

# SABC's bi-media operation in urgent need of review

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Recently, the South African Broadcasting Corporation released its findings from an internal investigation into controversies in the Corporation, especially in news and current affairs. In spite of the fact that this department has been, and still is, bedevilled with controversy, the findings gave the SABC a nearly-clean bill of health. What is the problem?

In a phrase: bi-media. Bi-media refers to the merging of radio and television news and current affairs operations into a free-standing news division. Existing journalists are being 're-skilled' or 'multi-skilled' to report in both media. This super-newsroom is being 'driven from the top' by a single, centralised bi-media editorial management team.

The problem is that bi-media could easily take news as far away from the Corporation's public service mandate as it can get. The merger allows management to exploit journalists and erode their working conditions to the point where they are increasingly unable to produce critical, investigative news representing the country's diversity of opinion (as per the SABC's public service mandate). In fact, news could be 'dumbed down' to the point where of a form of shallow, uncontroversial commercial journalism becomes the order of the day; a news that is so supportive of the status quo that government Ministers will never again need to pick up telephones to complain. Censorship will not be necessary as there may be nothing controversial left to censor. In short: mind control for the new millennium.

On the surface, the logic behind bi-media seems impeccable. SABC management is implementing it to save costs, given that even the limited government support it enjoys at the moment will be phased out. It also aims to transform the news department into a business centre to compete with commercial news agencies like Reuters and CNN to sell news to other local and international broadcasters. In the process, it aims to become the predominant source of news in South Africa and on the continent.

Apparently, the SABC will save money by sending one crew to cover a story, instead of two. Also, given that bi-media editors will monitor the input and output of stories for both media, they will ensure that radio and television do not send out mixed signals by scooping one another, or adopting different angles on the same story. They will also ensure that news and current affairs do not work at cross-purposes.

The SABC is also implementing bi-media to exploit the potential of new digital technologies to deliver news on more and more platforms. So if a journalist records a story using a digital camera, the content could be stored as digital data, and packaged in the newsroom for radio, television and the internet; so, the number of platforms for the delivery of that story increases, which theoretically means more news across a spread of media. So if media are converging, then why not converge newsrooms? These editorial and technological 'advantages' should enable the SABC to enhance the quality and credibility of its news, which in turn should make it easier to sell. Enhanced productivity should enable the SABC to launch more news services, such as a continuous 24-hour news channel along the lines of BBC World.

In fact, the SABC has apparently modelled its bi-media outfit on the BBC's, which is worrying given that the latter's move to bi-media has been so conflict ridden that it has apparently been frozen. The SABC's plans are also generating conflict, with the Media Workers Association of South Africa pursuing a dispute around the implementation of bi-media. The point is that stripped of all its techno-babble, bi-media is simply another way of putting profits before people. Management drives journalists to become multi-skilled to increase their productivity and save staff costs: essentially, they are being made to do more with less. Not only do they have to chase deadlines for both media, they also develop 'roving job descriptions', moving between programmes and different parts of the news production chain at the behest of management. Small wonder that bi-media has been criticised in other countries for encouraging a 'dumbing down' of news and the de-skilling of journalists. Increasing workloads force them to cut corners, and lessens the amount of thinking time necessary to take innovative angles on stories. The result? A creeping marginalisation of adventurous and critical (but expensive and time-consuming) investigative reporting.

The existence of one editorial outlet means that one editorial position must be taken on stories. This imperative will inevitably force editors to seek consensus positions on controversial stories, paving the way for a safe and superficial news: the sort of news that other broadcasters will probably be only too happy to buy as it should not upset their revenue streams.

Journalists' sensitivities to the needs of particular media become dulled: for example, at the BBC, one critic noted that bi-media led to radio reports and interviews becoming mere audio tracks produced primarily for television. Given the threats to journalists' working conditions and the quality of their work, it is not surprising that MWASA is contesting the unilateral imposition of bi-media given that in terms of the Labour Relations Act, employers should consult workers about workplace restructuring.

Yet, even within bi-media operations, there are degrees of centralisation. SABC management itself was faced with a

choice between two options: shared newsgathering responsibility between national and regional editors (essentially giving the regions more power), and an even more centralised option where one strong newsgathering editor managed all journalists nationally. It chose the second option. We need to ask why.

SABC management is also exerting greater control over current affairs programmes, involving oversight of the content of programmes and direct editorial intervention when deemed 'necessary'. As a result, executive producers will no longer act as programme editors; a form of editorial independence that encourages adventurous programming, and a diversity of material. At the BBC two years ago, editors and journalists erupted in anger against similar moves, arguing that the elimination of their editorial independence would destroy the distinctive character of programmes, leading to a "sausage machine" churning out the same products across BBC stations. Management was forced to backtrack on these plans. Why does the SABC continue to walk the same road that the BBC saw fit to abandon some time ago?

More control by editors means less control and creativity by journalists, especially in terms of the approval of story ideas, and how their stories are packaged and presented. The SABC's mandate to represent the country's diversity of opinion implies a greater need for editorial democracy. This is because journalists are on the coalface of newsgathering, and are therefore best placed to represent this diversity authentically within the framework of their ethical obligations. Journalists cannot fulfil this role in a climate of rigid control, where they cannot easily influence how their own stories are packaged and used. This loss of control is inevitable in a bi-media operation, as raw material trawled at the 'input' stage will be fed into a merged computer system and packaged by a series of desk editors at the 'output' stage. These two divisions will be physically separate. Interestingly enough, this was how the SABC's newsroom was structured under apartheid, as it decreased journalists' control over how their stories were used. It also increased the scope for management intervention, either on their own initiative, or at the behest of the authorities.

The point is that if news is dumbed-down sufficiently, such interventions will not be necessary. As a mechanism of editorial and social control, bi-media is brilliant in its subtlety and sophistication. Increasing workloads will probably force journalists to go to the most powerful generators of 'news' used by their commercial competitors, essentially government and the corporates. As a result, their news starts to look like everyone else's news in commercial media: literal, straightforward, bereft of further research and tied to the main loci of social, political and economic power. This creeping focus on the status quo makes it more difficult for journalists to realise one of the Corporation's earlier transformation objectives, namely to encourage 'people-centred programming' that tells the stories of ordinary people. In any event, the pursuit of this objective may be very compromising for the government in the light of increasing inequalities exacerbated by its controversial Growth, Employment and Redistribution plan: bi-media could easily numb opposition to the plan by turning the cameras and microphones away from the very people who have the most to lose from it.

It should not be surprising, then, that bi-media is generating its own opposition. MWASA's call for there to be a review of the whole operation is correct, and should be supported. Only once there is such a review can we work out how the technological changes that supposedly underlie bi-media can enable access to information, rather than fuelling a redistribution of news from the poor to the rich.