently from commercial pressures or political influence. To achieve this, the guiding principle towards establishing an independent and democratic public service broadcaster should be the establishment of 'pluralism' – but then, pluralism that is neither part of the state nor wholly dependent on the processes of the market (cf. the discussion on funding, below). This can only be established through the *principle of regulated pluralism* (cf. Thompson 2001) in which editorial and programme independence (cf principles related to content), institutional autonomy and accountability are entrenched. The goal should be to make the relationship between public broadcasting and government as transparent as possible and to discourage any attempt by government to interfere (cf. World Radio and Television Council 2000).

To achieve this, a clear and legally bounding distinction should be made between the board, the day-to-day management of the organisation, the supervisory bodies and the government. Their roles and functions related to organisation, programming, recruitment, employment and staff management, funding, budgeting, the management of financial resources, the negotiation, preparation and signature of legal acts relating to the operation of the service, and access by public service broadcasting organisations to new communications technologies should be defined clearly and within a legal framework (cf. Canada 2001 (b)).

*Distinctiveness*: In the changed media environment where the public broadcaster exists side by side with commercial broadcasters, the issue of distinctiveness is increasingly important. Distinctiveness requires that the service offered by public broadcasting distinguishes itself from that of other broadcasting services. In public service programming – in the quality and particular character of its programmes – the public must be able to identify what distinguishes this service from other services. It is not only a matter of producing the type of programmes other services are not interested in, aiming at audiences neglected by others, or

dealing with subjects ignored by others. It is a matter of doing things differently, without excluding any genre. This principle must lead public broadcasters to innovate, create new slots, new genres, set the pace in the audio-visual world and pull other broadcasting networks in their wake (cf. World Radio and Television Council 2000). In short, public service broadcasting should *leave its mark*.

● **Principles related to the funding**

*Funding*: The biggest problem confronting public service broadcasting in the new media environment, is funding. This problem is worded by Price and Raboy (2001:7) in the following way:

> Public service broadcasting comes at a price, financially, in the capacity of the state to tolerate criticism and keep its hands off management, and, in the resources needed to nurture an audience against the pressures of the persuasive and appealing channels of a newly opened global bazaar of entertainment (and information). In economies that must contend with balancing extraordinary claims on a struggling budget, public service broadcasting must be widely understood and its principles appreciated for expenditures to be justified. Building a sustainable, accepted public service broadcaster is a complex task.

Add to this the international broadcasting consulting firm, McKinsey & Company's (1999) evidence that a public service broadcaster's funding model has profound implications for its ability to pursue successfully its new strategies, and the problem is clear.

How can the problem of funding be approached? There are no clear answers. Most public service broadcasters have opted for a form of mixed funding: licences and advertising. Yet, McKinsey & Company (1999) have found that this is potentially dangerous in the sense that the higher the advertising figure as a proportion of total revenues is, the less distinctive a public service broadcaster is likely to be. In short, McKinsey & Company have found that dependence on advertising revenues creates a conflict of interest that prevents the public service broadcaster from meeting its public service obligations.

Alternative forms of funding, such as voluntary donations and direct government funding, also have their shortcomings. Voluntary donations do not generate enough money to support a broadly based public service broadcaster. Direct government funding has resulted in an annual budget squeeze for those public broadcasters who rely on it and has led to declining programme standards.

Funding the public service broadcaster by means of licence fees still has the fewest disadvantages. However, in addition to licence fees, funding could come from taxing companies who are distributors of electronic communications, including satellite, cable and telecommunications providers. In this regard the Canadian Mandate Review Committee (cf. Canada 1996) argued convincingly that such companies should have a content funding obligation (a percentage of gross revenues invested in content). Furthermore, they argued that a broad base of communications companies being taxed, keeps the tax rate within an acceptable range.

Whatever the funding may be, and based on McKinsey & Company's investigations as well as the experience of public service broadcasters almost all over the world, it is becoming clear that the funding of public service broadcasting should adhere, to and be guided by, the following principles:

– *The principle of realism*: Funding must be sufficient to allow the public service broadcaster to achieve the multiple tasks it is legally mandated to perform. It is meaningless to mandate a public service broadcaster to perform certain tasks, such as, for example, in the case of South Africa, to provide broadcasting services in 11 official languages, if sufficient funding is not provided.

– *The principle of substantiveness*: Funding should be substantial enough to create a true competitor to commercial channels. In this regard McKinsey & Company warn that while it may be tempting to cut the funding of a seemingly underperforming (or high-performing) public service broadcaster, governments must bear in mind the critical role the public service broadcaster plays in the market ecology. Those public service broadcasters that have been forced to chase market share (e.g. Portugal, Spain) in order to fill their funding gaps have had a very difficult time. The overall standards of the market have been affected and it has only taken a short while for audience taste to descend to the lowest common denominator. In Europe, the Treaty of Amsterdam (cf. World Radio and Television Council 2000) provides in principle, for the assurance that the level of the contribution or licence fee should be fixed after consultation with the public service broadcasting organisation concerned, taking account of trends in the costs of its activities, and in a way which allows the organisation to carry out fully its various missions.

– *The principle of distinctiveness*: Sufficient revenue should be provided to support the public service broadcaster' programming and programming schedules to be distinctive from those of commercial broadcasters. Here the emphasis should be on financial support for raising programme quality. McKinsey & Company (1999) found that an increased dependence on advertising has led inexorably to a more populist and less distinctive schedule. This reliance on populism at the expense of distinctiveness can potentially compromise the rigour of a public service broadcaster's schedule. The principal cause appears to be increased competition for advertising.

– *The principle of independence and accountability*: The funding method can have a significant impact on audience's perceptions. Government grant income may imply a bias toward the government. To assure independence there should thus be a balance between the means of funding and mechanisms to guarantee balance and oversee the maintenance of balance. Furthermore, the decision-making power of authorities external to the public service broadcasting organisation in question regarding its funding should not be used to exert, directly or indirectly, any influence over the editorial independence and institutional autonomy of the organisation. (Cf. earlier criticism against the SABC, especially criticism related to the Broadcasting Amendment Bill which was seen to be direct interference from the government.)

– The principle of predictability: the system of funding should provide for stable, predictable, multi-year funding. Analyses (cf. Price and Raboy 2001) show that for public service broadcasting, licence fee-funding is by far the more stable and predictable, provided that it is guaranteed for many years, grow at a similar or faster pace than the

public service broadcaster's costs, and that politicians will not interfere. It allows the public service broadcaster to be confident to invest in programming and operational improvements. Advertising income, however, tends to be quite volatile, due to its dependence on the business cycle and susceptibility to competitive pressures. The European Union (cf. World Radio and Television Council 2000) also acknowledges the need that payment of the contribution or licence fee should be made in a way which guarantees the continuity of the activities of the public service broadcasting organisation and which allows it to engage in long-term planning.

● **Principles related to programming and content**

Based on a literature overview on the content of public service broadcasting (cf eg World Radio and Television 2000; Price & Raboy 2001, Tracey 1998), and despite the complexity of separating content from discussions related to the autonomy and funding of public service broadcasting, the following can be deduced as the main principles that should guide the programming and program content of public service broadcasting. The principles are the same as those originally formulated for public service broadcasting during the 1930s and 1940s as referred to in the first paragraph of this article. Against the background of increased competition, the emphasis on distinctiveness is new. Against the background of globalisation and the experience of nations after 'liberation' (in Africa and Central Europe), the role of public service broadcasting in the advancement of multiculturalism and in peace making is emphasised. The new emphasis on the principle of diversity can be seen as a direct result of the changed nature of present-day society and of democracy itself and the emphasis placed therein on inclusivity and transparency.

Public broadcasting should strive towards the provision of:

–   *Information and communication*: Public service broadcasting should provide true, factual, comprehensive, objective and unbiassed information that can provide credible reference points and guidance for the free forming of opinion. It should provide a forum for public discussion in which individuals and social groups can participate. Through its information and communication public service broadcasting should aim for mutual understanding and, thus, foster social cohesion.

–   *Quality and production*: Public service broadcasting has the obligation to provide high-quality and innovative programming and should be the standard setter. Its distinctiveness cannot be accomplished by the mere acquisition of foreign productions or from independent local producers. It should not just be a programmer, in other words, filling programme schedules with 'outside' productions. It has to produce independently and creatively, establish a 'culture' of creativity and through such a culture an own identity; a 'signature' that distinguishes it from other broadcasters.

–   *Service programming*: public service broadcasting should provide service programmes that deal with matters of current or practical interest. Such programmes should have as their aim to deal in a practical, comprehensible and advisable way with, for example, consumer, legal, health, economic and community issues. It is through such programmes that public service broadcasting can give a concrete meaning to its *public service* mandate

and get closer to people's specific needs. In a certain way, with greater means and on a greater scale, public broadcasting must, according to needs, offer useful information.

– *Public interest*: Against the background of globalisation and of the changed media environment, public service broadcasters should reinterpret the concept op *'public interest'* in the broad sense of the meaning of the concept (cf. Price & Verhulst 2001.) Such reinterpretation should include the concepts of *'public interest'*, *'public funding'*, *'public accountability'*, *'public/universal service'*, *'public taste and choice'*, *'public identity and represen-tation'* (minority groups), *'public choice'* (quality and complementary programming), and *'public service obligations'*. All these meanings and possible meanings that can be attached to the concept of public interest boils down to what the US Gore Commission on the *Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters* (cf. Burger & Gray 1999) called the *public interest standard*, the Irish the *public interest principle*, the New Zealanders the public broadcaster's *sense of national purpose, identity, and pride*, and the Australians the public broadcaster's *obligation to meet the communications needs* of all Australians.

Although formulations differ, the content of the these countries' public broadcasting policies, charters and acts are in agreement that as far as serving the public interest is concerned, public service broadcasters are the trustees for the public interest, and should therefore

- ☐ present a wide diversity of perspectives
- ☐ serve national and local communities
- ☐ take into account the public interest of children (and their education), as well as that of people with disabilities
- ☐ provide programming that will contribute to the wider and longer-term benefits of society as a whole
- ☐ contribute to a sense of national identity
- ☐ contribute to the liberation rather than the restriction of programme makers and the artistic community as a whole
- ☐ maintain a balance between programmes of appeal to all citizens and programmes of special interest
- ☐ increase awareness of the contribution of diverse cultures to the continuing development of society
- ☐ promote understanding and acceptance of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity
- ☐ contribute to the retention and continuing development of language and other cultural skills
- ☐ inform, educate and entertain citizens in their preferred languages
- ☐ reflect the changing nature of society.

– *Censorship*: Public service broadcasting organisations and their programming should not be subject to any form of censorship, provided that they uphold national laws pertaining to freedom of speech, decency, pornography, *et cetera*.
– *Peace communication*: It is increasingly argued that public service broadcasting should play an active role in preventing conflict and contribute to healing in post-conflict contexts. However, 'peace broadcasting' has many elements. If it is not guided by the principle of

providing 'more speech' to those who previously had no or little opportunities to express their opinions, and the principle that the programming activities of public service broadcasting organisations shall not be subjected to any form of censorship, then it can be prone to unacceptable interventions by governments, interest groups, lobbyists, *et cetera*.

–   *Diversity*: Apart from all the clauses, discussions, definitions and policy guidelines related to diversity in most of the documentation about public service broadcasting (eg, diversity of programme content, programme genres, audiences and, staff), it is increasingly argued that public service broadcasting should provide for the incorporation of different visions of the role of the media in a democratic society. In other words, it should provide for (i) citizen participation, (ii) perform a watchdog role over the government and public and private institutions, (iii) be socially-responsible in terms of inculcating and transmitting 'proper values', and (iv) aid people and groups in pursuing their agendas.

Another aspect of diversity that is emphasised relates to what is called the 'politics of recognition'. With this is meant the purposeful role that public service broadcasting is expected to play in changing negative prevailing social attitudes towards marginalised groups such as women, racial and ethnic groups, gays, lesbians, and the disabled, and to provide, both in programming and employment, a platform for marginalised groups to express themselves.

## 5 Conclusion and recommendation

From the above the following important questions arise with regard to the SABC as the public service broadcaster and the future role it has to play in South Africa in this regard. Each requires extensive empirical research and constant monitoring as to how the SABC progresses towards becoming a public service broadcaster in the full sense of the word:

● How autonomous is the SABC really?
● How accessible is the SABC for real and potential audiences, not only in terms of signal distribution and access to equipment, but also in terms of ensuring that all South Africans can understand its programme content? This is especially relevant against the background of South Africa's high illiteracy statistics, poverty and low levels of education.
● How independent is the SABC's editorial and programme policies from political and economic interference?
● How distinct, if at all, is the SABC from private (commercial) and community broadcasters in South Africa?
● What are the best ways of funding the SABC in order to allow it to become a public service broadcaster in the true sense of the word?
● Does the SABC provide a comprehensive, objective and unbiassed forum for public discussion in which individuals and social groups can participate?
● What can be done to allow the SABC to become a trend setter in terms of production and to develop its own identity and signature that distinguishes it from other broadcasters?
● Does the SABC, through its programming, do enough to address the real and practical needs of audiences and by so doing give concrete meaning to its public service mandate?

- Does the SABC adhere to the public interest principle and as such express a sense of national purpose, identity, and pride?
- Does the SABC adhere to the public service obligation to meet the communications needs of all South Africans?
- Does the SABC play an active role in preventing conflict?
- Despite its justifiable emphasis on black empowerment to rectify the injustices of apartheid, how inclusive, both in terms of programming and employment, is the SABC today? Does inclusivity as practised by the SABC mean the further fragmentation of stations and channels each to accommodate a different section of the South African multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic population? Can such an interpretation of inclusivity (reminding one of segregation under apartheid) contribute to the social cohesion of one South African nation? How should the SABC approach the topic of inclusivity in order to contribute to social cohesion instead of strengthening separation?

These questions need urgent investigation in order to prevent the SABC from slipping further away into becoming little more than just another outlet for commercial (foreign) entertainment with no value for the development of the South African society.

Much of what the South African media industry is experiencing after the demise of apartheid and in the wake of globalisation and technological advancement, is similar to that of Central European countries in their post-Soviet transition. It is therefore, and against the background of all that has been said in the previous sections of this article, including the general discontent with the SABC as expressed periodically in the print media by NGOs, labour unions, individuals and the government itself, not unrealistic to call for an urgent government-instituted investigation into all aspects related to public service broadcasting in South Africa.

Such an investigation can be similar to that of, for example, the investigation conducted by the International Federation of Journalists (NFJ) into the Hungarian broadcasting system in 2001 (cf. International Federation of Journalists 2001). The outcome of this investigation was a call for an urgent review of public service broadcasting in order to:

- institute mechanisms for the defence of public service broadcasting
- ensure that the public broadcaster obeys the principles underlying the concept of *'public service broadcasting'*
- establish new mechanisms, legal and otherwise, to eliminate financial and political pressures on the public service broadcaster
- institute appropriate levels of funding of and investment in public service broadcasting
- ensure transparency and accountability
- ensure that the principles of pluralism and editorial and program independence are met.

In addition to this, urgent attention needs to be paid to the education of public service broadcasters, the regulator and South African audiences. South Africa is experiencing a generation of broadcasters, regulators and audiences who, in the case of the black, coloured and Indian population, have never experienced the artistic and intellectual benefits a true public service broadcaster can offer and from whom these benefits were withheld under

apartheid. In the case of the white population there is a generation that has also not experienced public service broadcasting free from its own commercial interests. To them, broadcasting means popular entertainment, a billboard for advertisements and little else.

Apart from practical and technical training for broadcasters, and legal training for regulators, both of these groups, as well as the audiences need to be educated about the value of public service broadcasting as a proud national institution that can contribute to their well-being in different ways.[28]

Such an education should not only focus on skills, but also on a critical understanding of public broadcasting's role in democracy, in cultivating a culture of human rights, in nation building, and in development. Most of all, such education should have as its purpose to foster an understanding of the true meaning of the concept public service, namely to, in words of Keane (1991) to facilitate a genuine commonwealth of forms of life, tastes and opinions; to empower a plurality of citizens, who are governed neither by despotic states nor market forces; to circulate to the public a wide variety of opinions and enable them to live democratically within the framework of a multi-layered constitutional state which is held accountable to its citizens.

In conclusion: Industry may rightfully argue that a competitive market contributes to economic growth, that audiences have a wider choice, and that access to broadcasting services has increased. However, there is no guarantee that economic gains are ploughed back into the provision of quality broadcasting. The majority of people do not necessarily gain from broadcasting's contribution to economic growth. There may be a wider choice of programming, but not necessarily increased diversity of opinion, content and genres. On the contrary, the impression is that more and more of the same popular content is presented in different ways. Access may have increased, but mainly for those who can afford subscription, cable and satellite services, which, in a developing country such as South Africa, still constitutes the minority.

If policy is not formulated from a humanistic perspective and takes as its point of departure human needs, use, knowledge, thinking and communication, broadcasting will become nothing more than superficial entertainment and an electronic platform for commercial trading instead of being a platform for the trading of ideas, knowledge and creativity.

**Postscript**: On the day this article was submitted for publication (25 April 2003) the SABC took a bold step towards incorporating the public's participation in reforming its policies. On its Web Site and through announcements in the media, it released, for public scrutiny and comments, its mission statements on programming, news, language, education, universal service and access, local content and religion. The public, including NGOs and labour unions, were invited to respond by 13 June 2003. In his accompanying letter the chairperson of the SABC Board, Vincent Maphai, invites the public under the headings 'Your SABC', 'Our SABC', 'Everybody's SABC' to be part of building a SABC that adheres to their needs and expectations. This step taken by the SABC can be seen as a direct response to the conflict between the SABC and the government about the controversial Broadcasting Amendment Bill in 2002 (cf section 3), through which the government sought direct involvement in the formulation of SABC policies. The questions pertaining to the SABC formulated above can

contribute to monitoring the SABC's progress in this endeavour. To these questions one can now add the following:

- How and with what effect did the public respond to the SABC's invitation?
- How does the government, the industry and the public support the SABC in its quest to fulfil its public service mandate?

Should the SABC succeed, public service broadcasting policy in South Africa can become a model for all public service policies and can contribute to the art of interactive policy formulation in the country.

## Notes

1   For an overview of the history of the development of the free market model and the decline of the social responsibility model in broadcasting, cf Underwood 2002. For an overview of regulation and deregulation policy developments in the European Union, cf e.g the EU Report *The Digital Age: European Audiovisual Policy, October 1996*. See Stein & Sinha (2002:419) for an overview of the differences between market-based versus government regulation. In market-based regulation the role of the government is limited to establishing a legal framework that facilitates commerce, provides industries with incentives to regulate themselves, and maintains marketplace competition and consumer choice. The primary goal is economic efficiency. The ability of economic efficiency to maximise the wealth is equated with the overall public interest and beneficial social outcomes. The legitimacy of this model rests on the assumption that consumers can choose at any time to exit a relationship. Critics of marketplace regulation argue that allowing business to determine social purposes results in the erosion of public service values traditionally maintained by governments. By defining economic efficiency as the end-goal of a communication system, market regimes reduce information and communication to mere commodities, and fail to recognise the other roles they play within political, social and cultural life. It takes the right to be informed, the right to quality and freedom of expression out of the domain of public political processes and into that of private organizations where they will not necessarily find protection.

2   Cf. e.g, the BBC's collaboration with ICL/Fulitsu (IT systems and services) to create a commercial BBC Online Internet Service; with the UK Flextech to supply thematic subscription channels in the UK, investment funds/management services; global partnership with Discovery Communications and channels such as Animal Planet/People and Arts.

3   As an example of mixed funding, cf eg *BBC Worldwide* which, it is claimed, is responsible for the BBC's commercial interests. Its goal is to maximise the value of licence fee-funded assets for reinvestment in the BBC's core free-to-air services for the benefit of all licence fee payers (cf. Steemers 2002:15).

4   On the problem of ethos, Tracey (1998:59) eg argues that since the 1980s every major public broadcasting institution has been involved in making itself more *efficient*, *leaner*, in developing corporate broadcasting *strategies*, in applying more competitive and aggressive *scheduling*, in using ratings-based marketing strategies. All this is constructed around *process*, rather than *human performance* and have eroded traditional programme commitments. The result is a generation of broadcasters whose purpose for being appears to be a commitment not to public service principles but to technocratic procedures. In comparison, the 1970s was a time in which programme makers dominated the television system. It was a time of discovery, excitement and creative innovation among programme makers.

5   On the possibility of market failure, the Davis Report (1999:137) concluded that 'there is good reason to suppose that the market, left to itself, will not provide broadcasting which our society wishes to foster'. The report motivated the argument that public service broadcasting should be secured, at least for the time being. On this point, Underwood (2002), argues as follows: how to remedy market failure becomes a much more contentious issue when there is a wealth of providers. Lord Reith's understanding of public service paid scant attention to what the public might want and was more concerned with giving them what he and his patrician class considered good for them. In an era of potentially unlimited consumer choice, it would be politically difficult to argue for the continuation of a licence fee to support an organization whose output many (perhaps most) consumers would not be using.

6   Cf. e.g. Panos Institute of southern Africa for an overview of the state of broadcasting in southern Africa. This publication provides a brief overview of the impact of liberalisation and deregulation or the lack thereof on pluralism and freedom of expression in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Also see Fardon & Furniss 2000.

7   Main broadcasting policy documents in South Africa are, among others: Independent Broadcasting Authority Act, 1993; Triple Inquiry Report of the Independent Broadcasting Authority 1995; the Green Paper on Broadcasting Policy 1997; the White Paper on Broadcasting Policy 1998; Discussion Document of the Technical Task Team on Broadcasting Policy 1998; the Broadcasting Act of 1999; Broadcasting Amendment Act 2002. (Cf. South Africa.)

8   The IBA Act of 1993 and the Broadcasting Act of 1999 provide for three tiers of broadcasting in South Africa: public, private and community. The lastmentioned is a new phenomenon in South Africa. It is based on the premise that community broadcasting is for the community, by the community, through the community.

9   In 2002 Icasa raised the local content quotas to 55 per cent on public broadcasting television services, 30 per cent on commercial free-to-air television and 8 per cent on pay television (subscription). For radio the new quota is 40 per cent for public and community radio services and 25 per cent for private commercial stations. These quotas have to be reached by August 2003. Although, on paper, South Africa has a comprehensive local content policy, criticism may that it not formulated and implemented from the perspective of a deep-rooted understanding of communication as being embedded in the social and cultural fabric of a nation, part of its shared national symbolic environment and the environment of other social or communal formations. Commercialisation of broadcasting has and continues to diminish such an understanding.

10  In 1999 the SABC management reached a crisis point. An independent consultancy group was appointed to review the entire SABC structure at a cost of R5 million. It proposed down-sizing and re-organisation. (Cf. van Zyl 2002:14.)

11  During the struggle against apartheid these NGOs, as well as the ANC's Radio Freedom (which operated in Zimbabwe), resistance television documentary makers, the Film and Allied Workers Organisation, etc., were at the forefront of the battle against the apartheid government's restrictions on media freedom. A dialogue that preceded constitutional negotiations in South Africa culminated in the Jabulani Freedom of the Airwaves Conference in 1991 in Doom, the Netherlands. At this conference three levels or tiers of broadcasting were proposed for South Africa, later adopted in the Green and White Papers and eventually in the new Broadcasting Act (1999). The Jabulani Conference was followed by a Campaign for Open Media and a Campaign for Independent Broadcasting that advised the Interim Government of National Unity on media matters. The rest is history: the establishment of a new SABC Board, a formal Triple Inquiry into the future of public service broadcasting, the expansion of commercial broadcasting and the establishment of a community radio sector. This resulted in, amongst others, the restructuring of SABC governing and

managerial structures, the selling of SABC radio stations to private operators, the institution of the IBA and the licensing of 30 initial community radio stations. Shortly after its establishment, the IBA experienced managerial problems.

12  The community radio sector (about 100 in 2002 of which about 80 are on the air) in South Africa operates according to strict rules laid down by the IBA (now part of Icasa). Licences are normally granted to geographic communities that have proven evidence of community sector support, with the exception of occasional 'special interest licences' granted to religious groups. They can only operate as trusts or non-profit organisations.

13  Cf. Mosco and Rideout (1997) for an overview of the main economic trends affecting media development and policy.

14  The Broadcasting Act (1999) requires the SABC to make radio and television services available in all 11 official languages. The Act does not specify how to do it. On SABC's three televison channels the distribution in 2000/01 in percentage of minutes during prime time (18:00–22:00) was:

|  | SABC 1 (%) | SABC2 (%) | SABC3 (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| English | 71,62 | 49,60 | 100 |
| Nguni group | 15,39 | – | – |
| Afrikaans | – | 29,59 | – |
| Sotho group | – | 12,29 | – |
| Multi-lingual: | 12,09 | – | 8,30 |

15  At the time of writing the currency rate was: $US dollar = R7.80; 1 euro = R8.39; £ sterling + R12.25

16  Despite progress in reach, facilities and increased advertising revenue due to the further commercialisation of its three television channels, the SABC turned a R120 million surplus reported in its Financial Report for 1999–2000 into a deficit of R28,1 million. The main reason given was growing competition with the subscription channel M-Net and the independent free-to-air channel etv (cf. van Zyl 2002:14).

17  The all-media advertising market share in 2000 was: Print 40,55 per cent; TV 40,40 per cent; Radio 13,47 per cent; Outdoor 3,83 per cent; Cinema 0,78 per cent; Other 0,97 per cent. The SABC reports that the entrance of new competitors has not increased television's total share of advertising at the expense of other media. SABC1 revenue has declined but SABC2's revenue has increased due to increased investment in the Afrikaans target market. (Cf. SABC 2000/01.) Also see the IBA's latest regulations pertaining to the definition of advertising (cf. Independent Broadcasting Authority 1999).

18  e.tv is a commercial free-to-air television channel which is dependent on advertising. It started broadcasting in October 1998 and reported a viewership of over 500 000 in 1999. The holding company is Midi Television, a consortium of companies, among others, black empowerment companies and unions.

19  The South African company MultiChoice is part of the South African holding company the MIH Group. It provides television and subscriber services in 49 African countries, the adjacent islands and the Middle East. The television service consists of terrestrial analogue networks as well as direct-to-home digital satellite television (DStv) bouquets. DStv comprises 50 video channels, 6 data channels and 48 audio channels. Among the most popular with viewers who have to subscribe to the bouquet are M-Net, SuperSport, Movie Magic, kykNET and Discovery Channel, etc.

20  Ownership regulations include that no person shall control more than one private television broadcasting service; more than two private FM sound broadcasting services; more than two private AM sound broadcasting services; two FM sound broadcasting services which have the

same licence areas or substantially overlapping licence areas (private, public service broadcasting or community); two AM sound broadcasting services which have the same licence areas or substantially overlapping licence areas. Existing legislation limits foreign ownership to 20%.

21  Channel Africa (radio) is a international radio service managed by the SABC on behalf of the state (the Department of Communications). It offers multimedia content from an African perspective on shortwave and terrestrial networks. It also supplies programmes to 27 community radio stations and reaches about 15 million listeners all over Africa. The SABC's two international pay television channels are *SABC Africa* which is the only 24 hour news service on the African content channel with the mission of 'telling the African story through African eyes'. Africa-2-Africa is a 24 hour entertainment channel. In South Africa 146 000 households in Africa and 375 000 households in South Africa have access to these channels provided through MultiChoice subscription service via satellite on the DStv bouquet.

22  Although the differences were settled and the Broadcasting Amendment 2002 Act (Act 64 of 2002) was passed in February 2003, the furore created by the bill was seen by opposition parties to be part of the government's tactic to erode agreed safeguards for freedom of expression and the independence of the media. In the words of opposition spokeswoman on communication, Dene Smuts, the tactic is to achieve its eventual goals by tabling, leaking or otherwise introduce shock measures that reverse the negotiated order, and then, having created a panic, to retreat in show of reason to a compromise position which becomes the new norm or point of departure. (Cf. Smuts 2002.)

23  For a more in-depth discussion of these topics, see Berger (2002); Fourie (2002); Tomaselli and Tomaselli (2001); Connor (1992); Servaes and Lie (1996); Servaes (1989). For the purpose of this article *'development'* means changes in patterns of society that allow greater sustainable realisation of human values, which allow a society greater control over the environment and over its own destiny and, ultimately, which enable its individuals to gain greater control over their own lives.

24  The SABC defines its social responsibility in terms of its free national public service announcements. In this regard 9 083 radio spots to the value of R7 million and 1 095 television spots to the value of R7,3 million were broadcast during 2000/01. (Cf. SABC Annual Report 2000/01:77.)

25  McNair (2002) argues that people often forget that the BBC (as the public service broadcaster) caters not for a homogeneous British culture, but that the 'British' comprises in the UK alone, English, Scots, Welsh, unionist Irish, Church of England, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, gay, straight, and a host of other quite distinctive sub-cultures.

26  In South Africa radio reaches an estimated daily audience of 29 million out of the estimated population of 41 million, whilst television (including the MultiChoice audiences) reaches a daily audience of 18 million mainly among the higher income and urbanised groups. (Cf. South African Advertising Research Foundation 2001.) As in the rest of Africa (cf Panos Institute 1998), radio also has a proven track-record as a medium for development communication, the provision of programming that responds to the variety of people's needs (including linguistic and cultural needs), discussion and critical evaluation, involvement in decision-making processes, and participation in civil society. Against the background of the unique communicative possibilities of radio, South African policy should seek to further and strengthen the radio sector, especially the community radio sector. The Media Development and Diversity Agency Act could contribute to this, provided that a clear definition of and objectives for community radio are implemented. The Media Development and Diversity Agency Act (MDDA) provides for the establishment of an independent agency that is rooted in a partnership between the government, the media industry and the community media sector to expand and develop the community media sector – radio and

print. The Act was passed in 2002 and a board was appointed. At the time of writing, and to the knowledge of this writer, concrete examples of the development of this sector was not yet available.

27  Cf. e.g. Price and Verhulst 2001; Price and Raboy 2001; World Radio and Television Council 2000; McKinsey & Company 1999; Raboy 1999/2000; Treaty of Amsterdam 1997; Green Paper on the Convergence of the Telecommunications, Media and Information Technology Sectors, and the Implications for Regulation, Towards an Information Society, European Commission, Brussels, Belgium, 3 December Guidelines on the Guarantee of the Independence of Public Service Broadcasting: Recommendation No. R (96) 10 of the Committee of Ministers to Member (CANADA); International Federation of Journalists. 2001.

28  In this regard the Australian experience is an example. (Cf. McDonald 2002.) In Australia it is claimed that the emphasis in the charter of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on programme genres such as drama, the arts, education and a balance between specialist, minority and broad appeal programmes placed the charter and public service broadcasting in the centre of Australian life and culture. The charter itself became a kind of 'broadcasting constitution' among the people. This was achieved by promoting the ABC in *ABC Shops*, present in almost every shopping centre in the country. Furthermore, the ABC was promoted as something 'special' through marketing campaigns in which its corporate slogan, 'It's Your ABC' took a central place and aimed at building a better sense of the public's ownership of the ABC. Most important, the ABC turned to its audiences and investigated their opinions about the ABC regularly. In short, the ABC recognised the need to educate the public about the role, need for and value of public service broadcasting.

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