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EMBARGO: 15:00 FRIDAY, 31 JANUARY 1992

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ADDRESS BY MR JOHAN PRETORIUS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: TV NEWS PRODUCTIONS OF THE SABC AT THE "FREE, FAIR AND OPEN" CONFERENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE.

THE ROLE OF THE ELECTRONIC AND STATE MEDIA DURING THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

Thank you for inviting the SABC to participate in this debate about the media. The SABC as the biggest mass communication medium in South Africa, reaching many more people every day than all the other media certainly has a role to play in the future of this country. We welcome this opportunity. I think it is necessary to first give some background to the present and future situation.

- 1 The SABC has been blamed and criticised over the years for being the Government's mouthpiece. It would be naive to deny that the Corporation followed a fairly strict government of the day line. The SABC used to interpret and comment in favour of the policy of the government of the day and seldom criticised the Government. Debates were not on and the different parties' policies were mostly interpreted by the SABC.
- 2 However, over the last two to three years the whole picture has changed completely. Please note that the Corporation started its new and open approach to news before the State President's speech of 2 February 1990. Months before that, we started with live and unedited debates. The Corporation at that time decided to abandon its commentary programmes.

Very little self-interpretation/commentary is heard nowadays and we rather let the representatives of the various political parties or interest groups put their case themselves.

We can assure you that we try to give fair exposure to the different viewpoints and the various interest groups/parties. Just think, for a moment, how difficult this can be with ten political parties in Parliament, 19 delegations at CODESA and many more outside, all demanding air time. Add to this the time pressure of news and the intricate logistics of broadcasting! We do not prescribe to parties whom they should nominate as their spokespersons - they themselves nominate them.

We also regularly address very contentious and sensitive matters - which two to three years ago would not even have been contemplated.

We are not infallible and we do make many mistakes, but please remember, the new approach is also new to us! But we are proud of the progress made so far.

Whilst some people still see us and criticise us for being the Government's mouthpiece, others including some in the National Party accuse us of being "agents for the ANC". Yet others say we must watch out for the many CP Staff members in our midst because we favour the rightists. They can't all be right!

Independent surveys, which have been (and are) conducted on a regular basis, reflect a significant favourable swing in public opinion as far as the SABC's news/actuality products are concerned. We are generally rated as more unbiased and credible than any of the printed media.

But don't be mistaken! We know there are still weaknesses in our total make-up and we want to rectify this; we want to improve it and there is an honest attempt to do so - to reflect all sides of a story; to be fair and reasonable; to get to the truth of the matter and to stimulate debate. Certain changes including control and structures might have to be made. But trying to improve the whole functioning of the SABC brings me to a very important matter, i.e. restructuring - a matter which needs to be clarified.

Some people accuse us of privatisation and state that we unilaterally decided to go that route. I think there is great misunderstanding about our restructuring and I want to explain this very briefly.

- (a) The principle of business units is applied by the bigger organisations in the private sector and is generally accepted as by far the best way to optimise performance, to increase productivity; to improve teamwork and to focus on one's product and its success. Responsibility can also be pinpointed because of the integrated action of all the various disciplines and this enables us to shift decision-making to lower levels of staff, etc.
- (b) Therefore: the reason for restructuring the SABC into different units, was to improve its performance and efficiency.
- (c) But:- the broadcasting scene is changing very fast and the traditional (public) broadcasters world-wide are facing severe problems - some even survival. The new structure of business units will make it possible to adapt to any new situation. The old functional structure would have made it very difficult.
- (d) But most important:- management has not yet put forward any privatisation proposals to the Board. The Group Chief Executive has asked me to emphasise We do not plan, and have not planned, any unilateral privatisation.

Coming to the subject of the SABC's role during the transitional period: The question should be asked:

CAN THE SABC PLAY A RELEVANT ROLE?

We say:

YES, because of its high accessibility

YES, because of its good infrastructure

YES, because of its many services in various accessible languages.

YES, because of its proven expertise.

BUT:

Does it have CREDIBILITY?

This IS a PROBLEM!

It is still regarded by some as the mouthpiece of the Government.

It might be a PERCEPTION as I have already discussed.

But whether it is true or just perception, this IMAGE must simply become more positive so that the SABC will be a credible medium for all and so that the SABC will

be generally trusted with an important national task. The SABC accepts that certain adjustments may be necessary in the process.

WHAT the SABC does, and HOW it does it, is what will matter eventually and will determine its credibility and status.

WHAT IS THE SABC'S PLAN OF ACTION?

TO ACHIEVE CREDIBILITY (AS A PREREQUISITE) AND SO FULFIL ITS ROLE

The SABC has listed TEN "musts":

One: By expressly declaring its support for generally accepted democratic values and by actively promoting this in its programmes. (We will shortly discuss this issue with parties outside the Corporation.)

Two: By acting in strict accordance with a CODE of conduct and journalistic policy. (Again something we will shortly discuss with outside parties)

and accepting that it will have to be measured/evaluated accordingly.

Particularly important here (and for further discussion with various interest groups) are:

- * VALUES - what the SABC supports and strives to live up to.
 - justice
 - respect for the truth
 - respect for sound reason and reasonableness
 - respect for the individual and for his/her affiliations
 - respect for generally accepted ethical norms, values and ideals in society and in particular of the broad target audience of a specific service
 - tolerance
 - freedom and responsibility.
- * An express statement that the SABC believes in a just society, and in peace, stability, security, and prosperity.
- * Express rejection of discrimination on the basis of race, colour, creed or gender.
- * By putting public interest first in its programme and news presentations and by presenting programmes that are constructive rather than destructive.

Three: By showing respect for the rich cultural (language) variety of the country and its people and accepting it as a reality.

- Four: By accepting CODESA as the negotiation forum, but also reflecting other relevant views and debates.
- Five: By making available its services and infrastructure, particularly during the negotiation period, so that all relevant views/ideas will get sufficient exposure; by contributing positively and actively to the establishment of an informed society and to encourage and activate debate.
- Six: By continually fighting for independent control of broadcasting and against political interference.
- Seven: By structuring the SABC as organisation (i.e. its hierarchy and staff) in a manner that would allow it to meet the requirements for producing a product of quality and of general credibility. (Certain adjustments will be needed, therefore, to reach this objective among the broad masses and interest groups.)
- Eight: By determining key aspects of its product on the basis of scientific research and in consultation with relevant interest groups and the Broadcasting Control Structure, for example policy on language, religion and formal education. But what is important : we do accept a public service role
- Nine: By continually providing a professional, quality product with consideration of market needs. The SABC is well aware of the need for educational and information programmes.
- Ten: By operating its Organisation and all its activities on a sound financial basis Without financial self-reliance the SABC cannot fulfil its vital role.

Ladies and Gentle

men: To sum up and in conclusion:

The SABC understands the fear and doubts in some peoples' minds about the SABC's ability to be objective and fair during the transitional period. We also understand the need for access to the media, coupled with the viewers/listeners' need for information.

- Therefore: One: We are prepared to make our infrastructure and time on the air available to the interested parties.
- Two: We accept the fact that we will be monitored. There are various methods/options in this regard, and which will probably be negotiated at CODESA.
- Three: Some changes to the control of broadcasting and the SABC's own structure might (will) be necessary.

The SABC realises that the effective utilisation of the electronic media over next few years will be crucial in the unfoldment of the peace process in South African society. We are ready to make a positive contribution.
